The Holding of Hearts

by hope91

Summary

Thranduil is gravely injured during an unanticipated Second Battle Under the Trees after the War of the Ring. As Eryn Lasgalen’s interim ruler, the Elvenqueen considers an alliance with Erebor in the form of an arranged marriage between Legolas and Gimli, an unexpected and welcome development as both believe their love unrequited. But when Legolas later discovers that his planned marriage may be part of an ominous enchantment brokered many years ago between the Elvenqueen and the Blue Wizards of the East, he may be forced to put love aside to fulfill the requirements of duty to his kingdom.

Follows events from the time of Aragorn’s wedding.

***ON HIATUS until summer 2016****

(I'm unfortunately too busy in real-life right now to give it this particular story the attention it needs, but I do plan to return to it).
The friendship of an elf and dwarf

Erestor, Lord Elrond’s Chief Advisor, surveyed the crowd before him. He was somewhat surprised at his own joy, let alone that of Elrond’s, for the day’s events had permanently cemented Arwen’s choice. It was clear that the love she bore the King was true and returned in larger measure. If anything, Erestor’s own life experiences, his own lack of love, had taught him that such love should be cherished, for not every elf would find it. This way of thinking helped mitigate the pain he had felt when he first learned that the elfling he and Glorfindel tutored had chosen the mortal path of Elrond’s line, and would one day die.

Erestor had arrived in Minas Tirith on Midsummer’s Eve with the large party of elves from Imladris and Lothlorien, and was but one of many witnesses to the wedding ceremony of the Evenstar and King Elessar. After the wedding feast, Erestor sought an out-of-the-way place to sit and watch the festivities, never having been an elf for dancing or other demonstrations. After all, he was perhaps the most hard-to-read and serious of the Imladris elves. As he walked the perimeter of the enormous hall, he saw a ginger-haired dwarf sitting with a hobbit. He approached them, happy to see familiar faces in the sea of unknown ones. “Master Gimli, Master Pippin, may I join you?”

“Of course Erestor, it is nice to see you! How was your trip here? Isn’t it strange that Arwen just arrived and then had her wedding so very fast! We shall have a fantastic time telling this story back in the Shire! Why my mother spent at least a year planning her wedding, it was such a grand affair I heard, but not as grand as this I imagine! Oh Erestor, there are so very many stories that I should like to tell you, I am not sure where to start!” The hobbit continued to babble excitedly. ”Wait, there’s Merry! They must have refilled the food table, I will be back, and then I will fill you in on everything! Can I bring you anything?” Both shook their heads no.

“Hmph, hobbits and their never-ending appetites, where do they put it all?”

Erestor smiled. “I am not sure, Master Gimli, though I know when they stayed at Rivendell they cut into more of the winter stores than I could have imagined! And only four of them, eating that much!”

They sat quietly for a time, both watching the dancing silently, Erestor sipping his wine, Gimli chewing a piece of licorice, an indoors-appropriate substitute for pipeweed that the Hobbits had taught him to enjoy. Eventually the dwarf spoke again, more softly this time, “The love you bear him, it is long-suffering, no?”

Erestor felt his heart drop into his toes, surely the dwarf did not know this, he had kept it hidden for so long, was it suddenly apparent to all? “I am not sure what you mean, Master Dwarf.” He hoped he would leave it at that, not understanding the presumptuousness of it all.

Gimli snorted. “Master Elf, I am not going to share your secret. And I would not have been so bold when I first met you, but I grew to like you in Rivendell, and I still like you now. So you may relax, there was only a split-second moment where it was apparent. And apparent to one who is of similar kind in matters of the heart.”

What on Arda was this, a dwarf, a dwarf of all people guessing something he had held secret for so long? And why on Arda was he being so bold, disclosing he felt the same way about another? How exactly was that exemplary of dwarven secrecy?

“You don’t need to discuss it, but should you like to, remember that I am a dwarf, and dwarves do not break confidences.”
They watched the dancing in silence for some moments, and Erestor found that this breaking of the ice, as it were, made him unable to contain himself any longer.

“I have loved him for centuries. I think it was love at first sight.” He whispered very softly, worried that elven ears would catch his words, but then relaxed when he realized that the music, singing and talking of others would preclude any eavesdropping.

“He seems quite fond of you, have you not shared this with him?”

Erestor laughed. “Are you serious? He cares for me as a friend. A friend. Perhaps one of his better friends, yes, but a friend nonetheless. And perhaps you may have noticed in Imladris – Rivendell - he is fond of everyone. There is no elf more friendly than he.”

Erestor studied the dwarf for a moment, and then returned his thoughts to the dancing. His brow furrowed. “So you said we have this in common.” His gaze shifted back to the dwarf, and his eyelids raised very high, an expression Gimli did not typically associate with elves, “You love him as well?”

Gimli laughed, a hearty dwarven laugh, spitting out his licorice at the same time, a most un-elvish behavior, although the elf beside him did not mind in the least. “Nay, ah, nay.” The laughter continued, and Erestor almost joined in, finding it somewhat contagious.

At that moment, Legolas appeared and plunked himself down on the other side of Gimli, his face flushed from dancing. “What is so funny, mellon-nin?” He had brought an ale for the dwarf and some concoction for himself. Gimli was unable to catch his breath, finding the idea of unrequited love for Erestor’s target of affection simply hilarious, so Erestor answered. “It would be too hard to explain, I hardly understand it myself.”

Legolas draped an arm across the back of the dwarf’s chair and sipped his drink.

“Hmph, what is that foul beverage, elf?” Gimli wrinkled his nose.

“Dorwinion wine, would you like to try it?”

“Nay. You have had that before, there is something afoul with this batch, it smells not the same.”

“Pippin mixed it with some of the dwarven spirits that Faramir had found in the stores. It does indeed smell poorly, the scents do not mix well, but it tastes surprisingly good. Try it!”

“Hmph, no, definitely not. Especially if Pippin made it.” Legolas laughed merrily at the dwarf’s remark.

After a few moments, Legolas turned to the dwarf again. “Gimli, I beseech you again, come and dance. I will teach you the basic steps, you will enjoy it!”

“Hmph, nay.”

“I will get you to participate eventually, mark my words!” They drank some more, and Legolas looked around Gimli to Erestor, “How about you, shall you join us?”

“I am as much of a dancer as your friend here.”

Legolas smiled. “Well, that will not be the case for long, for I shall teach him! I have been thinking Gimli, after we visit Fangorn you shall accompany me back to my home, so that I can show you the merriment of Eryn Lasgalen! And there I will get you to dance!”
Both Gimli and Erestor were somewhat surprised, for taking Gimli to Thranduil’s newly renamed realm… Well, they all knew that the dwarf’s father didn’t exactly receive five star service when he had been the traveler.

“And should that go well, you will take me to Erebor, for I will apologize to your father about the locket, and you will teach me more of dwarven merriment! And should things go poorly for us in my wood, well, you will just take me to Erebor all the sooner!”

Gimli spit out his ale, and both he and Erestor looked at the Prince. Legolas was both merry and serious at the same time, clearly not joking. “Will there be fresh linens in the dungeon?” His tone was light and playful.

Legolas stood, a twinkle in his eye. “If you end up there, we will enjoy the view from behind the bars together! For you will not back down from my offer, it would be as though yielding and announcing you have lost your stomach for a challenge! I will be back mellon-nin, as I will show you the stars this eve, but first I have promised to dance once more with Éowyn!”

He glided away merrily, drawing Éowyn away from Faramir and back into the Elvish dancing, as he had been instructing her this entire eve, Merry and Pippin joining them frequently.

“Master Dwarf, you must send me a letter when you reach the Wood of Greenleaves, for I must know how this trip goes.”

Gimli cleared his throat. “Hmph. Crazy elf. I should hope his optimism will be enough for both of us.”

“So you will go? I am a bit surprised that he convinced you so easily. I thought dwarves were stubborn, unyielding, and gruff!”

“Aye, we are, and that is why I cannot back down from his challenge!”

“I do not think he was challenging you, he merely said….” But he did not finish his sentence, for the dwarf interrupted.

“Aye, that is not what I meant. The challenge is the both of us tackling the residual discontent of our fathers and kingdoms; we defeated Sauron, surely we can do that! As for the gruffness, laddie, that shall be with me forever, and you as well I daresay, for we have that in common also, which is why I think I like you. Not every elf can be happy-go-lucky in a torrential blizzard like my friend there!”

After a short time, Legolas returned to collect his friend as promised. “Come mellon-nin, now we shall walk under the stars of Minas Tirith and be in the fresh air!”

“As we do every eve! Ah! I am out of pipeweed!”

“Well, we can stop at the house and you may, how did you say this, pilfer Pippin’s stash from the Shire?”

Gimli chuckled. “Master Erestor, would you care to join us? I will regale you with tales, and the background singing from Sir Elf here is actually quite pleasant!”

Erestor decided why not, always preferring small groups to large ones anyway. He walked with the pair towards the large terrace doors that would take them to the paths that led back to the sixth level of the White City. He spent the next few hours with them, sitting under the stars and learning interesting facts about Gimli’s life in the Blue Mountains and the Lonely Mountain, things Legolas obviously knew well, for he would frequently interrupt the dwarf and finish his sentences. And as
Gimli had predicted, Legolas did sing much of the time. Erestor realized that there was more to both the dwarf and the son of Thranduil than he had originally thought. The dwarf was gruff, but passionate and even friendly. Legolas had seemed inscrutable in Imladris, but here he was joyous and happy at heart. Both were obviously very loyal to one another, kindred spirits in a way. He felt somewhat envious, wishing he had a most dear friend as they had one another, although he most certainly did not envy the dwarf’s short lifespan. Shame to lose a dear friend so near to finding him. Based on this and on Arwen’s path, Erestor realized that there might be some logical wisdom inherent in the elvish tendency to stay away from mortals.

“I grow tired my friends, I think I shall retire for the night.” Gimli finished his pipe and stood. “Are you coming, Legolas?”

“I shall in a short while, mellon-nin, this night is too beautiful for me to leave it quite yet!”

“Elves!” the dwarf muttered under his breath.

“Not this elf!” said Erestor, referring to himself, and Legolas laughed merrily. “Ah, I believe I have found Gimli’s elvish counterpart!” said the latter.

Erestor and Gimli left Legolas to sing under the stars, and strolled towards their respective quarters, Gimli to the house that he shared with the fellowship, Erestor back to his room in the palace.

“If you like, we can talk again another evening, I should like suitable company during the dancing. Will give me a reason to decline the elf’s offer to teach me his revelry!” Erestor nodded at the dwarf’s offer, and they parted ways.

He did not see Gimli at the next evening’s feast, however, and as the dancing began, he sat beside other elves from Imladris, being joined by Sam and Frodo. Lindir approached, offering to take the hobbits to the dance floor, but they politely declined. Erestor knew from Elrond that Frodo had not fully recovered from the Quest, and that Sam was ever by his side. Sam didn’t seem like the type of Hobbit that would dance much, but he wondered if Frodo had been more of a merry sort in the past.

The nights passed quickly like this, and on the 5th evening after the wedding, he was joined by the ginger-haired dwarf. “Master Erestor! How are you this eve?”

“Master Dwarf, good to see you. I heard from the hobbits that you took a trip into the forests nearby.”

“Aye, the crazy elf and I were on a wild chase, searching for some specific type of flower the Princeling wanted to find. Some silly pressed flower collection he wants to make. Even Arod was beginning to wonder if this flower existed on Arda. But we finally found it, and here we are!” Erestor could clearly see that the dwarf’s expression was fond, and his presumed annoyance was not really so. “And then he wanted to come dancing again, so here we are, fresh off the horse almost!” He pulled out a piece of licorice. “Though I have to say these constant feasts get a bit dull, and I didn’t mind missing a few.”

Erestor laughed. They watched for a time, and then, the dwarf ventured, “I should like to ask her to dance, do you think she would say nay?”

Erestor, unsure for a moment, trained his gaze on Gimli’s own. And then his eyes widened. “Galadriel? Why, that is a bold move indeed.”
“Aye, I am awestruck by her, but reluctant to approach her.”

“Oh go and ask, Gimli! I think she will say yes!” While uninvited and unexpected, Pippin’s input was taken under consideration, a rare occurrence indeed. But not acted upon. Pippin, ever the helpful hobbit, took matters into his own hands, running to the place where Galadriel was speaking with Arwen. By the time Gimli could react, sputtering about the inane hobbit, Galadriel was gliding towards him, a smile on her face, offering a dance.

Gimli could not say no.

And no one, Erestor included, noticed the long moments in which the Prince of Eryn Lasgalen could not move his gaze from the pair. Merry noticed Legolas taking leave of the hall soon after, a smile on his face, going to “sing under the stars,” but did not realize that the smile was plastered on, was false.

And so it continued the next night, Gimli enraptured by the Lady of Lothlórien, the sheer poetry of his words for her breathtaking. Sharing a dance with her, Legolas slipping outside at the same time. This time, Gimli sat down beside Merry and Frodo, asking for his friend. “Where has that dratted elf taken himself to? I could not find him last eve, and barely saw him this morning, is there some reason he has suddenly disappeared from view?”

Merry shrugged. “He seems to go places by himself all the time, Gimli, I don’t see anything strange about it.”

Gimli knew differently, but he didn’t press it further, knowing Legolas would not have appreciated that.

“Well, he cannot leave this dwarf behind two nights in a row! I am off to find him.”

Gimli did indeed find the elf, partially hidden from view in a tree he particularly enjoyed, singing quietly, somewhat sadly, at the stars. Legolas must have heard him approach, but he didn’t look at him, largely because he didn’t know what to say, he didn’t even know what he felt.

Gimli sat on the bench near Legolas’ tree and pulled out his pipe. He spoke after a few long puffs, his tone gentle and his words representative of their friendly banter. “Princeling, I do not think that song will help these flowers down here grow, nay it may stunt them!”

Legolas glared at him, and Gimli changed his approach. “Legolas, I know something is amiss, what is it? I missed you last eve, and today, and as your friend, I would know.”

Legolas said nothing, for he had trouble finding words in Westron on those rare occasions that he felt upset; Gimli was well-aware of this and was patient.

“Well, as your closest friend, you shall not so easily rid yourself of me! For I am a dwarf, and once you have taken a dwarf on as a friend, you cannot be rid of him! I shall trail you back to your father’s halls even if you refuse me entrance!”

Legolas laughed. “And then you might see the dungeons after all!” And that earned a hearty guffaw from his friend.

When Legolas did not say anything more, the dwarf began to speak thoughtfully. “So….your mood seemed to have shifted last eve.” He began to weigh different possibilities, settling on one. “Last eve when Pippin had the Fair Lady dance with me….” and it dawned on the dwarf, “You are upset that I danced with her and did not dance with you. Just as you were upset when I rode with Gandalf and Éomer and not you. Ah, no wonder we are well suited to one another, your jealousy regarding your best friend is worthy of a dwarf!”
Legolas did not protest, and Gimli knew this was true by his silence, even as he had already known it.

“I am sorry Legolas, that was a hurtful thing to do. I will not be so careless in the future.”

Legolas tilted his head and smiled slightly, while Gimli brushed his own shoulders and patted his beard. “I am pleased to have such a good friend who recognizes the treasure in front of him!”

And this brought an even bigger smile from his friend, who jumped down from the tree and sat beside him. “Thank you, dearest dwarf, for helping find words when I could not.”

“Help?” He snorted, a bit embarrassed. “Speaking of help, I need some help staying away from that dratted hobbit Pippin for awhile. Drop a skeleton down a well, wake up the orcs of Khazad-Dûm and a Balrog! Play with the Palantir, draw Sauron’s eye! Get Galadriel to dance with Gimli, risk the wrath of Legolas!”

“More correctly the wrath of Gimli, I think, mellon-nin.”

“Aye.” And they were silent a moment longer. “Well, let’s get on with it, take me to walk under your stars, and next time you ask me to do something, I will do it for you.”

Legolas lifted an eyebrow, surprised at the dwarf’s offer, while his heart filled with joy, with appreciation for having such a dear friend, a friend who could speak so plainly and kindly when it mattered most. And then he led his friend, his greatest and most loved friend, for a long walk under the stars.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The celebrations at Minas Tirith came to an end, as all celebrations do. Soon it was time to travel homeward, including the one who would be carried in honor, Théoden King of the Riddermark. Éowyn and Éomer stood beside the bier that bore his body, hands clasped, their heads bowed in reverent sorrow. Faramir watched Merry approach them, seeing the siblings gently grasp the hobbit’s hands and then pull him into an embrace. The Steward of Gondor smiled bittersweetly, reflecting on all that had passed and all that was to come.

“You look most pensive, Master Steward.” Faramir looked down at the ginger-haired dwarf who had appeared beside him, the dwarf who had the same bittersweet smile in his own regard of the same scene.

“As do you, my friend.”

Gimli continued to gaze at the three before them. “Aye. While my heart breaks for them, as I love them, we should take our leave. For the three of them, the King of Rohan was a father, even to Merry for a short time. So let us go, for privacy befits a family.” He suddenly looked a bit mischievous. “Although you might be family soon enough, no?”

Faramir smiled broadly, giving the dwarf a slight respectful nod, with no hint of agreement in it. “Master Gimli, a gentleman does not give away the secret plans of his heart before baring them to those who must know first.”

“Aye, that is well enough, but a gentleman would also do well to ask for a fair lady’s hand. As I am certain you know and, I would venture to guess, that you would plan to do. And I would further guess that you will ask her brother in the stead of her deceased father and uncle.”

Faramir’s expression was bemused, as it was clear from the gentle chiding that Gimli knew the truth of the situation. He and Éowyn had made plans to wed; he had not yet had an opportunity to discuss this with her brother, though it was on the forefront of his mind and he was trying valiantly to discretely find said opportunities.

The Steward nodded again. “Your counsel is most wise, and if I did not so plan, I would be compelled to do so should I move to complete the plighting of my troth. For I know of your love for her, and I do not want to be on the receiving end of your axe.”

The dwarf grinned. “Aye, that is well enough. Now, you will likely not guess this part. But I will give you a try, for you are most wise yourself and may be able to guess correctly. And I enjoy guessing games as much as Frodo’s Uncle Bilbo does.”

Faramir grinned back at the dwarf, for he had heard the story of Bilbo and Gollum, among other tales of the elderly hobbit that bore the theme of riddles. “Well, you shall present me with a riddle then?”

The dwarf shook his head. “Nay, riddles are for hobbits. Just guess, and if you are correct, we will decide the winner.”

“The winner? So what do I win if I guess correctly?”

The dwarf laughed. “Nay, you win nothing. The bet will be between the elf and I, the wager on
whether you will guess correctly.”

Faramir joined in the laughter. “Very well, I think I shall enjoy being included in the tales of your challenges with Legolas. So let me think for a moment on an answer…. But first, how many guesses do I get?”

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders. “In truth, I hadn’t thought that far ahead, for the idea of this challenge was generated just now.” He turned to beckon the one who was needed to launch this latest contest. “LEGOLAS! Come here! The game is afoot!”

The Prince of Eryn Lasgalen appeared shortly, although Faramir was unsure from which direction he came. It was puzzling to him, how the blond-haired elf could appear out of nowhere whenever the dwarf called. He was tempted to try it himself sometime, call for the elf and see if he appeared. Though he doubted the result would be the same.

“Yes, mellon-nin?”

“Faramir is ready to undertake the challenge.”

“What challenge, mellon-nin? Is he going to join us in an orc-slaying contest the next time we encounter them? Or were you thinking of another drinking challenge?” The elf tilted his head slightly in his characteristic way. “I do not quite see the usefulness of a drinking challenge, though, as the winner has been established? Although if you would like to have a rematch, I am more than willing.”

“Aye! As am I! That is a very good idea. Legolas, we will wait until the Lonely Mountain, and there we shall have a rematch, wherein you will try our most potent dwarven spirits.” He put his hands on his hips, his stance most proud. “There we will truly see who has the stronger constitution!”

“Well that is not quite fair, mellon-nin. It would be more so if we also contested with the wine of my homeland when we travel there.”

The dwarf nodded. “Aye, best two out of three then. Though this may be a mistake on your part Legolas, for my father told me how your guards could not handle wine, passing out in their excess and allowing that escape, in barrels no less!” He began laughing loudly, the hilarity of it bringing tears to his eyes. Legolas, on the other hand, looked puzzled, not exactly understanding why Gimli found the idea of drunken elves so humorous.

Faramir held back his chuckle and cleared his throat instead. He was used to this banter between the two and typically enjoyed watching it. At the moment, however, he was driven to politely interrupt them, being very curious to learn the dwarf’s thoughts regarding marriage and Éowyn.

“Aye, back to the matter at hand. Legolas, Faramir agrees that he must ask Éomer for Éowyn’s hand in marriage.”

Legolas’ eyes flickered in recognition. “Oh, so....”

The dwarf put up a hand, interrupting him. “Stop right there, my friend. For he shall guess another part.”

“And the conditions, mellon-nin? Three guesses? One? And which of us takes what side?”

“Well obviously Legolas, you will take the side that he should guess correctly, and I would take the side that he would not.”

Legolas nodded, for of course that made the most sense. “And three guesses, I think, is most fair. Not
“too many, not too few.”

“Aye. Alright, Master Steward, go ahead and guess.”

Faramir laughed, appreciating the brevity of this moment, contrasting the sorrow he observed (and felt) just minutes ago with the joy he felt at the contemplation of the road ahead of him. “Well this is indeed a challenge for me, my friends, for I am not sure of the parameters of the ‘next part.’ It is most vague. But let me think on your words, and I will venture a guess.” He thought, and then put forth his first guess. “I must honor her all the days of my life, or you will come after me with your axe.”

“Aye that is true, but nay, that is not it. Next guess.”

Faramir thought some more. “I must spend a certain amount of time in her homeland each year, and if I do not you will come after me with your axe.”

“Aye, that is also true, but that is not it.”

Legolas was fiddling with the leaf-shaped clasp of his cloak, although his expression was completely confident. Faramir decided then and there that when Legolas came to Ithilien, he would ensure the elf was on his team in any card tournaments he ran. And as he imagined the dwarf would be there often as well, he would ensure Gimli was on another team, as he had no ‘poker face’ as the hobbits termed it. It would be easy enough to get the elf to stop his nervous habit.

And an idea dawned on him. “I must ask you for her hand in marriage as well.”

The dwarf threw his hands up in frustration. Faramir and Legolas smiled, nodding at one another.

“Aye, that is close enough.” He glared up at Legolas. “Did you send him some type of mind message? Tell him the answer by speaking in his thoughts?”

Legolas laughed. “Nay! I cannot sent ‘mind messages’ of any type, you know this mellon-nin, we have discussed it before. Lady Galadriel is one of the few who can do that.”

“Hmph! Alright, I lose. So, Master Steward, Éowyn and I have agreed that you will ask me for her hand in marriage as well, for I brought the matter to her attention and I have drawn up a contract for you. A betrothal and marriage contract in the manner of dwarves. She has reviewed it, and the conditions are agreeable to her. And Legolas has reviewed it also, as a third party. And Aragorn as well, in his role as King of your homeland. And Arwen, in her role of Queen. And Éomer, for obvious reasons. And Merry, in his role of esquire to Théoden. And yes, Pippin too.”

Faramir’s eyes widened, not so much at the idea of this contract, as he found himself liking the idea of being part of this friends-close-as-family situation. No, the surprise had a different cause. “So half of Minas Tirith is aware of this contract?”

“Nay, that is silly. Now, it looks like all are getting ready to set out for Rohan. Legolas, we shall ride beside Faramir and I will review the terms with him, for Aragorn told me our pace would be leisurely, so this is as good an opportunity as any. It shall give me something to do on that horse of yours.”
Neither Faramir nor Legolas missed the fond glance Gimli sent Arod’s way, but they also did not say anything about it. It was sometimes best not to, after all.

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Around three weeks later, Éowyn hugged Gimli, tears still in her eyes from her goodbyes to Merry. “I shall visit you when you return to the Glittering Caves, for it will give me yet another reason to travel to the Riddermark. And if you can, I should like you to attend my wedding. I was pleased that the contract was so well-received, for I greatly enjoyed constructing it with you.”

“Aye, I did as well. Although, do you still draw offense at the prohibition against cooking?” The dwarf almost blushed. “It was Aragorn’s idea,” and he sighed, “but Legolas and I did assent to it as well.”

Éowyn laughed, and Gimli thought her to be even more beautiful when she did so. “You know very well, my good friend, that I draw no offense to that. Besides, I think I shall take after elven ways in that matter, given that Arwen will be my Queen.”

Gimli gave her a questioning look.

“Did you not know, good Gimli, that male elves do most of the cooking when married? Except for the lembas bread?”

“Nay, that is something Legolas has not told me yet. Perhaps the only thing he has not told me yet. Although, Éowyn, I do not think it should matter if you cook lembas bread, no offense to you, my dearest lady, but it would taste terrible no matter how good or poor the skills of the cook.”

She looked at him closely, deciding she had one more thing to say before they parted. “Gimli, you know that we have been in similar situations. But the difference is as I have already told you, as we have discussed before. My love for Aragorn was unrequited. Yours for Legolas is not. Mine was but a fancy. Yours is not.”

The dwarf snorted while a faint blush rose on his face. “Éowyn, I have appreciated how directly you have addressed me in this matter as we have grown closer. But I will continue to say nay, for I think you are wrong.”

“And I will continue to say Aye, for I am right.”

Éowyn kissed his forehead. “Goodbye for now. It seems it is time for you to leave, for all are finishing their preparations.” She looked at him closely. “Promise me, Gimli, that at some point you will tell him the truth.”

He sputtered. “And what purpose would that serve? Destruction of a friendship I hold so dear?”

“You know as well as I do, dear friend, that even if I am wrong, which I am not, that loss of your friendship would not occur.”

“Aye, you are correct. I still do not see the purpose, however.”

“The purpose is proving me wrong, then.”

“Nay, I have no desire to prove you wrong. Why would I want to do that?” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Alright then, the purpose is because I want you to. I dearly want you to. Please do this for me, it is
important to me. I desire you to find a partner such as I have found in Faramir. And that partner need
not be looked for any longer. I am certain that the making of lembas bread is not the only thing he
has left unsaid.”

The dwarf took a deep breath and shut his eyes. There was no use in arguing any further; when she
believed a cause to be true, she was as hard to sway from her path as he was. “Let us talk about it
when I return. I may consider it at that time.”

“Fair enough. Goodbye for now.”

They parted, and Gimli went to find Legolas. He spotted him having a reserved conversation with
Aragorn, but when he approached, he did not know of what they spoke, for it was in Sindarin. He
had been picking up bits and pieces of the language, but his knowledge was much too minimal to
understand anything, though he did pick out names, Arwen, Elrond, perhaps something about a
flower? Of course it would be about flowers, for he had thought more about floral blossoms during
his time with Legolas than he had in his entire life. And trees. And stars. And was he becoming an
elvish dwarf, as he was beginning to enjoy it?

Aragorn beckoned towards him, interrupting his tangential thoughts. “Gimli, my friend, come join
us, we have been discussing my beloved’s ideas for the Gardens of Minas Tirith. She wanted me to
share them with Legolas, so that he can think upon them before he returns to Gondor with you. She
cannot review these plans herself, for she will not ride with us to Helm’s Deep, having bid farewell
to her father.”

“Aye, that must be a most sad parting. To have a child, one you would never really expect to lose for
eternity, choose a mortal path.”

“I would have chosen that she follow her path to Valinor.” It was not a defensive comment, but
rather one that was full of sorrow, spoken in a manner of self-sacrifice. “But her choices are her own
to make. And I will do my best to ensure they are never regretted.”

Legolas was pensive. “Indeed you will. And I may say, I think she views it as good fortune that she
has made that choice. For her road in loving you would have been much more complicated without
it. But I think she would have remained by your side even in that case.”

His fellow Hunters looked at him and decided to solemnly agree. They knew that Legolas was aware
of Arwen’s heart in this matter, the outgoing elleth reaching out to the more reserved ellon and
forging a friendship during their time in Minas Tirith and subsequent travel to Rohan. Legolas was
ever thoughtful, and his new friendship with the Queen had obviously led him to contemplate the
idea of elvish love for a mortal.

Legolas continued to speak. “We can talk further of the gates and gardens as we ride to Helm’s
Deep. But remember Aragorn, Gimli and I both love you, love you as our own kin, and we would
ever be here for you.”

The King clasped each of them on a shoulder. “For that, my friends, I am forever grateful.”

The ride to Helm’s Deep was uneventful, as the ride from Minas Tirith to Edoras had been. There
was some talk of gates and gardens, but far more of caves, of mining, of dwarven craft. For Gimli
was excited, so very excited to finally show the Glittering Caves to his dear friend. He and Legolas
spent two full days in the caves while the others stayed in the fortress. The elf and dwarf spent their
time exploring the caves slowly, Gimli at his most poetic, even more poetic than he had been with
Galadriel.
For some assorted moments, Legolas wondered if any of these poetic words might be the result of him. But he did not allow himself to entertain those thoughts for long, for they led to sorrow. He had overheard Gimli and Éomer back in Minas Tirith, debating who was more beautiful, Arwen or Galadriel. He heard Gimli say that he loved the Lady of Lothlórien, and it was not the first time those words were spoken. To have heard it again that evening in the White City, that Gimli’s love was given to the lady of the morning, that his heart forebode her departure to the Undying Lands.....well, he had been glad he had already told Gimli that he had planned to sing under the stars, for that gave him the time he needed to push the thoughts and feelings away.

And now, in this current moment, he needed to shove away his straying thoughts regarding Gimli’s poetic mood, his brief hope that such poetry might be due to him, push this to the recesses of his mind. Not stray to what ifs, for the lack of hope was clear. A dwarf loved One, a dwarf loved once. Oh, he had talked with Arwen about this back in Minas Tirith, sometime after she had offered friendship. Arwen had guessed his heart, he was not sure how, as no one else had. Perhaps it was because she loved a mortal and could sense such things in others. But she did not understand Gimli as well as he did. She did not seem to grasp the extent of Gimli’s feelings for Galadriel, feelings that Legolas had plainly seen.

Had Gimli not been so entranced by the caves, he would have recognized this moment of jealousy and hurt and started to ask questions. But he was entranced, and this gave Legolas the opportunity to realize his untoward mood and shake himself out of it. He plastered his smile on his face and decided to choose the option of basking in the beauty before him.

And soon enough Legolas was also entranced by the beauty of the caves......by the beauty of his friend’s words.......by the beauty of his friend in this moment.

When they emerged, Pippin was most excited to see them, for he had been disappointed that he had not been invited. At Legolas’ suggestion, the dwarf then promised that they would tour for two days with the hobbit after the dwarven colony was established. Therefore the Glittering Caves Excursion was added to the list of many reunions that Pippin was planning, an intricate array of various configurations of the fellowship and the others they had grown to care for.

Pippin approached Legolas standing near a tree in the field in front of the fortress, the Prince enjoying the smells and sounds wafting about on the fresh air. “Legolas, how was it? Was it most grand?”

“I have no words for it, dear Pippin, as I will tell the others.”

“Oooooh, it must have been breathtaking then, if it leaves you silent!”

Legolas nodded.

“What’s that in your hand, Legolas?”

Legolas looked at the crystal he held. “It is a crystal that Gimli found in the caves; he plans to mount it on a chain for me. He dedicated it as a token of our friendship, and just like I have no words for the beauty of the caves, I have no words for this either. See, he began to carve an opening for the chain right here.”

“Oh Legolas, it is beautiful, I don’t think I have ever seen anything like it before. Look at that, it is truly grand. You are lucky to have such a good friend, Legolas. I know he is my friend too, but I am glad that he is such a good best friend to you. Can we go show Merry? He would love to see it. And Frodo and Sam?”
“Certainly, my good hobbit, lead the way. But first, let us wait a moment for Gimli, for he will join us shortly.”

Soon enough the dwarf did join them, and Pippin took both over to his fellow hobbits. They were chatting at a table within the fortress, having just finished eating. And they were indeed enamored of the crystal Gimli had given Legolas, for it was unlike anything any of them had ever seen. Eventually Gimli took it, and began to work a chain through it.

“Pardon me for asking, Mr. Gimli…. I had heard from Mr. Bilbo and from Gandalf that dwarves had the highest skill with crafting, but I reckon I do not understand how you are able to fashion this for Legolas so easily.” Sam spoke softly, as he always did, and both Legolas and Gimli were pleased with his speaking up, for they knew his cautious nature often precluded this.

Legolas spoke for the dwarf. “All dwarves learn of crafting when they are but dwarrowlings, just as I learned of trees, archery and the like when I was but an elfling.”

“Mr. Legolas, you learned how to use your bow when you were little? With arrows? Wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

Frodo smiled fondly, one of his first smiles of the day. “Indeed Sam, remember the stories Uncle Bilbo used to tell?”

Sam cleared his throat. “Well yes, Mr. Frodo, and pardon me for saying this, but I was never sure if it was actually true, it seemed so far-fetched and all. Like a story to tell to children, is it really just fanciful, if you know my meaning?” The gentle hobbit looked at Legolas and Gimli, who were surprised, as Sam seemed to be the hobbit who most believed in tales, which they both deemed to be a most positive quality. “But now, now I reckon I know what is true. Fancy that, little Sam here, someday Samwise Gamgee will be telling tales of his own to his own little hobbits.”

“Soon enough Sam, we will be back in the Shire soon, and Rosie awaits!” This came from Merry, and all at the table smiled.

Sam blushed.

Legolas looked at him fondly. “Well, dear Samwise, perhaps this shall help you in the telling of tales to your future children.” He turned to Gimli, waiting expectantly. “Gimli?”

The dwarf looked up, having been absorbed in his stringing of the crystal. “Hmmm? Sorry Legolas.” He rustled through the pack he had brought inside, removing some parcels.

Legolas took them, each neatly wrapped in fine silk and tied with a ribbon. “Gimli and I are well aware of the Hobbit love of gift-giving, so we have prepared some for you, as we will soon part, though not forever, if Pippin’s planning for our reunions remains true.” And they all knew it would.

Hobbits certainly did love presents, and they opened them with as much enthusiasm as they had felt when they tucked into their first meal after being limited to lembas bread during portions of the Quest.

As gifts for Merry, Frodo and Pippin, Gimli had crafted a pipe, a most marvelous pipe, and each was engraved with elvish characters and drawings of Legolas’ elaborate design. Sam received a book, the outside crafted by Gimli, perhaps the most beautiful book Sam had ever seen, and inside were pages upon pages of pressed flowers, each with notes in Sindarin detailing the name of the flower and key elvish facts about it, with accompanying translations in Westron.

The thank-yous were profuse, for these gifts were almost as marvelous to the hobbits as Legolas’
crystal, or perhaps more marvelous, because they were for them. And then Gimli pulled out one more, and gave it to Legolas. It was wrapped similarly, and Legolas smiled at Frodo. “And this is for your Uncle, for I am not certain when we might see him again, and we would ensure he would receive it when you return to him.”

“Of course, Legolas, he will be most pleased.” Frodo took the package almost reverently.

Gimli finished fashioning the necklace, and handed it to Legolas, who put it on immediately.

“Oh Legolas, that looks so lovely.” Pippin sat with his chin on his hands, enraptured.

“Pip! Stop staring!” Merry swatted the air beside him.

Legolas smiled most brilliantly. “I do not mind at all, for it is indeed of great beauty.”

“Hmph. Say, Merry, I was wondering if I might have a short word with you? I have something to ask of you.” The hobbits looked puzzled at Gimli’s words, but Legolas did not, and the elf turned to the Ringbearer and his dear friends, beginning to show them his favorite flowers within the book he had created.

Gimli and Merry walked off, and the hobbit was excited, for it seemed to his clever mind that a scheme might be in play, and everyone knew how he loved schemes. They found a quiet corner in which to talk. The dwarf looked thoughtful, trying to decide what to say. “Master Hobbit, I have something to ask of you, but first, do you know the Balrog-Slayer?”

Pippin appeared beside them as if by magic, and spoke. “Glorfindel? Why yes, he rescued Frodo after Weathertop, remember Gimli? He is most friendly. A most friendly elf indeed. Why, the tales he has told us of Gondolin, they are simply fantastic. Imagine that, Merry, we know two people who have battled balrogs! And died! And then came back to life! And Gimli, he is a most skilled warrior!”

“Pip! You weren’t invited along!”

Pippin looked downtrodden.

“Hmph! No matter, it is just as well. So I was wondering if you would do me a favor.”

They immediately agreed, not needing to know what the favor was.

“Master Hobbits, do you care to know of what I will speak before you agree?”

They both shrugged. Obviously, they did not. And Gimli was not surprised, for they had done many things both together and apart that were driven by a sense of adventure and loyalty. And unlike being chased by Black Riders, the quest Gimli would propose had no particular danger.

“Hmph. Very well. So let me tell you what it is, and then we can discuss how you may approach it. I will warn you, its purpose will not be clear to you, but it seems you trust me, and for that I am glad. The next time we meet, you shall tell me what you have learned.”

Pippin was most excited for this adventure, and wanted to speak of other possible learnings, his mind wandering, but Merry smacked him before he could speak. “Focus, Pip. Pay attention to the task at hand.”

Soon enough after the telling, it was time to prepare for departure, and Legolas approached the trio. “Come mellon-nin, it is time to ready ourselves to ride to Isengard and then Fangorn. It will be most
delightful indeed!”

“And then your forest, and then the Lonely Mountain, don’t forget that part Legolas!” Pippin looked concerned.

Legolas laughed. “Of course not, my friend. Come, let us go.”

They walked outside, and soon enough Gimli and Legolas came across Erestor, who was readying his own horse. “Just a minute, Legolas, let us have a word with Master Erestor here.” Legolas nodded.

They walked up beside the raven-haired elf, and it was he who spoke first. “So you will ride to Fangorn after we reach Isengard? And you still plan to go on after that, to the realm of Thranduil?”

“Aye, my elven friend here sent his father a letter, a warning in my estimation, that Gimli, son of Glóin, Glóin of Thorin Oakenshield’s Company, Gimli will be accompanying his son back home. Father in the dungeon, son as best friend. I venture my father would wish to witness it!”

Legolas laughed.

Erestor, however, looked a bit concerned. “Have you written to Erebor as well? I may be biased, but I feel it is the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain that will be more of a challenge than the Elvenking.”

“Aye, I have, and aye, you may very well be correct.” The dwarf’s eyes were bright. “And that challenge, it makes me feel firesome. After all, Master Erestor, I have grown used to battle, to constant apprehension, and so has Legolas; we need the excitement of conquest and conquering!”

Erestor laughed, and then they all turned toward the sound of joyous singing in the near distance. It was Glorfindel in all of his lordly glory, the warrior shining and beautiful as always, singing merrily as he walked by. “Master Gimli! Prince Legolas! Is it not most marvelous today?! Come soon Erestor, as we shall ride, and I should like for you to travel beside me, as I shall discuss with you some plans Elrond has made. But I will leave you some moments for your conversation with your friends.” And he walked off, reminding Gimli of the merriment a hobbit would have when skipping, although the Balrog-Slayer certainly did not skip.

Gimli snorted as he walked past. “In a competition for syrupiness, who would win, do you think, Master Erestor, he or Legolas? He seems to sing even more than my good friend does.”

Legolas ignored the comment, and spoke to Erestor. “Erestor, it has been good to get to know you. And I am glad you were able to share with me that which Gimli had guessed. We are thankful that you agreed to this plan, for we think it shall be of potential use to you.” He did not dare speak more plainly than this, for he knew Erestor’s cautious nature, even as he knew it was impossible that they were being overheard right now.

If Erestor was less reserved, he might have grumbled. “Well, you did convince me that simply learning information is of no specific consequence, especially when the seekers of said information have absolutely no idea why they are looking for it.” He looked at them sternly. “But if this should backfire, I shall be upset. Especially if Pippin decided to join the task with Merry and that results in mishap.” He saw the nod that indicated Pippin had indeed decided to participate, and he continued. “Well, you predicted that would happen, so at least I have increased my confidence in my analysis.” He paused. “I can still think of no way it could backfire, having weighed every possible outcome an infinite number of times.”

“You might as well move with me to the Lonely Mountain, Master Erestor, for you are more
cautious in this than all of the caution ever shown by dwarves in all of the mining that has ever occurred on Arda. And let me tell you, that is a lot of mining. No wonder nothing has ever come of this for you, your caution is overly cumbersome. And for something this small, something that is not really that untoward to ask of another. Especially if a hobbit is the one doing the asking.” His stern countenance was then overridden by his pleasure and pride when he reflected on himself and his closest friend. “I suppose it is good that we have spent this time with Gandalf and Merry and Pippin, for their penchant for ‘assisting’ has rubbed off on us! It is good that you met Sir Elf and I, and we you, for we can be of most good use to you!”

Erestor smiled, for he agreed, no matter what came of this information-gathering plan of the dwarf’s. Or was it the Prince’s? No, it was the dwarf’s. But no matter, the source was irrelevant.

They agreed that they would reconvene at some point before Erestor sailed to the Undying Lands, to discuss their findings further. Based on said findings, they would assist him with generating ideas about potential further avenues, for he was much too reserved to do so himself. Given said reservation, both Legolas and Gimli had been pleasantly surprised by the Imladris elf’s willingness to consider their input.

Walking back with Legolas towards the place where the elf had left Arod to graze, Gimli was suddenly very glad that he had departed from Éowyn. Had she caught wind of this, she would have berated him. Not for this plan that might benefit Erestor, but for his own behavior with regard to his own unrequited love. And she would have facilitated resolution of said situation then and there, taking matters into her own hands. Or so he feared. And that fear would have had the potential to be realized.

“What are you thinking about, mellon-nin? You look a bit ill.”

“Hmmm? Just Éowyn.” He could not lie to his friend, but neither could he put forth his entire thought.

Legolas seemed to know he was holding back, for he continued. ”Are you concerned about Faramir? You know that you had no concerns about him, and that your contract was more the result of your love for her than anything else.”

“Nay, Legolas. I do not know, it is hard to explain.”

Legolas left it at that, for he knew that the dwarf would not be able to explain further. For a very brief moment, he worried that Gimli had developed love for Éowyn that went beyond friendship, but he was able to quell those worries as quickly as they arose, for his heart knew with certainty this was not the case. So instead he began to think about their upcoming travels, and began to feel his excitement rising. And then he had a realization. “Oh, wait, are you nervous about Fangorn?”

“Hmph, well of course I am. But no, that was not what I was thinking of. But speaking of Fangorn, you do not think those trees with the eyes will be there, do you?”

Legolas laughed. “Ents, Gimli, they are called Ents. And of course they will be, they live in Fangorn. And there will be Ents at Isengard, Gimli.” And then he grew more serious. “Do not worry, mellon-nin. I will not leave you behind as I did at the Paths of the Dead. As I have told you, I am very sorry about that, I was not considerate of your fear. I will not leave you behind again, nor will I discount your worries.”

Gimli did not know what to say, feeling self-conscious and humbled, so he stayed quiet, minus one short statement. “Thank you, Legolas.”
And then they prepared to ride to Isengard, where the fellowship would part ways for eternity, never to be gathered as eight again (or perhaps, as Gimli had said, they would meet again when the world was remade, Pippin then proceeding to put *Meeting When World Is Remade* on his reunion list, very pleased that Boromir would be able to attend). They would always fondly remember this time, and keep in their hearts the memory of the ninth who had been lost along the way. But now each was traveling to those they loved most, and in some cases with those they loved most. So while the parting would be sad, the view of the future was not, for all held hope for the doors they sought to open before them. Even if it was for hope they did not realize their hearts held.

Chapter End Notes

In my reading of the books, I think Eowyn wouldn't have been in Minas Tirith when I place her there (here and the past chapter), but I like her so took some liberties :-)

In Fangorn Forest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hmph! Treebeard, forgetting his manners indeed!” Gimli muttered under his breath. “Stay and rest awhile, he said, and then take the pleasure of passing through Fangorn. Ents! Elves! Maybe if that dratted Ent remembered his manners he wouldn’t insist that a dwarf, *a dwarf*, travel through a forest filled with trees that have eyes!”

Legolas patted Gimli’s hand, which rested on the elf’s waist as it always did when they rode Arod. “I didn’t quite catch that, mellon-nin.” He smiled brightly. “Your compliment’s words were lost in the air of this wondrous wood.” He waved his hand casually through the air, emphasizing his comment.

Legolas couldn’t see the dwarf’s scowl, but he could well imagine it was there. And when his friend remained silent, Legolas took it as another sign of Gimli’s worry, just as his comments had been driven. Their banter often took the edge off any hard emotions, but not on this occasion.

“Mellon-nin,” he began, patting his friend’s hand again, “Let us dismount, so that I can help you feel more at ease.”

From the look on Gimli’s face, Legolas may have suggested that they drop everything, sail to the Undying Lands, seek an audience with Manwë and Mahal, and proceed to tell every lewd joke that had ever been told on Arda, naked as newborn dwarrowlings.

“Legolas! You cannot be serious! I cannot get off this horse!”

Legolas had already dismounted, and he could see the mixture of surprise and horror on his friend’s face. If he had not seen it, he would have been very pleased at the safety Gimli was finding in Arod. But instead he was filled with concern.

“Mellon-nin, I know you are very worried. Just as I was worried when you were injured in the battle at Helm’s Deep. And you told me then that you would be fine, that your head was stout, that it was just a graze. That did not entirely ease my worry, as you know, but it forced me to entertain different thoughts. So I will tell you now that this forest is old, yes, but it does not intend to harm you. I know this will not ease your worry, but you know I would not lead you into harm.” He paused thoughtfully. “Unless you wanted to be led into harm. As in one of our challenges. A battle perhaps. At some point in the future, for there is no battle to be had here.”

“Ah! We have spent too much time around Pippin, we are both tangential when we speak now! Aye, you know that I cannot resist the logic of your argument, so I will trust you. But I beseech you, warn me if you see something untoward!”

Gimli dismounted. They began to travel slowly though the forest on foot, Arod following them from a distance. Soon the dwarf cleared his throat, and Legolas looked at him expectantly. “Legolas?”

“Yes, Gimli?”

He cleared his throat again. “I would prefer you not tell anyone about what I said. It feels….unbecoming.”

It was Legolas’ turn to look surprised, though not in the manner of utterly shocked disbelief Gimli had exhibited before. “Mellon-nin! Firstly, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Secondly, dwarves
do not break confidences, and neither do elves.” He shrugged his shoulders slightly. “Besides, you are far more talkative with others than I. It would be more likely you would tell someone. You cannot help yourself sometimes, I think.” His face was now dancing with mirth.

Gimli laughed, and then Legolas joined him. This broke the vice of fear on Gimli, and they continued to walk slowly through the forest for a time.

“Legolas, I am impressed by your ability to introduce yourself to each and every tree. It indeed shows your practice in royal court, for you are able to make each of your subjects—these trees here I suppose now—feel warm and welcomed. Perchance you can get them to make your esteemed companion here feel welcomed too?”

“Mellon-nin, you are not giving them a chance. Look at them, each has such a story to tell. This one, it grew from a russet-colored acorn many millenia ago. At least it thinks it was a russet-colored acorn, for that is what this tree over here has told it. And Gimli, it remembers the ent-wives! It tells me of the coloring of its leaves from rust to copper in the fall, the small green buds in the spring. Look, look at the shape of those leaves, how each is different, and this one, it feels like silk under my fingers. This leaf tells the story of a squirrel that passed here 2 days ago, scrummaging for food!”

“Scrummaging? Is this squirrel related to one of the hobbits? Firstly, because it can find food anywhere, and secondly, because it has conjured-up words that detail its eating habits—scrummaging, elevenses, hmph!”

Legolas laughed. And they continued like this until the sun began to lower in the sky, Legolas introducing Gimli to each tree they passed and telling his friend each one’s tale.

“You know Legolas, at this pace, we shall be finished with this wood by, let’s say, the Fifth Age?”

Legolas laughed even more merrily. “Oh Gimli, this journey would not be the same without you!”

“Hmph! I should say not! For whom would these trees be glaring at if it were not for me?”

“Mellon-nin, they do not glare at you! They simply wonder about you, they are not used to seeing dwarves! Yet, you are right, so I shall tell them once more about you, that will help you feel more welcome!” And Legolas began to sing.

“Wood-elves!” The dwarf rolled his eyes. “Sir Elf, I hate to disrupt your entertainment of our new friends here, and I know you could continue like this all night, but I begin to grow hungry. And I should prefer not to eat their leaves, even though I imagine you can convince them to share.”

“Of course, Master Dwarf!” And he chuckled at himself for using the term, Gimli lifting an eyebrow at him, not understanding why he found it funny. “Let us find shelter! The night has not grown chill for me, but should you like a fire? We can build one, and I will tell the trees not to worry themselves about the flames.”

Gimli patted his chin thoughtfully. “Hmmm, a fire, that will make them nervous? Aye, then they will stay away.” But then his eyes widened a bit. “Nay, that will make them angry. No fire!”

Legolas tilted his head, looking quizzically at the dwarf. “Gimli, they will not hurt you.” He tilted his head further. “Is your fear right now as it was in the Paths of the Dead?” The dwarf’s face grew a bit paler. Legolas straightened his back, standing very tall, and put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Gimli, I will help you grow to love the trees!”

“Hmph, and how do you propose to do that?”
The elf shrugged his shoulders, not entirely sure, and then an idea dawned. “Why, it is simple, mellon-nin. We will just travel even more slowly, and I will help you grow more used to them!”

The dwarf sighed. “Where did you see a place for us to make camp?”

Legolas moved to a small glade, and they built a fire, proceeding to cook and eat a small meal. As the evening drew on, the elf singing to him of the wonders he saw, the dwarf cleared his throat. “You know, Legolas, I suppose this glade here isn’t so bad. I am almost starting to see the beauty in it.”

The elf’s smile was dazzling. “See Gimli, elves and dwarves can learn from each other. Imagine what it will be like when we return to our realms together, and help facilitate peace!”

“Peace!” The dwarf snorted. “More like p-i-e-c-e, as in pieces of dwarf that your father’s sword should carve out of me! Or his spear? Or his arrow? Or his knife? What is his weapon of choice?”

Legolas laughed and disregarded the latter part for now. “Mellon-nin, you know that will not happen. For I wrote to my father, just as you did to yours and to your King, and they will have had time to come to terms with our friendship. Our hinting at alliance. At least to think on our friendship and our deeds.”

For some reason, Gimli could not help but stare at the brilliant fire in the wood-elf’s eyes. And the wood-elf noticed. “Gimli? Are you well?”

This shook the dwarf from his trance. “Aye.” He looked downward. “A new beginning indeed.”

Legolas tilted his head, confused. “Mellon-nin?”

“Ah, don’t mind me, the rocks in my brain are addled from this forest!”

They sat in silence for a time, and Legolas began to wonder.

*****

The next days passed similarly, Legolas teaching Gimli of the beauty of trees, just as Gimli had taught him of the caves. Their pace was leisurely, for Legolas was enraptured by the forest and no fellow companions set limits on their time as had been the case with the caves.

One night, they settled on a mossy glen, Legolas singing softly on his bedroll.

“Legolas, I have been proven wrong.”

“Oh?”

“Aye, you sing for trees more than you do stars. For the canopy is so full here, we have not seen stars since we entered.”

Legolas laughed. “Mellon-nin, of course I would sing more for trees! I am a wood-elf!”

“Legolas?”

“Yes Gimli?”

“I have a confession.”

This got the elf’s attention more than the previous comment did, and he shifted himself up onto his
elbows, turning his head to look at the dwarf who was sitting near him, smoking his pipe. “Yes, mellon-nin?”

The dwarf cleared his throat. “You cannot tell anyone this, not anyone, for it is not befitting of a dwarf.” Legolas nodded, of course he would not break his best friend’s confidence, they had recently had this discussion in this very forest, after all.

“I find… I find myself starting to… like stars, flowers, trees… I find myself starting to like this forest, just as I did that glade our first night here!”

Legolas laughed happily. “Not befitting of a dwarf indeed! I told you, mellon-nin, I told you the forest’s beauty would tug at your heart, just like the caves tugged at mine.” He sat up now, looking at his friend with a glint in his eye. “Wait until I show you my home, my forest, and then you show me Erebor. I am looking forward to seeing all of the places you have told me of. And seeing the people, for this quest has changed me, our friendship has changed me. A year ago I would never have imagined that I would be making plans with a dwarf to take some of our kin to Gondor, and then onward to establish mutual colonies. That is my own confession.”

“Hmph, not much of a confession, Legolas, I knew that already. Tell me something I don’t know. But not about male elves cooking when they marry. Éowyn already told me about that.”

“Why did she tell you that, mellon-nin?”

“Related to the marriage contract. You know, how she shouldn’t cook. And she told me that she plans to follow elvish ways in that regard.”

They both agreed that was a good thing indeed. Then Legolas thought for a moment, for he had told his friend so many things; however, having so many more centuries on his friend, it didn’t take too long. He settled on some mischievous tales, stories of trouble he had gotten into as an elfling, and one in particular had both of them breathless with laughter.

Gimli wiped the tears from his eyes with a broad hand. “Aye, I cannot imagine your father’s face after you did that!”

Legolas smiled. “Oh, he was not pleased at first, but it is something he finds very delightful now. He will probably tell you this story himself, probably others as well. You will see for yourself Gimli, Adar is a good elf, and he will see the good in you too.”

“Hmph, well, Gandalf told me the same thing, so I suppose I will trust you on that.”

They were silent for a time, and then the dwarf spoke again. “Legolas, one thing you have never told me, and I wonder…. My father told me of your friend, a red-haired elf, the one who saved Kili’s life in Laketown.” They both grew somber at the memory. “I am sorry to pry, but….what was she to you? My father said you seemed fond of her.”

“Mellon-nin, if this is the confession you seek, you need but have asked!” His face was kind.

“Nay, I just thought of it now, thinking of traveling to see your realm. I am sorry Legolas, sorry if she was your One.”

Legolas looked at him thoughtfully. “I have never understood if elves have the same type of One as dwarves do, Gimli. If love was not returned and there was no binding, well, I think love might be found again, Eru willing. Although maybe this depends on how strong the love is. For if it was too strong it would not be lessened over time, I think. Erestor is a good example of that. So I suppose elves do have One after all. You know, Gimli, elves are supposed to spend our time on ‘higher
“things,’ as Adar would say, and we speak much less of love than dwarves do.”

“But I ramble. It is irrelevant, for I did not love Tauriel in that manner. As the hobbits would say, I fancied her, but it was no more than that. Though your cousin…..I think Tauriel was One to him. Yes?”

Gimli shrugged. “I wish he was around to tell the tale himself, it is so hard to know what is true. Far too easy to try to tie a happy bow around that tragedy, imagine it ended differently that it may have. Maybe she was One to him, maybe it was just the same type of fancy you talk of. Maybe he died before they could figure out if she was his One, and vice versa. But even if they did know it, knew that they were One to each other, sooner or later they would be sundered for eternity, no matter what happened. Yes, there would be much tragedy in that. I shall only find out the truth after I pass from this life, to Mahal’s Halls.”

Legolas looked puzzled, tilting his head as he often did. “Well, I was there, you were not, and I say it was so, that they were One to each other. But why are you so somber? It is not like you to speak like this, you are one to speak of love, of exceptions to rules, of Mahal’s kindness, of Eru’s grace. You are one who would say they would find a way to be together in this life and the next.” He grew more daring, finally saying something he had wanted to say for so long. “Is it because of Galadriel? That you love her? That your love can never be realized?”

It was Gimli’s turn to look puzzled.

“In the interest of confessions, mellon-nin, I could not but help overhear your words to Éomer.” The dwarf looked even more puzzled, not understanding what his friend was referencing. “When he said Arwen was the most beautiful, and you said Galadriel was even more so, and that she held your love.”

Gimli laughed, a bellowing, deep laugh. “That is not love for One, Legolas. Have you gotten into some kind of Ent-Wine? If so, I would like some too! Nay, that is my admiration of a beautiful gem. A lovely being who is perfectly crafted. I would gaze upon her in the way that I gazed upon the Glittering Caves, and love both in a similar manner. Love for One, that is so much more. Love for One is more to a dwarf than all jewels in all kingdoms combined, more to a dwarf than all of the mithril on Arda, more to a dwarf than all kith and kin, more to a dwarf than love for any craft, more to me than my life itself.”

They both looked startled at the last words, for those were not a global statement. The last was spoken as though from someone who had found his One.

On any other evening prior to this, on any other day that had gone before, Legolas probably would not have gone further. He would have changed the subject or stayed silent, not daring to hope, not wanting to know if the answer would be one he did not want to hear, often not realizing he held hope in his heart at all. But there was something about this evening, something that was different. Perhaps it was the time they had spent in the forest, that time in combination with all of the time they had spent together before. In this moment Legolas did dare to hope, and the hope could not be hidden from his expression.

“Gimli,” he said softly, “Who is your One?”

And in the seconds thereafter a horse broke through the trees. They did not have time to bring their weapons to bear, for they had not anticipated battle here and were woefully unprepared. But then they realized there was no need, for they recognized the rider. “Make haste! We must ride for Eryn Lasgalen!”
When I wrote this story (pre-BOFA) I assumed that Tauriel was either killed during the Battle of Five Armies, or that she sailed to the Undying Lands after Kili died defending Thorin.
Journey to Eryn Lasgalen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gimli and Legolas both knew that no idle cause had led Elrohir to crash through the trees near their camp. The son of Elrond spoke immediately. “We have been searching for you, it has taken far too long. We started further northward, not realizing you had planned to tarry. And this forest is not leant to tracking, though I would have thought a dwarf would be easier to find. Even the birds that were sent could not locate you.” He put his fingers to his lips, letting out a shrill whistle. The whistle was returned after a short time. “Arwen and Elladan have been searching with me.” He shook his head. “If it was not for the Ent, we would still be looking. But I dally, I can tell you more on the way. Come, we must go!”

Given accumulated recent history, the war that had been waged across Middle-Earth, Gimli and Legolas both immediately assumed a most serious ill in Legolas’ forest, perhaps a resumption of war. For who would conduct a leisurely tour of trees while their homeland was in the midst of turmoil or strife?

They put out the fire, and while grabbing gear Legolas spoke clearly, questions forming vividly in his mind. He exhibited the keen emotional control of a well-trained warrior, for those who panic are less likely to survive repeated battles with giant spiders, orcs, and other assorted evils of the world. “What has happened? What brings this great need?”

He could not speak further, for then the control began to slip and the beginning trappings of guilt prevented further words. If they had not been traveling so slowly through Fangorn, they would have been back in his own forest, and he would know the answers to these questions firsthand.

Gimli saw his friend’s difficulty and spoke the remainder. “Is Eryn Lasgalen under seige?”

Elrohir was uncertain how much to tell, as they did not have time to linger. The telling could be left for the riding, for the ride would be long. Precious time had already been lost in this prolonged search. “There has been a battle in your forest. An unexpected resurgence of a massed force of orcs.” He took a deep breath. “It was swift, and while the battle was won, there was a most grievous result. Your Adar, he has been wounded. Badly wounded.” Elrohir’s facial expression was keenly intense, a mixture of drive to return Legolas to Eryn Lasgalen and compassion. The latter was heightened by their shared allegiance with Aragorn as well by Elrohir’s own personal experiences. He had borne the same type of expression when his Naneth Celebrian had been horrifically attacked by orcs five centuries ago. He and his brother had rushed to the Redhorn Pass of the Misty Mountains to rescue her, and the discovery of what had occurred was without words, terrible, unspeakable. Elrohir knew, he knew, what this situation demanded. While Legolas might not be able to assist his Adar, neither would he want to be lingering here. “Come, we must go!”

As Elrohir spoke, Legolas’ years of experience, his years of automatic responses in battle, his emotional control, all of these failed him. He was frozen, unable to move. Gimli had never seen him like this before; it was as though his reaction to Gandalf’s fall in Khazad-Dûm was reverberating and multiplying an infinite number of times. “Legolas, as he said, we must go.” His friend did not move, so he grabbed his arms. “Legolas, come. LEGOLAS!” The Prince shook his head, his unseeing eyes focusing on the dwarf in front of him. “Come Legolas, we must go.”

They made their way through the forest as quickly as they could, partially on horseback, walking when they had to stop to guide their mounts. As they traveled, the story was told. Aragorn had made
for Eryn Lasgalen as soon as the message was received in Minas Tirith. He had just returned to the
White City when the messengers arrived. The elves of Eryn Lasgalen assumed Legolas might still be
there, unsure of the exact time frame of his return to his homeland. Elessar’s aid was not requested by
Thranduil’s realm, and he was unsure if he could even be of use. But he also knew that his healing
skills were of few in the land and his kingdom was safe with the Steward of Gondor. Traveling to
Legolas’ wood was the least he could do for the friend he loved.

Arwen, on the other hand, set out to search for Legolas and Gimli, and her brothers went with her,
for their tracking skills were unmatched. Her siblings wanted to provide aid; the twins respected the
wood-elf’s role in the Quest but more importantly valued the bond he shared with Arwen and
Aragorn. What the twins probably wouldn’t have done before the Quest, before Aragorn’s and
Arwen’s forged friendship with the elf of the former-Mirkwood, they did do now.

They traveled through Fangorn silently and swiftly, stopped near the forest’s edge by Treebeard.
With a Hoom! the Ent invited Legolas and Gimli to return when they were able. Then the three elves
and dwarf exited the forest and stood in the plains, where travel would be more swift and
unencumbered.

The small party drove northward across the plain with all speed. The sound of hooves was a
cacophony of thunder, elven hair and a dwarf’s braids streaming like the standards of heralds. In the
far future, and even in the recent days to come, some would discount the ride, unbelieving that it had
been completed as fast as it would be. They took the fastest route they could, taking necessary rest
breaks for the horses, knowing they would switch steeds when they reached the northwestern edge
of the newly expanded realm of Lothlórien. They were slowed during the night and by changes in
terrain, but for the most part made extraordinary speed, Sindarin words to the horses making it clear
that this ride must be like no other.

Two evenings later, when they stopped once more to rest the horses, Legolas was more of himself.
He sat beside the fire they had made to cook a meal, talking quietly with Arwen while the horses and
Gimli rested.

Arwen looked at Legolas in the light cast by the fire, her face gentle, studying his own. Her siblings
scouted ahead, said scouting unnecessary, but she had asked them to do so in order to gain some
privacy from elven ears. She spoke to him in Sindarin, so that Gimli would not overhear should he
awaken. “Legolas, the message detailed grave injuries. I do not know what we will find when we
reach your wood.”

Legolas nodded slightly. “I understand. But I know my Elven-Lord, Arwen. His strength is
unmatched. He has survived the fire of dragons. He survived the Battle of Dagorlad. If any can
survive, it is he.”

She nodded, for she agreed.

Legolas looked into the distance, his eyes unseeing. “He has borne the burden of rule without
escape, for there is no promise of travel to the Undying Lands as the world changes, there is no call
of the sea for most of the Silvans of our forest. And he does not have the support of family, of loved
ones, aside from me.”

And Arwen nodded to this as well, for she knew the history of the realm first ruled by Oropher.

“Arwen, my Adar, he is unlike yours. He loves me just the same, but it is different. To look at us
together, one might not understand the depth of his care for me. But any joy in my childhood was
due entirely to him, Arwen, and I love him. I do not want him to pass from this world. He would not
want to pass. He has always said his place is in our forest, ruling our people, refusing the call of
Valinor, seeking independence from influence.”

“If he does not survive, Arwen, I do not know what I will do. I cannot assume the throne. I have heard the call of the sea; my Adar never did, and I daresay he never will. I cannot spend countless years here as he would. And…” he turned his gaze towards the dwarf, who snored softly nearby. “I cannot be without Gimli.”

She laid her hand on his. “Your thoughts travel too far ahead. We do not know what has come to pass, or what will come to pass. Do not forget, Legolas, that just as you pledged to be by Aragorn’s side, we will be by yours. And should the worst happen, we will assist you, for the path may not be clear, it may not be easy, but it need not be wholly tragic.”

Legolas felt some solace in her words. But the doubts remained, a growing gnaw in his thoughts and in his heart.

“Legolas, you are still thinking too far ahead, I can see it right at this moment. What of the faith of your dwarf, the faith you have so fondly spoken of?”

“He is not my dwarf, Arwen.” He sighed, looking downward.

“Legolas, your growing pessimism colors your thoughts and your heart. Do not let darkness overshadow your hope.”

He looked at her, straight into her deep eyes. “Arwen, I should not speak of this, but right before Elrohir appeared…Arwen, I dared to think for a moment that Gimli might see me as his One. But that moment is gone, replaced with this.” And he waved his hand in a sweeping gesture that referred to nothing and everything all at once.

Arwen smiled, and for a moment the wisdom in her eyes matched that found in her grandmother’s, the Lady of Lothlórien. “I have told you this, Legolas, and now you start to see it for yourself. Do not lose that moment, for it is an unbreakable thread of truth, it is for you to hold onto until the time is right.”

She touched the stone of the necklace he wore, the one Gimli had crafted from the crystal he found in the Glittering Caves. “I do not know much of dwarves, Legolas, but Aragorn told me of this token, and I do know that a dwarf does not give such a gift lightly. Not something so spectacular and fine. They save their best work for those they care for, and surely they gift such intimate tokens only to those they truly hold in their heart. He would call all of us dear friends, Legolas, and he only crafted a necklace for you. And I am certain that there was more than one crystal to be found in those caves, so lack of supplies is not the issue. Legolas, this is no mere token of friendship, it must be far more. You are blind to what is in front of you.”

She continued most firmly. “You need not do anything now, Legolas, I recognize that the present urgent matter precludes it for you. But I know of what I speak. He will wait for you, just as I waited for Aragorn. No matter what happens.”

The ferocity of her words tamed the raging emotions in Legolas’ fëa. “I wish I had your certainty, Arwen, for I should glide through life with no ill concern or worry!”

Arwen laughed, a tinkling of bells. “Legolas, you know that is not the case. But as I must lead the blind, I must know the destination.” Her eyes grew more fiery. “I am so certain of this, Legolas, that I have asked my Daer-Naneth to seek passage for him to the Undying Lands.”

If an elven mouth could drop open in some degree of shock, Legolas’ might have. For the
presumptuousness of Arwen’s idea, and the request itself, was one he had not even begun to entertain in his own mind …. the implication that Lady Galadriel agreed with Arwen, that Gimli bore him great love, great enough that it might permit the dwarf to pass to the Undying Lands.

“I know you long for the sea, my friend, and I know you long to be with Gimli. My Daer-Naneth and Mithrandir will return to Valinor soon with my father, Frodo, and the others. She and Mithrandir will to seek permission from the Valar for Gimli to cross. They plan to seek it for Samwise as well.”

“But what of Merry and Pippin? Pippin will be most upset, he does not like being excluded from things, particularly something so momentous as this.” Legolas laughed, and she joined him.

“Frodo will sail to heal the great burdens of his sacrifice. Samwise cannot go with him now, for we all know he would choose to remain here, to seek his Rose should she have him, to wed, to have children. But should he desire to sail at some point, and the circumstances of his life permit, Daer-Naneth and Mithrandir hope to obtain permission for his passage.”

Legolas was surprised, for his reaction remained the same - this was unheard of, unthinkable. But, he supposed, it would be one of the exceptions to rules, the path of faith, that Gimli was so fond of speaking,

“You, Legolas, have heard the call of the sea, and have a dwarven friend who bears the greatest love for you. Merry and Pippin, while they bear love for those who will sail...it is not the same. Their greater loves are and will be here. Even Pippin would agree, should he look into his heart.”

“But this travel is not certain, Legolas. My Daer-Naneth and Mithrandir can only beseech this of the Valar, they cannot create the permission themselves.”

Legolas nodded, the astonishment passing, a new path opening for him that he hadn't dare entertain before. Now perhaps, when it was time to sail, Gimli might sail with him. He filed this in the back of his mind, unsure how his friend would react, but filled with a new hope he did not have before. Still, there was a lingering doubt.

“Arwen, I appreciate your efforts, for you have boldly requested that which I would not have entertained. But your argument about Gimli’s feelings for me has an error. If Sam should sail, it is not due to a lover’s care but rather the greatest of love between friends, we all know this. Gimli, should he sail, would do so for the same reason.”

“I might have agreed, dear Legolas, had I not seen the necklace he gave you, how he treats you, and other accumulated things. Even you spoke, moments ago, of thinking the same, that he views you as his One. The facts are there, as I have told you before. But it is of not import, as I can recognize it with the faith of my own heart, and you deep down agree.”

Legolas did not think he agreed deep down, but he did begin to grow more confident.

A short while later, Elladan and Elrohir appeared, and the four decided it was time to move on. Legolas shook Gimli awake.

“Mellon-nin, it is time to ride. We will ride through the remainder of night.”

“Hmph. Well, no matter, the blasted horse misses me so.” He sighed. “I cannot let him be so broken-hearted for me.”

Legolas smiled. “Mellon-nin, you may ride in front of me, instead of behind, in the event you need to sleep.”
“Nay, Legolas! I am a dwarf. I shall endure. There is no such need.”

“I am well aware of that, Master Dwarf. And I am also aware that you may need sleep, whereas we do not, at least not yet. I should not have you unwittingly soothed to sleep if you ride on Arod while tired.”

“Hmph! Nay, Legolas! Unwitting?! I assure you, my wits are fully about me. And a dwarf is not soothed to sleep any more than he is tossed over open spaces!”

“Well then, mellon-nin, will you not do this such that I can rest my own head? For it will be a long ride and mine grows a bit heavy.”

Gimli’s eyes narrowed, knowing this was a bit preposterous, but it provided salvage for his pride at the same time. “Aye, Master Elf,” he feigned reluctance, “I suppose, for your sake, that I will make the sacrifice.”

They rode as fast as before, Legolas holding Gimli in front this time, finding some solace in his friend being within his field of view. And although the dwarf fought sleep, he did doze, oft jerking himself awake to prove his point of his endurance. When they reached the next stop, he commented on the same.

“See, elf? It was unneeded, for my endurance saw me through!”

Legolas smiled, and perhaps provided a feigned rolling of his eyes.

Some time later, near the northern border of the extended realm of Celeborn and Galadriel, the switch of steeds was made. Arod in particular was reluctant to be left behind, for he knew the urgency of the matter and did not want to be of ill use.

“Hmph, Legolas, you need to talk to Arod, he wants to proceed with us.” Gimli placed a gentle hand on the elf’s own. They were only able to leave after one of the East Lórien border guards vowed to the horse that they would allow him to rest and then take him to Legolas after a suitable rest.

The hard riding continued over the next days, with appropriate yet short breaks for the horses, the dwarf riding in front of the elf for safety at night.

The party of four reached the edge of Eryn Lasgalen in the midday sun approximately five days after beginning their journey. They were spotted by the Eryn Lasgalen border patrol quickly and halted in recognition. “My Prince! You have finally arrived! We shall escort you.”

As they rode, the guards spoke quickly in Sindarin and all at once, such that there was little room to respond, and Gimli did not understand, aside from chief defamatory words and names.

“Is this the Naugrim of the Quest?”

“Are you certain you should bring him here?”

“Our King, he may not have wished it.”

“That is untrue, the King would not bear ill towards him.”

“Yes, the King would welcome him, he was planning a feast in his honor.”

“Is it true that he is the son of the dwarves who had stayed here before, the ones you and Tauriel captured? This seems most strange.”
“I do not think he can be trusted. Look at what happened with the Naugrim’s father. Look at history, you yourself said he is a mutant.”

“Look at what happened to Tauriel because of those Naugrim. Think of all of those who died because of Thorin Oakenshield.”

"Are you under a spell? Was your mind injured during your Quest?"

"He is of sound mind, sounder than your own!"

Could Gimli have seen it, Legolas’ face was a wall of cold stone, even though some of the comments were not ill-willed. He did hear his voice, which was of ice. He spoke in Sindarin in return, Gimli not understanding the words, but clearly understanding the tone. “Stop! He is noble and true, of goodwill. You will welcome him here just as you shall welcome the Evenstar and her brothers, who accompany me.”

“My Elven-Lord would be of the same mind. Any who disobey me or threaten him, you will be banished.”

It was the most serious punishment he could think of, and the elves were taken aback. They rode in silence for some time through the forest, Gimli deciding to have his friend translate the conversation later, when privacy could be attained, for the general flavor was obvious due to tone and the brief snatches of the defamatory Naugrim. Given the situation, it was best for the dwarf to stay quiet, for now was not the time to protect his honor or distract from the greater item at hand.

Eventually they approached the stone halls of Thranduil’s main dwelling. As they walked up the long bridge to the entrance, the same bridge crossed by his Adad those decades ago, Gimli was both apprehensive and impressed.

“Legolas, this walkway looks of dwarven make, as my father had said. I had not believed it, that your father had hired dwarves to construct his caves, but now there is no question. And I shall remind you that if you should ever give me a tour, I would still not see the dungeons.”

There was a slight glimmer of a smile in Legolas’ eye and on his lips. He knew the dwarf was trying to distract him, for the moment of truth regarding his father would soon be at hand.

At the entrance, two guards stood. Legolas nodded at one and spoke in Westron for Gimli’s benefit, his voice at its most dispassionate. “Take me to my Elven-Lord.”

Gimli was taken aback by Legolas’ continued icy demeanor and the formality; then he recalled that this was how the Prince referred to his father during the Quest, excepting the times he seemed to feel more comfortable and relaxed.

The guard assented, allowing Arwen and her brothers to pass as well, and then stopped Gimli with a spear, speaking in Westron to the dwarf. “You may wait here.” Legolas did not notice this immediately, and it required Elladan halting him to point it out.

Legolas turned his icy royal stare to the Guard. “Daro!”

The guard moved aside, reluctantly it seemed, and Gimli followed the others to the hallways that would lead to Thranduil’s quarters.

They soon saw Aragorn approach, as he had been alerted of their impending arrival. He walked up to them, his face both grim and earnest. He gave Arwen a brief kiss, holding both of her hands, and then went to Legolas.
“Legolas, my friend. I must warn you, the situation is grim. I have worked with your Adar’s healers for several days. We have stemmed the tide, but we do not know what his improvement might be. And he may not survive.”

Legolas walked beside Aragorn, the King of Gondor telling him of his Adar’s injuries, the most severe being a blow to the head that he had not awoken from.

Aragorn stopped in front of the doors to Thranduil’s chambers, the guards posted there making way for him. “I do not think a large party is a good idea, it is best if only Legolas accompanies me.”

Legolas looked to the others, and asked one of the guards to escort them to guest quarters near his own.

And now the swift journey reached its destination, its target in his sight. Legolas drew a sharp intake of breath. The Elvenking’s face was battered beyond recognition. The illusory barrier of his facial scarring was not upkept due to his current state, and a similar wound now covered the remainder of his face. His hair was in tatters, and Legolas thought he could see the gray-pink of the inside of his head through an open wound in his skull as bandages were being replaced. Thranduil’s body was in little better shape.

The Prince of Eryn Lasgalen fell to his knees, and for the first time in his centuries of life, he felt bile come to his throat, and he vomited. Many moments passed, Aragorn’s hand on his back in comfort. Next he spoke softly, so softly Aragorn could barely hear the words.

“I do not understand how he survives, Aragorn. This is too much for any hröa to bear.”

Aragorn shook his head gravely. “I do not understand either. For now, I have done all I can, and I must tell you, when I first saw him I knew it was beyond my capability. I have sent for Gandalf and Elrond. I did not send for Lady Galadriel, as I was not certain how your Adar or the others here would react to that, no matter the outcome, given their distaste for the Noldor. If you wish, I will send for her also.”

Legolas nodded his assent, and then he finally stood, walking over to the bed. He dared not touch his Adar’s hand, for it looked too delicate for such contact. But he did speak. “My Elven-Lord, I have returned. I was wrong to tarry. I have failed you.”

Hours added to hours passed, and Legolas remained by Thranduil’s side, wracked with guilt and regret. The Captain of the Guard came to him and described what he knew of the battle, for he had not seen the blows but was able to reconstruct the event to some extent. Legolas barely heard his words.

At some untold point, Legolas was interrupted in his vigil by a guard. “Our Elven-Lady summons you.”

Legolas followed the guard to the Throne room, not understanding why his mother was here. He had not seen her in some time, for she had seemed to reject her role of rule, isolating herself with a small group of elves, occasionally visiting his father. Prior to Thranduil’s injury she was so rarely seen or discussed that most outside of their kingdom were unaware of her continued existence, assuming her to have passed to Mandos’ Halls - if she had headed the call.
But beliefs about her death were proven to be untrue once she had been called from her remote location in the wake of Thranduil's incapacitation, and hence here she stood, her beautiful face one of infinite impassivity and coldness.

“You have returned.”

He bowed. “Yes, my Lady. I regret that the journey was delayed.”

“Indeed? Indeed you might regret so, should you think clearly. Although perhaps you did some good, for the King of Gondor has saved our King from passing to Mandos. He was an agreeable choice for an ally, and so I am able to even better tolerate his Queen and her brothers. A wise political decision, of which I am surprised, as your wisdom is lacking at times. As illustrated by your other companion, the Naugrim you brought with you.”

“Your Adar, he made a foolish decision in battle and was injured. I think, myself, it was punishment from Eru himself for Thranduil's allowing you to bring the Naugrim here. Punishment for allying with Celeborn and the Noldor. His heart and mind were colored in his folly. I have heard he had even planned a welcoming feast for you and the naugrim! A feast honoring a naugrim! And look what has happened as a result. The judgment of Eru is clear. Should Thranduil have listened to me over all of those years, things might not be as they are now. Trying to counsel him has been without purpose, so it seems.”

“While my heart grieves for his injuries, perhaps it is for the best, as I appear to be the only one who sees the truth and the danger in his judgments of late. I rule in his stead, Legolas, until you take the throne, per our laws. I will not allow the crown to pass while he lives. And in my ruling, I have done what is best. I have sent the Naugrim from this kingdom.”

Legolas’ eyes widened, his distress clear on his face.

“Pause yourself, my unthinking elfling. He is gone, there is no need to follow; the sons of the Peredhel went with his of their choice. Do not worry, I have dismissed him diplomatically, there will be no harm to our relationship with Erebor. But you know as well as I, Legolas, that I am the wiser here. And this is for the best.”

“Now leave me.”

He turned to go, the thought in his mind clear.

“And Legolas, do not think of leaving this realm to find the Naugrim. You would do so in great dishonor.”

“Now go.”

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin Translations
Daer-Naneth = Grandmother (so far as my beta and I can figure out :-)
Naneth = Mother
Adar = Father
fëa = Soul
hrōa = Body
daro = stop
peredhel = half-elven (aka Elrond in this story)

Adad = father (Khuzdul)

Eryn Lasgalen = Wood of Greenleaves = post-war name for Mirkwood, after Thranduil and Celeborn divided the realm (Woodmen/Beornings received the middle section of Mirkwood).

Minor Canon Divergence: I think Sam says Arod is sent back to Rohan after Isengard is reached by the dissolving fellowship, but I have kept him with Legolas for the journey (just as I had Eowyn around earlier in the story). Note that I have also had Elladan and Elrohir stay with Arwen in Gondor for awhile and not travel back to Rivendell with Elrond.

Additional background (assumptions I have made are noted)

Oropher = Legolas’ grandfather & initial ruler of the Greenwood; he died in the Battle of Dagorland.

Thranduil’s wife = There is no information about her. I am assuming in this story that she is also Sindar, and she is more isolationist and prejudiced than Thranduil, living elsewhere in the forest. Very few of the elves ally with her, but a most share some degree of her prejudice about dwarves (and distaste for Noldor).

I have read in certain places that Thranduil may have hired dwarves to create his caves when his wood started becoming even darker, so I am assuming that here.
“Hmph! This horse is more uncomfortable than Arod!” Gimli sputtered the words as he sat behind Elladan, riding swiftly from Eryn Lasgalen to the Lonely Mountain. His head felt jostled and his teeth chattered, and Elladan had the most polite yet annoying habit of checking to ensure that he was safely seated every ten minutes or so. He missed the teasing and banter of his own elf, the steady gait of his own horse. And then Gimli felt saddened again, for neither was actually his.

The twins raised their eyebrows at one another in a manner reminiscent of their father. The dwarf’s complaints had been somewhat frequent during the day’s travel, but they knew him well enough by now to understand that it was simply a reaction to the events of the morning. They had been partaking of an early morning meal the day after their arrival in the former-Mirkwood when the Elvenqueen had summoned the visitors, Aragorn included.

She had swept across the dias in a manner reminiscent of her husband, profusely thanking them for their assistance to her son, and summarily sent Gimli on his way. The pretense she used was recognized as most false, her unwelcome clear between the syrupy words her honeyed tongue spoke. Unfortunately, all present recognized alternatives were limited; all thought she might be capable of having the dwarf forcibly removed, and that sort of disruption was not needed at this time. Even Aragorn had been unable to sway her, gentle though his words were in the crafting of an alternative that would have resulted in no injury to her pride.

Aragorn and Arwen had reassured Gimli that they would inform Legolas of the turn of events when the opportunity presented itself, which they knew would be soon, ensuring that the Prince of Eryn Lasgalen was aware no desertion was at play here, but rather a history of distrust that had grown exponentially more complicated in the presence of this surrogate ruler. As they rode towards Erebor, Elladan and Elrohir had reassured Gimli several times that he was not abandoning his dear friend nor was he succumbing to cowardice. Perhaps this physical distance might even be for the best, allowing Legolas to gently introduce the idea of renewed kinship to those in his kingdom whose reluctance had been further inflamed by the one who had taken temporary rule.

“Master Gimli. Gimli? Master Gimli?” The ginger-haired dwarf was shaken from his melancholic brooding by the twins. “We approach Erebor.”

It was dusk now, the sun splaying all shades of orange across the turquoise sky, the few scattered clouds colored the same as the rosy pink blossoms that adorned the region’s trees in the spring. They made good time, for their horses were swift and had grown used to traveling at all speed, even though they did not do so now.

They traveled across the wide stone-paved road that would take them to the majestic arches of the dwarven city’s Front Gate, taking time to gaze upon the view of Dale in the distance. The River Running flowed along its path parallel to the road as it traversed into the mountain, the sounds of water most tranquil to elven ears.

The party of three was greeted at the Gate of Erebor by a guard whom Gimli did not immediately recognize. This did not matter, however, as the guard instantly recognized him.

“Gimli, son of Glóin! You have returned! We have drank many an ale in your honor over these past months, when we could spare it, for the tale of your quest has made us most proud! It is a most fitting pinnacle to the tales of honor found in our own battle during the war.”

Gimli knew the significance of this. The losses that the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain and the
people of Dale had suffered were severe before the forces of Orcs and Easterlings had retreated upon Sauron’s downfall. The letter he had received from his Adad and Amad while he lingered in Minas Tirith detailed that and more.

The guard looked up at the twins, his eyes squinting, gazing most politely yet cold, for it was obvious the reputation of Thrandulion had not been modified entirely by his role in the ending of the War of the Ring. “Now which of these young lads is Legolas? I thought there was only one elf on the Quest, one whom the King will welcome to our stone city per your request? Why do two join you now?”

Elladan and Elrohir laughed gently, and the latter spoke. “Neither of us is so named, Master Dwarf. The Prince had to remain in his kingdom due to the grave injury his father bore during the Second Battle Under the Trees. We are Elladan and Elrohir, sons of Lord Elrond of Rivendell, and we have escorted our friend home to his mountain.”

The guard listened to the first part with a serious expression, and then appeared most relieved, excited even, at the twins’ correction of their identities. “Aye, that was a most grievous, swift battle, for so I have heard. Our King was saddened to hear the result, having lost his own Adad in the war. As he would say, regardless of what has gone before, the present provides a new beginning for all, for elf and dwarf to forge further ties. For if Gimli son of Glóin can find forgiveness towards the one who so harshly insulted him and his Amad during Thorin Oakenshield’s travels to reclaim our mountain, the one who falsely imprisoned Thorin’s company on his own quest, we must follow his lead.” And he seemed to be reciting most of his words rotely, as from a script driven to memory, almost hissing out the last.

Gimli, however, was pleasantly surprised, as he had anticipated a much less welcome reception for his dearest friend and secret One. If this guard was any indication, there was at least forced tolerance at the idea, which was promising indeed. And then he responded, feeling compelled to correct false assumptions, assumptions he himself had borne to Rivendell in what seemed a lifetime ago. “Aye, but you forget the ways in which Legolas Greenleaf aided Thorin’s Company. And the aid of the Elvenking at that time as well, from food when my Adad was starving to their army in the battle. The intent behind it was not of an ill nature.”

Another guard near them spat, unable to restrain himself in silence during his overhearing of the exchange. “Hmph, the aid was entirely due to Tauriel. Should she still be in Middle-Earth, she might be welcome here. Legolas Greenleaf, he is a coward, hides behind quick-witted insults and slobbers after his greedy father like an unkempt dwarrowing.”

Gimli would not stand for this insult to honor. “You tell the story most incorrectly, your words are untrue. Without his assistance, Thorin’s company would have perished on the river when they tried to escape. Kili might have died in Laketown from the pursuers. Thorin….”

“But they would not have needed to escape had he not captured them! They would have died in those dungeons if left to that treacherous elf and his disgraceful father! Shameful! Why, I have even heard…”

“Enough!” A deep voice bellowed from beyond. It was an officer of high rank whom Gimli did recognize, Dwalin, his hair as white as snow, yet as always he defied his chronological age. He spoke as gruffly as ever, and he had lost none of his commanding nature as the years passed. “We are to put our judgments to the side, let Legolas Greenleaf, Prince of Eryn Lasgalen, have the opportunity to prove himself to us, as he has done to our Walker.” He turned to Gimli. “Gimli, son of Glóin, welcome. The Lonely Mountain is glad to see you return.”

His voice rumbled as he continued. “Has the Elvenking passed from this world? What say you? And
where is Legolas? I would recognize him anywhere, and these are not him.”

“Nay, Thranduil yet survives, and Legolas remains by his side.” Gimli then made introductions.

“The King will be pleased to hear that Thranduil lives. Sons of Elrond, I now see the resemblance to your father. I was one of the Thorin Oakenshield’s Company who journeyed through Rivendell. Dwalin, at your service.” He bowed. And then he spoke more formally, his speech more inviting than Gimli had ever heard from him. “Your father was most hospitable during our journey, welcome to the Kingdom Under the Mountain! Are you traveling back to Rivendell now, or shall you partake of our own returned hospitality for a period of time? For dwarven welcome is unlike any other. Even with dungeons involved.”

The brothers looked at one another, having difficulty determining if he was joking given his no-nonsense tone. Seeing them pause, Gimli spoke for them.

“Aye, I think they will stay here for a bit. Rest themselves, and I shall show them the mountain.”

Dwalin nodded. “As you wish. The King will bestow the same hospitality upon them as was given by their father to our own. And your Adad will be amenable to them.” Words of the highest praise, relatively speaking, came from Dwalin’s lips.

The first guard spoke again. “I will alert the King, for he will wish to know you have returned. And I will have his staff find accommodations for them near you.”

“Nay, they can stay with me, I have sufficient room.” Gimli was most surprised at Dwalin’s insistence, for he was not the type who enjoyed hosting guests. He must be most pleased with the twins, most serious about wanting to return the reception extended to him during the Company’s travel to reclaim Thorin’s kingdom from Smaug.

They traveled slowly into the Lonely Mountain, Dwalin and Gimli leading the sons of Elrond. The twins marveled at its vast delving and intricate details, the majesty of it a foil for the beauty of the valley that housed Imladris. Gimli waxed poetically about its design and infinite deposits of assorted minerals, metals and jewels. Dwalin, who was not one for waxing poetic, simply listened, his expression some steps between annoyance and pride.

The musing about the wonders of dwarven design and the intricate beauty of the mountain on which said design was interwoven was far too soon interrupted by a small veritable ambush. Word spread like fire that Gimli, Hero of the War, had finally returned home, his accompaniment by the sons of Elrond adding to the intrigue. Dwarrows, dwarrowdams, dwarrowlings, perhaps all of the Lonely Mountain would have come to greet them had there been opportunity and advance warning.

It was not long before Glóin and his wife, most proud and most relieved Adad and Amad, pushed through the crowd to see their son. He was embraced by both at once, the strength and effusiveness of their grip a dwarven signature. Glóin stepped back, and could not resist a comment. “Well? You have traded elves of Rivendell for the Prince of Mirkwood? I think that was a good trade!” Some in the crowd heard this, and laughed. A few taunts directed toward the non-present elf were spouted out. Gimli glared.

Another figure emerged from the crowd. “So it is the sons of the Lord of Rivendell! We did not meet you during the Quest, but we did your father, and he was most welcoming to us. And I see you have met Dwalin. I am Dori, at your service. There are others who would meet you who traveled with us then, and I would most enjoy hearing the news from your realm.”

A short time after this the crowd parted, a path created for the newly crowned King Under the
Mountain, Thorin III Stonehelm. As he drew closer, making his way through the mass of dwarves, he spoke in a booming voice. “Well met, Gimli son of Glóin, we have been most proud of your role in the banishing of evil. We shall have a feast in your honor tomorrow to celebrate your return. But we looked forward to seeing your companion, the Prince of Eryn Lasgalen, who also demonstrated his worth in the downfall of Sauron, and if you judge him as friend, so does the Lonely Mountain.” The forced agreement of most of those in the crowd was apparent, for none would speak out in the presence of the King.

He waved his hand. “We can discuss this later, when I call you for an audience, after you have had enough days to rest from your travels. For now, your family will tend to you. Please spend time with one another as those newly returned from war should, and then on the morrow join us to celebrate.”

The surviving members of the Company, minus Glóin, took the twins to Dwalin’s house, most excited to reminisce and hear tidings of Lord Elrond, and, they would soon learn, their dear Bilbo Baggins. Gimli and his parents went to his quarters, a relatively large house carved into the stone. They talked for a time about the war waged against the Lonely Mountain, then of the Glittering Caves and his ideas for Aglarond, of the gates he would work on at Minas Tirith. But Gimli grew most animated when he regaled them with tales of his companions, talking most fiercely when he detailed Legolas’ heroics in battle.

Glóin spoke calmly at the mention of Legolas, having been prepared by his son’s letter. “So, Gimli, tell us more of Legolas. He seems much changed from the one I met so long ago. Explain more of how you came to change your mind. For the change was clear, but I still do not completely understand the cause behind it. “

“Hmph, I think I explained it well enough.”

“Aye, Gimli. Well enough that we, and our King, would welcome him here. But we do not quite understand, why he of all that you met, why choose him to accompany you home? Why not any of the others, if friendship grew so fast and deep?”

Gimli shrugged, not really wanting to explain. “We grew close over the Quest. He has grown to be my dearest friend, as I told you. I will explain further sometime, but for now I would prefer to just rest.”

“Did you have a falling-out? Is that the reason he did not come with you? Is it as your Adad feared, he showed his true colors?” His Amad looked at her son in a most concerned and contemplative manner, and she was never one to mince words.

Were these not his parents, Gimli would have grown most irritated and angry. But they were, and as such he knew they worried for him. Above all, he knew why it was hard for them to understand his friendship with Legolas. When his Adad left Rivendell after Elrond’s Council, the climate between the elf and dwarf had not been friendly. At first, he hardly understood it himself, how he could grow to have feelings of kinship…and then more… for the elf.

“Nay, we did not part on bitter terms. It is as you have likely heard, Thranduil was injured most severely in the recent battle in his forest.” Both his Adar and Amad nodded their heads, waiting expectantly for more. Gimli sighed. “It is a long story, I have not the heart to tell it right now, but trust me, his colors are as virtuous as my own. Nay, they are more so. For if anything, I deserted him.”

His Amad was prepared to leave it there, but Glóin was not, and so Gimli was forced to tell the tale. Soon enough his Adad was more riled up than he would have expected.
“If Legolas is to be King, he should be King. From what you say, at least he has the sense to show our kin the hospitality we deserve; I say he has learned somewhat from his errors. She treated you most grievously, Gimli. Do not get me wrong, I remain open to the idea of your friendship with Thranduilion because of you, not because I bear the elven prince any fondness, but this does not seem right. It does not bode well.”

His Amad spoke then, more even-keeled than either of them when they became riled. “That is hardly clear, he had been returned but a day before Gimli left? Give it some time, it is not an easy thing that you ask, friendship between elf and dwarf, a welcome reception, open minds, not for these realms, regardless of the closeness of our trading ties. It takes time to undo that wrought by the past.”

Both Adad and son nodded, for her words were the most wise of the three, as always.

Glóin spoke again, eager to change the topic, for it seemed there was little else to say about it for the moment. “Well, on a lighter note, dearest son, we have some good news. Most good news indeed! Your reputation is all the more sterling since this Quest, our family’s standing rising all the higher.”

Gimli cocked an eyebrow, not understanding the point. His parents weren’t ones to care for standing, no matter how rich they were in money or their lineage, the descendants of Durin’s line having gained more than the wealth of some kingdoms after Glóin was given his share of the treasure from the retaking of the Lonely Mountain.

His Adad and Amad could see Gimli’s puzzlement, and both grew all the more excited, as though they were in possession of a wonderful Durin’s Day gift to bestow upon their dwarrowling. “Gimli, you are perhaps the most desirable dwarrow in the Lonely Mountain. Nay, perhaps the most desirable on Arda. We have been presented with many courting offers, and this one, this one you will in particular like, we think.”

Glóin sorted through a tall stack of parchment that he had been storing on his son’s floor; it stood at least half as tall as he. Finding what he was searching for, he passed several detailed pages to his son. “This is the best one, Gimli. I think you will be most pleased, you should spend time with this dwarrowdam first. She knows much of architecture and would be a most good fit for this Glittering Caves venture you are considering. And her beard is one of the most grand in the Iron Hills.”

Gimli took the parchment with a reluctant hand, for his Adad was nearly pushing it into his face. But he needn’t look at it, as it was clear what the contents would be. And when he glanced at the parchment his hunch was borne true; no dwarf would have guessed wrongly about this. It was a dwarven courting proposal. When terms were completed and agreed upon, it would solidify his exclusive courting of the named dwarrowdam for the standard period of three months. If agreeable at that time, a betrothal contract may be undertaken, or the courting contract extended should additional time for assessment be required.

“There are many dwarrowdams whose Adads and Amads have sent proposals, some from here in the Lonely Mountain, although I am unsure of all of those whom you may know. Others have traveled here to present them in person, a most unique gift to you indeed. All have consented to their participation in this review, for of course none would do so against their will.”

“You have a most wondrous opportunity before you, my son. A chance to find your One, and if not One, than someone with whom you can spend your days in companionship, and perhaps grow to love as One, as some others have done before you.”

Glóin slapped him on the back and laughed. “Come Gimli, you look so forlorn! It is time for you to expand your field of view. For too long you have focused on your skill in battle, your craft and your travels, and while none among us would begrudge a dwarf that, you have an opportunity earned by
few. We know you have had dalliances along the way, but now Mahal smiles upon you, my son, in more ways than one. My son, a hero of legend, to court dwarrowdams near and far. This is a most wonderful day indeed!”

Gimli sighed. The path before him had just grown far more complicated; he would require delicate diplomacy not only to find his way back to Legolas’ side, but also to extricate himself from this most unfortunate situation. Outright rejection of the proposals of dwarrowdams would be frowned upon if the reason was not clear, given the scarcity and value placed upon them. And how could he tell others that he had found his One, when that in itself seemed impossible for so many reasons?

He felt alone all of a sudden, alone amongst those who were his kith and kin, alone under the mountain. He wished he had someone to help him sort this out, and those he would ask for help were not here.

The Quest had changed him more than he had realized.

The next day, and for some days thereafter, grand celebrations were thrown, celebrating the winning of the war, the return of the Hero, and the assistance provided by Lord Elrond in the regaining of the mountain those years ago, welcoming his sons in kind. The sons of Elrond ended up staying longer in Erebor than they had planned, for many of the dwarves wanted to meet them and show them their hospitality. It would not do, after all, to depart the Kingdom under the Mountain when revelry was planned in one’s honor.

At one such event, the twins were instructing some younger dwarrowlings on the specifics of a dance they had loved as elflings, the dwarrowlings most joyous and enthralled by their teachers. Elrohir was demonstrating a twirl in the air yet again to the little ones, when Elladan grabbed his shoulder.

“Look, look over there! Dori did speak the truth, look at the dwarrowdams seated around Gimli.”

Elrohir followed his brother’s gaze. “Have you been staying in a cave by yourself since we arrived, Elladan? Partaking of too many dwarven spirits at these feasts, perhaps? That scene is no different than any of the celebrations before this. Though I wonder…I thought the Company said that the courting, if any, would be singular? Not plural, such as this?”

Elladan shrugged and then smiled. “I suppose the spirits must have gone to my head, then, dear brother. I know not the answer to your question, but I do agree, the courting is singular once the contract is entered. Perhaps it is that one there, the one who sits beside him, the one with all of the jewels in her beard. From the Iron Hills, I think, I met her earlier. I have to say, she is more attractive than I would have expected. Perhaps not in the manner of the Evenstar or Daer-Naneth or Naneth, but attractive just the same. Speaking of the Evenstar, I think our dear sister will be most saddened that she is not here, to assist in the brokering of a deal, as it were. For her fondness for something like this, it would be unmatched.”

Elrohir joined in his laughter, and then they went back to instructing the dear dwarrowlings, leaps, twists, jumps and all. And while the little ones had not the innate skill or talents of elflings for such feats, the twins found it absolutely adorable nonetheless.
Soon enough, the visit had to end, for while the novelty and welcome had not worn off, the twins did remind themselves that they must put themselves to good use, particularly as their Adar may have need for them. Their father had likely arrived in Eryn Lasgalen by now, or if not now, then soon. They took their leave, agreeing to return to the Lonely Mountain with Lord Elrond should circumstances and appropriateness permit.

They set off on their horses in the early dawn light, and before the sun had begun to set they were greeted on the Forest Path by Legolas and Arwen. The friends had been informed of the twins’ approach by the Eryn Lasgalen patrols, and had come out the short distance from the entrance to the cavernous kingdom’s seat to meet them.

“What news of Erebor, my friends?” Legolas spoke most keenly, glad for the opportunity to distract himself from matters currently at hand.

“Well met!” Elladan spoke, a sparkle in his eye. “I can say with certainty that when the time is right, you will most enjoy your travel there. It was a most interesting visit indeed. Their skill in the crafting of the Kingdom Under the Mountain is simply wondrous to behold. And I will never again speak of the gruff nature of dwarves, for it is true that they enjoy revelry and tale-telling unlike any other. Perhaps with the exception of our dear hobbits.” And all laughed, for they knew this was likely true.

“Gimli sends you this message.” Elrohir waved a letter Gimli had given him, addressed to Legolas’ attention. “You must tell us what is inside! I think it may be a betrothal contract for your review. Or a courting contract. Or whatever contract comes first in the dwarven pursuit of love and marriage, I cannot remember the steps involved, even though Bofur explained them well.”

Legolas had no response, for his heart was fluttering out of his chest, his unspoken dreams appearing to come to fruition in a most unexpected way.

Arwen spoke for him, excited beyond compare. “Show us, I want to see for myself! It seems that you have grown to know our good dwarf quite well, and he takes you into his confidence! Here, let me see, let me see!”

The twins, not quite understanding the intensity of their sister’s excitement, ending up attributing it to the affection she had for matchmaking, betrothals and weddings. “I am glad your love of matches extends to Aluë’s children! Although we should not be surprised, Elladan and I had even discussed this in Erebor, how you might be a dwarven matchmaker at heart, the contracting and bids making the process all the more exciting! It is good to see your interest, dear sister.”

“Of course this interests me, why would it not? This is near and dear to my heart, it is more than even I dared hope for. Show me.” She almost grabbed it out of Elrohir’s hand, but he snatched it away before she could succeed.

“Ah, my dear sister, if it is so important to you, perhaps you should earn it. Hmm, let me think… catch me, and I shall give it to you!” And he ran away laughing, she sprinting after, him stopping just enough for her to almost reach the parchment encased in the envelope, then snatching it out of her reach teasingly and running from her again.

“Elrohir! Arwen! This is not the time for the games of elflings! There are serious matters at hand in
It was Lord Elrond, looking sternly at them, most unimpressed by the scene before him. “What on Arda are you squabbling over?”

Arwen looked sheepish, yet she was unwilling to give up her game completely and forfeit her potential prize. “We are not fighting, Ada, I merely want to see the letter Elrohir keeps from me, for I have a vested interest in it.”

“Oh, indeed? And what is that?” Elrond cocked an eyebrow in his signature way, partially amused, partially puzzled, her words defusing his irritation.

“We told her it might be a betrothal or courting contract, Adar, from Gimli.”

“Oh? And to whom does he plan to plait his troth? My dearest daughter is already taken, as I recall.” Now knowing the subject, Elrond did not need to explore the reason for Arwen’s exuberance further, for she had always been an elleth focused on matters of the heart, particularly after she had found love for herself.

Arwen smiled almost gloatingly at Legolas, most excited to hear the answer, most thrilled to be proven correct about her belief regarding Gimli’s One, proof at hand that would now demonstrate it beyond any shadow of doubt. She fleetingly wished she had made her own wager with her friend in the manner of the dwarf and elf, for now it was clear she would win most decisively.

Elladan answered for his brother. “Why, we think Gimli would plight his troth to a dwarven beauty with the most wondrous beard, a dwarrowdam of the Iron Hills. And if so, he has sent it for his dear friend to review, much as he did with the contract he designed for Faramir and Éowyn. We do not know this for certain, for he did not tell us the contents, and it would be more likely a courting contract than a betrothal, but Adar, it is inevitable, you should have seen all of the dwarrowdams proposing to court him. I have never seen such a sight before. Yes, there must be a courting contract for Legolas to review inside.”

And if someone had been observing the scene from a distance, it would be difficult to tell whose face fell the furthest, Arwen’s or Legolas’.
Lord Elrond’s intellect was most keen, with powers of observation that didn’t surprise any who knew him. So when he caught the hint of the beginnings of morose expressions borne by Arwen and Legolas, he acted quickly. He took the letter and gave it to Legolas, leading the twins away, quickly before they would catch on, so that Legolas and Arwen could have privacy. Elrond spoke to his sons as they walked. “Come, let him read his letter in peace, you must aid me in my tending to Thranduil, for there is much to do.” His tone left no room for disagreement.

Walking slowly some distance behind them, uncaring that her father could have surmised what might be at play, Arwen placed a hand on Legolas’ back, speaking most quietly in his ear, so that the others would not overhear. “Legolas, you have not even opened it. We do not even know if what my brother says is true. There may be no contract in there.”

“I have not the heart to see, Arwen.” He sighed, his face miserable, and Arwen could not hide her expression of empathy. “I do not want to say I told you so, Arwen, so I will simply stay silent.”

She grew a bit indignant, her dark eyes flaring, his words banishing the growing hints of doubt from her mind and strengthening her resolve. “Legolas, I know things are difficult now, with your Adar and the Elvenqueen, but your pessimism does no good for either of us. I stand beside what I said. I will not let secondhand words from my impish brother deter my heart from what it knows to be true.”

“Arwen, I am simply being realistic. And now you have doubts, do you not?”

“No Legolas, not doubts. It just…seems more complicated, that is all. Legolas, I am very uncertain how to bring the two of you together, if Gimli’s kingdom is sending so many dwarrowdams his way…” She saw the jealousy flash in Legolas’ eyes and spoke to calm him. “A dwarf only loves once. You have no need to worry, for you told me he has One, even if you disagree it was you. But you know it is you, Legolas.”

“I do not know that he has One for certain, Arwen. It was more in the way that he spoke. And his One, maybe it is one of these dwarrowdams. Perhaps he now returns to her.”

“Legolas, if you did not speak with such love behind your voice, your insecurity and jealousy would be most irritating. But for some reason I find it endearing, and for some reason I think Gimli will as well. Your words make no sense, Legolas. He would have told you if there was a dwarrowdam waiting for him. He would have told us. I know dwarves are secretive, but I just cannot see him having One back home and not telling anyone during the Quest or thereafter. And if he did have One, he would not currently be in the midst of the potential courting of so many dwarrowdams. Oh stop, Legolas, the jealousy on your face, it is so plain to see. He only has eyes for you, I am certain of it. Come, let’s open the letter, see what it says.”

Legolas shook his head.

“And since when would ignoring it help anything? My brothers misunderstand, Legolas.”

He sighed.

“Let me open it then, if you will not.”

Legolas considered, and then assented. “Do not tell me details if they would be too hard for you to bear in my position.”
She nodded, and then read the letter. It took some time, for it was long and detailed, discussing the twins’ visit, the battle that had been held there, his reception home. “Well, this is most curious. Not the majority of it; it simply details his return to Erebor, waxes grandly about his welcome and the welcome you would receive there, all things you would enjoy reading, I think. The curious part is the ending. He makes no mention of any dwarrowdam courting. Instead he wonders if there is any type of aid you need for your father, any mission you need to send him on to assist you.”

“Mission? As in a quest?”

“Hmmm, yes. Well, this is most welcome news indeed. Look Legolas, if he was courting, he would tell you. He is not the sort who keeps secrets from his friends. Not that type of secret, at least. He wants you to find a way to be useful, to assist your father.” And then an idea dawned upon her. “He wants to get away from the courting, Legolas, and you would provide a welcome excuse. And he does not tell you this, for what dwarf would tell their One that they are surrounded by dwarrowdams who wish to marry him? No, dwarves become too jealous, they would not say such things, for they would not want to hear it themselves.”

“Arwen, you must stop talking, you are beginning to give me hope again, hope that Gimli may love me, that we may be together someday. And I was just getting used to the idea of swimming in despair.”

She smiled, her beauty most breathtaking. “Well, we can’t have that, can we?”

“Let’s go assist your Ada, Arwen, he has done much good for my Adar already in the short time he has been here. My hope has grown there as well, that he may actually improve and heal.”

And they walked off into the halls of the Elvenking, both feeling much less grim.

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Earlier the same day, following the departure of Elladan and Elrohir, Gimli took audience with King Thorin III Stonehelm. He was guided to the King’s study, as Thorin had already greeted the Hero in a public audience in full court view and requested a private discussion now.

“Gimli, son of Glóin, I am most pleased that you have joined me today. I trust your friends have departed safely? Good. Join me in a pipe? Come to my balcony.” Gimli followed the King and sat on a wide, intricately carved granite bench.

“I will speak plainly, Gimli. We knew each other fairly well before your heroic deeds on the Quest, so know that I do not discuss these items lightly, and I hold your interests first and foremost. You have become a person of great power, and as King, there are certain things I must ask of you in my duty to this Kingdom. But know ahead of time that I am but asking. You are free to say no, and I will support that fully.” Gimli nodded as Thorin continued.

“First, I would like to review the situation in Eryn Lasgalen. I worry that the Elvenqueen may degrade our trading relationship, not purposely, more so due to her apparent tendency to isolate. I have only met her once, after Thranduil was injured, for as the rest of us I had thought she had died some time ago, but that was obviously not so. Her tendencies seemed quite clear to me. Any loss of trading ties would prove difficult for us, as the damage Dale sustained during the war has led to a serious problem in their ability to supply us with stores and food. We cannot run out of food, and we
still have no means to produce any in large enough quantities. I wonder if we might be able to have
Legolas assist us in discussions with his mother.”

“Aye, I am certain he would gladly assist us with any need, but his mother, she is not kind, you
surely have seen this. She is so unkind that I am uncertain if she would listen to her son. She wants to
isolate their kingdom, I think.”

“To what purpose, though? That is what I do not understand. They benefit from our trade as much as
we do theirs.”

Gimli shrugged. “I only know that Silvans desire simpler ways. They reject the Noldor. They do not
desire to sail to the Undying Lands, perhaps they reject the Valar as well.”

“Well, we are neither Noldor or Valar.”

“Aye, but we are Naugrim, and they firmly recall all that has passed between us. With the keen
memory of elves.”

“Gimli, as a Hero of the War you are no longer an average dwarrow. And you were not before you
left. But now, your actions are of even more import. Perhaps there is some diplomatic role we could
establish for you, as I know that your skill with words is as unmatched as your battle skill.”

“Aye, I will be willing to entertain this idea, although I do not know how possible it is, based on the
reception I received. But I would be willing to try.” There was no reason not to try, for should it
succeed it would allow him to assist his kith and kin in addition to permitting regular visits with
Legolas.

Thorin smiled and nodded. “Good. I must think on this further, we must both think on it further,
perhaps take it to Council. I am not certain how to proceed without worsening the situation. But I
also recognize that doing nothing will certainly make the situation worsen.”

Gimli agreed. “Aye, I fear you are correct. We have a mutually agreeable goal, then. And I would
not see those in this kingdom starve, either.”

“Let us think on this then, over the next days and weeks. Gimli, one last point I should address, as I
have not forgotten that you had plans to return to Minas Tirith to work on the Gates there, and
establish a colony at Aglarond, and I think there may be a way to establish this new role without
interfering with those...”

Gimli raised his hand to interrupt him, drawing on his pipe. “I am not certain of my role there, to be
forthright, as I cannot see myself traveling there while my friend is in need. Perhaps we can send
others to work on the gates, and delay the colony until Legolas’ position is more clear.”

“Aye, fair enough my friend. My second item, Gimli, is more of a favor. There is a dwarrowdam
from the Iron Hills whose courting proposal I would like you to consider. I believe you have spent
time with her already, as your father thinks you are a good match on paper. I do not ask you to
proceed if you do not wish, but it would do good for Erebor's political alliance with my other realm.”

The King continued. “I know you are a most coveted dwarrow, and I am glad that I am not in your
position, for I would find it most overwhelming. Understand, though, if you already know that you
would choose differently, then my suggestion matters not. First and foremost I will give my assent to
whomever you choose; you have my backing regardless.”

“Any? I could choose any? Even in light of this potential for improving Erebor's ties with the Iron
Hills?”
“Aye, any. You have earned that right, not that any dwarf needs to earn such things. But you of any have especially earned it. There are other ways to build Erebor's alliance with the Iron Hills, as Lord of the Iron Hills I certainly know that, and if you would choose another it would be understood. But the situation does require your choosing of someone soon, I would beseech you.”

This gave Gimli pause, as he was greatly fed up with courting and contracts. Though he would continue to hide his heart from his One, he decided he might not need to hide it here, and the idea provided him a great sense of relief. “And if my choice was not a dwarrowdam?”

The King’s eyes widened so large it seemed they might reach the top of his head. And then they narrowed. “A question like that, it is not asked casually. Or by one who does not know of what he speaks. Tell me, Gimli son of Glóin, tell me what you mean.”

Gimli shook his head and sighed. His resolve weakened as his worry grew that Thorin would not understand. No one would understand, except for Éowyn, and why she understood was still a mystery to him. “I cannot.”

“Rest assured, son of Glóin, I will not break your confidence. This matter does concern me, despite what you might think; dwarrowdams from far and wide have come here to court you. It would not please anyone or our relations with other realms to not have a suitable end to this.”

Gimli closed his eyes in defeat.

“That does not mean you must marry one of them, Gimli. Not if you know it would be impossible to find your One amongst them. No dwarf would begrudge you that.”

Gimli opened his eyes and saw the earnest gaze Thorin directed towards him.

“You promise to keep this in confidence? You would take an oath, calling upon Mahal as your witness?”

“Aye. I will even present you a contract to that effect. Here, I will draw a brief one up now.”

They reviewed and signed it.

“Now tell me, who is she? Is it Éowyn of the Riddermark, the one of whom you seem fond? That is not something I had envisioned, but it has interesting potential. Ah! And that would even further explain your interest in Aglarond!” He tapped his lips with his stout fingertip as he pondered.

“Nay, she is betrothed to Faramir. I even most gladly designed a contract for them, for I love her as a sister.”

‘Is it Galadriel, then? You would not be the first with an unrequited One. And you do speak of her most poetically, the loving admiration is clear.”

“Nay. I gaze upon her as I would a fine gemstone. My King, I must tell you, my One is no female.”

“Ah, Gimli, now I see. You should have just told me, you know that is of no import. There are others such matched amongst us. It would be a bit unprecedented, perhaps, to court proposals from dwarrows on such a grand scale, but the consideration of so many proposals from dwarrowdams was also unprecedented. Regardless, I shall set up some potential matches for you, I think I know well enough your personality to find some who may fit.”

Gimli sighed. “Nay. Thorin, I have already found my One, and he is not a dwarf.”
The King drew in his pipe, nodding. The reluctance he had seen from the ginger-haired dwarf finally made sense. “Is it that hobbit, the one who you say always causes trouble? Your presumed annoyance is just a façade, I think, as I thought I saw a keen fondness in your eyes when you spoke of him?” Then he grew silent, pausing for a moment to reflect. “Dwalin, as you know, still believes Thorin Oakenshield loved the hobbit from the quest. Gimli, I would not stand in the way of your love of a hobbit, no matter what potential mischief he may cause. I understand now why you have been reluctant to tell me this.”

“Nay! Gimli, son of Gloin, wed to Peregrin Took? Nay!” And he wiped the tears from his eyes with his broad palm.

The laughter drove Gimli’s mind out of the conversation at hand, and when he finally stopped, he had almost forgotten the purpose of their talk.

“I am at a loss then. Is your One a man, is it a man you cannot have, Faramir, or the deceased Boromir, or Aragorn perhaps?”

“Nay, my One is not attached, and he yet lives.”

“And it is no hobbit?”

“It is no hobbit.”

“Well, what is left then? An Orc?” He knew that was ridiculous, but as he spoke the words he had another thought, and a sharp intake of breath followed. “Gandalf, I had not thought of he, is your One Tharkûn?” Gimli’s response to that was all too clear, the way his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, and Thorin ceased that line of thought.

“Gimli, there is nothing left, I do not…..” And suddenly he knew, wondering why he did not realize it before. “It is Legolas, Legolas Greenleaf.”

Gimli was silent, studying the play of his smoke rings in the air, and Thorin III Stonehelm took his silence for assent.

“Mahal help us.” He rubbed his forehead as though he had a sudden, most severe headache. This would certainly not be easy to explain to the dwarrowdams. Or dwarrows. Or Gimli’s parents. Or Erebor. Or perhaps all of Arda.

The King joined Gimli in silent draws of his pipe, then poured himself a drink, choosing the most potent spirit he had in his cabinet. He wordlessly handed a glass to Gimli, and then downed his all at once.

“This may be the most difficult contract I will ever broker.” He smiled a bit, his uneasiness clear. “This makes strengthening trade ties with Eryn Lasgalen seem as easy as feeding Bombur a pie.”

Gimli laughed, a deep bellowing laugh that continued to lighten the mood. “That is true, no doubt. But there is no need for a contract, my King. The feelings are not returned.”

“Do you know this for certain?”

Gimli shook his head. “Nay, I cannot say that. But I would venture that dear Bombur would show up here skinnier than my finger before Legolas returned my feelings.”

The King shrugged. “Well, if you are not certain he would reject you, I feel I have a duty to proceed.”
Gimli frowned, beginning to feel most anxious. Thorin saw this, and waved his hand. “Peace, my friend. I do nothing to break your confidence. But I do have an obligation to help you determine if these feelings are returned.”

Gimli almost choked on the smoke from his pipeweed.

“I cannot stand by while our Hero of the War of the Ring pines for his One. I cannot. We owe that to you. And if the feelings are returned, I will broker the contract myself.”

“I am not sure what to say, although I am certain there will be no need for contract brokering.”

“And I would have been certain that you would marry one of those dwarrowdams, Gimli. That you would fall in love with the beautiful, most skilled one from the Iron Hills. And look at us now.”

Gimli had no response to that.

“Well, we still must decide how to handle the dwarrowdam situation.” Thorin sighed, rubbing his temple again. “We must consider disclosing that you have found your One. It is the only thing that will be understood.”

Gimli was mortified. “And how do you propose to do that, without the whole of Erebor, nay, all of dwarvendom on Arda, knowing what my One does not?”

“I think I must tell them that you have found your One during the Quest.”

The King paced, knowing as soon as he spoke the words that this was not a good solution, for it would simply raise more questions from the dwarrowdams and their families, from all of Erebor. Gimli’s love life was a key kitchen table discussion topic, after all.

“There is no way around it Gimli. We must send a courting proposal to your One.”

“Nay! I would sooner crawl into a hole with an Orc!”

Thorin Stonehelm nodded thoughtfully. He poured himself another drink, sipping it slowly this time, gazing into the distance. After a time, he nodded to himself.

“I have an idea.”

“If it involves an Orc, or sending giant eagles across Arda, dropping parchment that proclaims Legolas as my One, I am not interested.”

“No, my idea is better. It will help us explore the option with no loss to your pride, I think.”

“And what, my dear King, would this be?”

“Why, an arranged marriage, of course.”

Gimli did choke on his pipeweed smoke this time.
Soon enough Thorin III Stonehelm set off for Eryn Lasgalen with a small escort of guards. He had consulted with key trusted advisors, while Gimli had presented the plan to his Adad and Amad. Glóin and his wife had initially been most shocked, but quickly grew to understand, particularly after Gimli told them Legolas was One to him. After that, his parents were the idea’s most staunch supporters, and they even generated additional useful suggestions for the proposal.

Thorin traveled to Eryn Lasgalen himself with his small retinue, for he knew the Elvenqueen would not remotely entertain his proposal unless he presented it in person; no missive would do here. Their ponies traveled more slowly than elven horses, and the Halls of the Elvenking were within sight within two days of travel, accompanied along the Forest Path by an escort of Eryn Lasgalen elves.

The Elvenqueen received the King Under the Mountain in the throne room, her face impassive. “King Thorin Stonehelm, to what do I owe this pleasure? I received your missive that you would travel here, but I knew not the cause.”

He bowed his head in turn. “I would seek private audience with you, dear Queen, for I have a proposal of import for the betterment of both of our realms.”

“Indeed? Very well, follow me.” She stayed the guard, motioning for him to leave them alone, and soon enough Thorin was seated in a room behind the throne, being offered a glass of wine.

He spoke very quietly, not wanting to be overheard, and she put up a hand. “There is no need, this room is barred against sound travel, Thranduil had it so constructed.”

“Well, that is most wise. First, I would ask you of the Elvenking’s status, and offer again any aid, for if we are able to provide anything, we shall.”

She nodded, ceasing her graceful gliding about the room. “I would tell you once more, I appreciated the dwarven healers you brought with you, as they had some strategies that we would not have known, and it did assist him. As for your inquiry, Thranduil improves slowly with the tending of Lord Elrond, as he is perhaps the most skilled healer on Arda, and King Elessar has remained to assist him.”

The dwarf nodded. “That is good to hear, then.”

“Make no mistake, dear King, I do not warm to your kind, but I have appreciated your forthright ears and tongue.”

“Aye. In the spirit of forthrightness I have a proposal, one that may benefit us both.”

“Oh?” She sat down most gracefully, her eyes suddenly keen. “And what would this be?”

“I am well aware that you rule this kingdom partially by necessity, not purely by choice, for this you told me when I traveled here before to offer aid, both of us sharing the newness of rule by the unfortunate harm befallen on our Kings, our loved ones.” She nodded. “And I am also aware that you seek to reduce influence from others, from the Noldor in particular.” She nodded again, and he continued. “I would seek an alliance between our kingdoms. A cementing of our relationship.”

“But we have an alliance already. And, as you have so keenly observed, I desire to reduce our dependence on others as much as possible.”
“Aye, and that is why I think this proposal will suit you. Our races allied once, most long ago, and I would say we have much in common.”

She beckoned for him to continue, and he did, for he and his Council had worked most diligently to craft the framing of their proposal in a way she might hear. Some of his words made him cringe internally, but they were necessary for the greater good of his goal.

“I understand that you continue to seek independence for your people, freedom from others who perceive themselves as elevated above you. Yet they are not so elevated in your eyes, given their historical misdeeds. Your cause is noble, you also seek a return to simpler ways of life, yet you are seen as inferior. As we are, as Eru’s second children. We have a common goal and we can unite together to ensure we remain independent from influence. Further the recognition of our areas of pride. Both of our numbers were impacted in the war. Look, for example, at Thranduil. He ceded part of your kingdom to the Noldor as a result of that alliance. Unite with us, and we shall ensure there will be no more ceding. Our numbers together would benefit us both.”

This argument she had not expected, and while the idea of an alliance with the Naugrim was distasteful, the suggestion of enhancing the solidification of her kingdom outweighed her aversive reaction. “It seems you may know, King Thorin, that Celeborn has no plans to sail to the Undying Lands with Galadriel.” He assented, and she continued. “This can only be because of his desire to further his power, for the Noldorization of his Sindar self overrules and produces his need to extend his position over all of elvendom. Thranduil never understood this. Yet you do, and you would assist us in resisting this.”

“Aye. Dwarves were created to resist all evil, intended or not, you know this. And you do not have the military force to resist any type of onslaught, for your forces were just as decimated as ours during the war. And neither of our kingdoms is akin to those of Men, where we can reproduce quickly enough to regain numbers in a relatively short span of time.”

Unfortunately, she thought, this dwarf was beginning to make sense. “So what is your proposal? A completion of a stronger trading agreement?”

“Nay. I propose something that will clearly demonstrate the alliance of our kingdoms to all. A clear message that Erebor supports the elves of Eryn Lasgalen.”

“And this is?”

“I would beg you to brace yourself, dear Queen, for this may shock you at first; it shocked me when I first thought of it. But the idea will soon grow on you, I guarantee.”

She nodded and gestured for him to proceed.

“I propose an arrangement between our shining stars, an arranged marriage between your son and the son of Erebor.”

She frowned. “And who would that be?”

“Gimli, son of Glóin, Legolas’ companion during the Quest, and now renowned hero amongst dwarves. With him standing by the seat of your kingdom, you shall have the allegiance of all dwarves on Arda. And, I daresay, that of Galadriel, for she provided him three strands of her hair during the Quest. No Noldor would dare march against you or take additional territory, with force or with words, maliciously or in supposed assistance, with this dwarf aligned with your son.” Thorin knew Gimli would not be happy with this mention of Galadriel, but he found it necessary in the construction of his argument, and the Council had agreed.
She gasped softly at his words, for she understood the import. This dwarf had gained what Fëanor had not? He must be powerful indeed. Perhaps this could provide the protection her kingdom needed, something to ensure they would not fade from Arda, ensure they would not need to sail to the Undying Lands to permit their survival, for travel there would spell their end anyway, given the inevitable assimilation that would occur.

“I can see you have some interest, dear Queen.”

“King Thorin, I agree with you that this is not something of which I would have thought, but it is a most interesting idea. You have made a strong argument, one which I would not have expected. I am surprised that my inclination may be to say yes.” And she spoke most truly, for this was indeed her mind on this matter.

“Unfortunately, I wish you had come to me sooner, even one day before now. For just this morning I committed Legolas’ betrothal to one among us, cementing our kingdom’s commitment to Silvan ways. While there is no formal agreement as yet, it would not do to back out of it now, as a suitable elleth has been difficult to find for him. The repercussions of withdrawal could be severe, and the potential benefits of your idea do not outweigh this. You must understand, I might have chosen yours, but this comes too late.” For this was true as well. But her choice had been made, and she desired to send a clear message regarding the value of Silvan heritage. More importantly, she knew in her heart that her chosen elleth would be able to manage rule from the Halls while maintaining her strong allegiance with the now-Elvenqueen. Do a better job of rule than she could, in fact. In essence, this elleth would serve as a surrogate ruler for her.

“May I ask, dear Queen, is this elven lady One to Legolas?”

“One? No, she is not. But he will grow to love her, as she is an elleth beyond compare. Legolas has never found his One, but he is not unlike others, many elves never find that. At least now he has a chance to truly fulfill his fated role in this kingdom, to perform the duty he owes this realm.”

“Well, if she is not One to him, I have an additional suggestion.”

“Oh, and what is this?”

“I would have you consider the dowry. It is most high. And of personal import to your kingdom. A reparation of wrongs, if you will.”

This sparked additional interest on her part. “Dowry, what is this dowry you speak of?”

“Typically, in a dwarven marriage, the dwarrow offers a sum for the dwarrowdam’s hand. Families save for this from the time their son is born. In the case of a dwarrow-dwarrow union, it is typically the one seeking the union who offers the dowry.”

“Hmm, well I doubt that could be of enough import to us to change my mind. I do not understand.”

“His dowry is most impressive, my lady. I daresay there may never have been a similarly sized dowry. It is his father’s portion of the treasure recovered during the recovery of our Mountain. To that we would add the treasure of his Uncle Óin, who perished in an attempt to retake Khazad-Dûm. Its sum is twice that which was divided amongst elves and men after the Battle of Five Armies. To your kingdom it is due.” And he believed those words just enough to say them.

She tilted her head in a most-Thranduil way. This was interesting to her. She had always thought that her kingdom deserved a larger portion of that treasure. And the dwarven target of this match? That was most interesting indeed. “I had not realized, I had not thought. This is the son of one from the
He nodded. “Yes, I am surprised your son did not explain, or your husband.”

She waved her hand, making an excuse, for it would not look beneficial for Thorin to know that she rarely spoke to them of such matters. “Let me think on this, though I do not know if it is sufficient to overcome my other option. But I will consider it.”

Thorin departed for his guest quarters, and the Elvenqueen sat on the Throne, all sorts of possibilities running through her mind. She briefly thought it might be most satisfying to obtain this dowry and then humiliate the Naugrim in some way, keeping the dowry but ending the betrothal, but summarily dismissed that idea almost as soon as it was generated. The dwarf’s lifespan was short, and in her mind a dwarf-elf bond would be meaningless, for such bonds only occurred between elves. It was preposterous to think they could occur between an elf and a dwarf! Legolas and Gimli might vow themselves to one another in the manner of dwarves, even marry as elves would, but a true elven bond? A sharing of fëa? Never. This suited her indeed, for it made the idea of her son’s marriage to Gimli seem as a political alliance only, one of no consequence whatsoever aside from the potential gain Thorin had described. The promise of treasure, she was certain that would make the elves of Eryn Lasgalen love her, for they would take it as a concession that Thorin Oakenshield had wronged them, a concession Thranduil had never entirely attained. She was also impressed by the dwarf’s procuring of hairs from Galadriel; if he held sway like that over the most powerful Noldor on Arda, he would be a strong ally indeed.

But as she thought, she continued to return to her original idea, her plan of establishing herself with this most suitable elleth, one she knew that Legolas had cared for before he had grown fond of Tauriel. She knew he would have renewed interest in this elleth, and she also knew of the elleth’s allegiance to her. This elleth had profound political potential, far more than her own, as well as equally profound beauty and charm. Regardless of what occurred with Thranduil, whether he lived or died, this solution would ensure that the Elvenqueen would have more influence over her kingdom than she had been able to achieve on her own.

She thought about the options over the course of the remainder of the afternoon. Then, her decision made, the Elvenqueen sent for Legolas, who was tending to a grove of birch near the Elvenking’s halls. He soon presented himself, and with cold eyes nodded his head towards her.

“Is it Adar? Has there been a change? Do you need me to perform a task to assist him?”

“No, his status is the same. This regards something different, although it involves service to your kingdom all the same.”

He sighed. He and the Elvenqueen had different ideas of what service entailed, what duty required. “And what would this be?”

She spoke most neutrally, though less coldly than was typical, and in this way demonstrated her excitement, her own self-interest in the matter. “I have arranged a match for you.”

“A match? As in a marriage?”

“Yes, while arrangements such as these are unconventional amongst us, they are not unheard of, and it will be most beneficial to this realm.”

This was not what he expected her to say, not whatsoever. His Adar never talked of marriage, aside from occasionally ensuring that Legolas knew whom he should not marry, namely a Silvan or Noldor. When Legolas had passed the age typical of elven marriage, his Adar had not seemed to care
that he was unvowed, even occasionally giving him praise, in his way, that he had devoted himself to wood-elf pursuits, archery and tending to plants included. Should need for continuation of rule ever arise, his Adar had commanded that Legolas would simply name an heir, which was a common enough practice amongst elves, for kingdoms were taken over by non-related elves frequently enough, or simply permitted to diminish and pass into the annals of time.

“Adar has never cared that I did not find One, why should it matter now?” His voice dripped with distaste for her.

“Because this will ensure the continuance of our realm. Do not argue with me, Legolas, I will not stand for it.”

Legolas rarely spoke against Thranduil; their relationship and roles simply did not permit it, and Legolas found Thranduil to be commanding, almost intimidating at times. Yet he knew his Adar had the best interests of both kingdom and son at heart. Knowing what his father would say on this matter, Legolas would not stand for the Elvenqueen’s words or actions. Not from this elf who had been no mother to him. And this resolve was bolstered exponentially by the fact that he had found his One.

“No, I will not do this.”

“You have no choice in the matter, Legolas, I have arranged it.”

“I will not, Adar would not agree with you, of that I am certain. He would see no need.”

“I disagree, but more importantly, it matters not what you think, what matters is my judgment, I am ruling now. Let me ensure you understand, your personal opinion on this does not matter. This is for the good of the realm, the good of all Silvans.”

“I will not marry a Silvan.”

“Ah, just like your father, your prejudice so clear.”

“I would not marry a Sindar either.”

“Oh, then a Noldor? What, are you in love with that daughter of Lord Elrond with whom you spend so much time? She is vowed, Legolas. And it matters not, as I have told you, for this is for the good of our kingdom. It is your duty.”

“I…”

“I will not argue with you, Legolas. It is done. Now come with me, for we must plan the betrothal ceremony.”

“No, I refuse. I will not.”

“Stop acting as an immature elfling, and come with me. Now.”

“I will not consent to your abuse of this realm. This has gone far enough, Elvenqueen. I will stand for this no longer.”

“Legolas, I will only say this once more. Come now.”

And he knew not what to do. It was certain that they would stand here for hours, arguing just like this the entire time. His impulse was to leave, drop all and travel to Erebor and not return, but he
knew he could not leave his Adar, and in particular not leave him alone in this kingdom with the Elvenqueen, for Lord Elrond would not stay here forever, and Aragorn planned to depart soon.

He reminded himself that time devoted on thought towards this would generate a solution. He had others whose counsel he could seek, and he need not solve this problem immediately. Sauron was not defeated in a day, there were setbacks along the way, and this would be no different.

So with an air of resignation that was outweighed by a continuance of his resolve, he followed the Elvenqueen to the private room behind the throne.
As Legolas entered the room behind the throne, he was well aware that the Elvenqueen seemed almost excited to be leading him there. It must be self-interest at play, he knew, for that was all that ever entered her mind.

But no one was waiting for them, and he was confused. “I thought someone would be here? To discuss this betrothal?”

“Yes, we await their arrival. But first, let me discuss this with you.”

He sighed, not really wanting to hear what she had to say. So he waited for her to tell him what ally of hers she planned for him to marry. He started to ponder what her reaction would be when her plan came to ruin, for while he had not yet determined how this would come to pass, he knew with certainty that he would not enter into any betrothal in the false guise of duty to his kingdom.

“Legolas? Are you listening to me?”

“I did not hear what you said, could you repeat it?”

She looked at him with scorn, and then repeated her words. “Legolas, I said that I want your greeting to be formal yet polite, as is appropriate for your position.”

He raised his eyebrows at her, not quite understanding why she felt the need to tell him this. “I have attended many court appearances. Adar taught me well. I need no instruction from you.”

“Well, I certainly hope you demonstrate better manners to your betrothed than you do to me.”

“You speak ahead of yourself, as I have accepted no betrothal.”

“You have no choice, Legolas, this is your duty to your kingdom.”

At that moment, a knock was heard at the door, and a guard entered the room. “My Queen, as you requested,” and the guard ushered his party into the room.

She nodded, most pleased. “I am most glad to see you, and most pleased to proceed with this betrothal.”

She turned to her son, waiting expectantly for him to welcome their arrival, but he did not, which she attributed to belligerence, so she spoke for him.

“Legolas, this is King Thorin III Stonehelm.”

Legolas continued to be stunned, as stunned as he had been from the first moment he saw the dwarf walk in. “I am sorry, but you have both decided that you want me to exchange vows with the King of Erebor, the Lord of the Iron Hills?” He began laughing. “That is the funniest thing I have heard since I took leave of Pippin Took. No offense to either of you, but have you partaken of excessive quantities of our strongest Dorwinion wine this afternoon?”

She almost found this humorous as well, and for perhaps the first time in a millenia they had a point of remote closeness. “No, but I understand your reaction, it is a bit shocking at first. This idea was shocking for both of us at first.”

Thorin nodded, for indeed it was.
“Legolas, it is not Thorin you would wed, he is simply here to propose the idea.”

“Oh?” And an unbidden thought crept into his mind, the pause in the conversation becoming most unwelcome, suddenly impatient to know who this was. “It is a dwarrow or dwarrowdam of Erebor then? Or the Iron Hills?”

Thorin spoke. “Aye, it is your companion from the War of the Ring, Gimli, son of Glóin.”

Legolas attempted to put a dispassionate expression on his face, but was not at all certain if he succeeded. Thorin kept sending glances his way, attempting to gauge his reaction, but he found this a most difficult task, as the elf’s face was unreadable.

As the King and Queen reviewed the terms with him, Legolas knew that Gimli had agreed to this out of friendship and goodwill, deeming it a way to ensure his people would not starve. The Elvenqueen’s motivations were clear as well; he understood now why she was agreeable to this. Part of him wished this proposed marriage was more than a mere arrangement, that it was the product of requited love. Yet, somewhat surprisingly he thought, a larger part of him did not care, for this was more than he had ever dared hope for. Maintaining his dispassionate expression was most difficult indeed.

“Legolas? Legolas!” The Elvenqueen broke his train of thought. “We were discussing when you would like to travel to Erebor, for that is where the proposal and brokering of the contract will formally take place, correct Thorin?”

“Aye, but only if Legolas is amenable to this, I have not heard his thoughts.”

She waved her hand as if to dismiss the question, as though his response to Thorin’s inquiry did not matter, but Legolas spoke regardless. “It is amenable to me, I have no quarrel with this.”

The King was thoughtful, thinking of the question he would most like to ask, whether Legolas did not have One as his mother had said, or if he did have One, if that One might be Gimli. It was most difficult to guess, as he continued to find the elf’s expression impossible to read. But Thorin decided to forego that line of questioning, for now was obviously not an appropriate time. “Aye, that is good then. We are all in agreement.”

Legolas nodded, and the Elvenqueen ignored them, for her son’s agreement was irrelevant to her. She spoke next, intent on the terms of the contract. “So Legolas, when shall you travel, and then Thorin, when shall the betrothal ceremony be? We will set the date of the vowing ceremony one year from that date, per our custom. And Thorin, you must ensure that you have mithril betrothal rings crafted per our custom as well. I would like for them to be most impressive, perhaps inlaid with jewels, to clearly demonstrate the value of this commitment.”

Thorin nodded, for that would be easy enough.

They decided Legolas would travel back with Thorin and his retinue, for that made the most sense. Thranduil was well-tended by Lord Elrond, both the wife and son of the Elvenking being of little practical use at the moment, so there was no significant need there. There was the matter of leaving his side, but Legolas knew he would be able to convince Lord Elrond to stay until he returned, at minimum, so he would be in good hands. The Elvenqueen agreed to send for him should his situation worsen, but at this point that seemed unlikely, even though he had not yet regained consciousness.

“The only thing left, then, is the elven ceremony. We must ensure that is written into the contract as well, otherwise my people will not view this as binding.” She looked up at Legolas, and spoke very
quietly, so that only his elven ears could hear. “It is of no matter, it need only be once.”

He did not hear her, for his mind had drifted off again, hardly believing this was happening.

After a time, he was dismissed, while the King and Queen brokered additional details. Legolas immediately searched for Arwen, ensuring his expression remained dispassionate as he walked amongst the others of Eryn Lasgalen. When he told his friend the news after leading her to a private grove outside the halls, she was most excited.

“Legolas! Look what can happen in such a relatively short time. Moving from utter despair, thinking an envelope contains a proposal between your One and a dwarrowdam, to being the target of that proposal yourself.”

“Technically Arwen, I am the one who will present the proposal.” He said it almost giddily.

“Oh, that detail matters not. Legolas, how exciting! I told you, you are his One! You must give me a significant role in this wedding, I insist. And Pippin also, for I am certain of his insistence as well.”

He laughed. “I will. But Arwen, this is an arranged marriage, Gimli does this to ensure sufficient food supplies for his kingdom, and other related practical needs.”

“No, there are other ways to do that, Legolas. Your denial is most humorous to me now.”

“It matters not, Arwen, my heart feels more content now that it ever has.”

“Legolas, you are most sweet. Now, tell me what else is in this contract.”

And they talked of betrothals and weddings and more late into this most peaceful and wondrous night, sitting beneath one of Legolas’ favorite trees, each most happy about this unexpected turn of events, their hearts full in different ways.
Thorin III Stonehelm and his retinue departed soon after the completion of the betrothal contract, returning to Erebor with what he deemed an acceptable response in hand. They traveled back to the Lonely Mountain as the turn from late summer to autumn continued; those leaves that would turn color would soon enough be resplendent in their shades of crimson, ochre and gold.

Glorfindel decided to travel to Gimli’s homeland with Legolas, driven by stories of the Company’s hospitality as well as his own relative lack of critical function in Eryn Lasgalen; he had escorted Elrond to Thranduil’s forest, but had provided what help he could with the healing tasks at hand. Thorin III Stonehelm was most amenable to this, for the Balrog Slayer was a legend unto himself regardless of any history elven-dwarvish animosity, and the previous visit of Elladan and Elrohir had demonstrated the fondness borne towards the Rivendell elves by Thorin Oakenshield’s company.

The journey itself was uneventful, with some members of Thorin’s entourage riding ahead to prepare for their arrival. None of the escort knew the exact purpose of the King’s visit to Eryn Lasgalen, for a formal announcement of the details of Legolas’ pledge would not be made the proposal was reviewed and accepted during the betrothal ceremony itself. All, including Glorfindel, simply assumed Legolas was traveling to the Kingdom under the Mountain per Gimli’s original plan, before tragedy had befallen Thranduil in the Second Battle Under the Trees. None would have guessed that he traveled to the Lonely Mountain to review betrothal contract terms with Gimli and his parents.

When they entered Erebor, Thorin showed the elves to lodgings within his own palatial quarters. Soon enough, Dawlin, informal leader of the Company since the tragic events of the Battle of Five Armies, called upon the Balrog Slayer with Bofur, Bombur and Dori, the latter using a walking stick to assist his stiff joints, age overtaking him at last. Just as they had with Lord Elrond’s sons, they planned to repay the debt of hospitality they had been shown in Rivendell. Gimli accompanied them, most eager to see his dear friend.

Thorin pulled the ginger-haired dwarf aside before Legolas presented himself, conveying that he was unsure of the elf’s heart, but that he wanted to proceed with the arrangement and had no quarrel whatsoever with it. Gimli did not care of the status of his friend’s heart, for this was more than he would have hoped for, and would provide what he saw as the greatest benefit of marriage regardless, namely having a lifelong companion. And after he passed from this world, returned to the stone, Legolas could proceed with his own life, and perhaps even find another to love someday, for Gimli was unsure what form elven love took. If he was not Legolas’ One, he became certain that another would await him after he died. That thought pained him, sending tendrils of jealousy around his heart and his mind, but he pushed them away, for the future was much too far off yet, and he was not a dwarf to worry unnecessarily of unknown events that might not come to pass.

Gimli gazed intently at Legolas as he entered the large sitting room, smiling fondly at his friend, his smile returned in equal measure.

“Legolas! Well met! I see you brought another with you; even the Balrog-Slayer could not resist partaking in the revelry of Erebor! It is as I told you, and surely you will see for yourself, dwarven welcome is like no other! Did you convince him with your words, as I must have convinced you?”

“No, mellon-nin, I did no such thing, but your words must indeed be true, for the sons of Lord Elrond convinced Glorfindel to join me.” Legolas’ sapphire eyes twinkled with joy at seeing his
friend, the ease of return to their steady and true friendship bringing untold happiness to his heart.

“Aye, of course. Lord Glorfindel, welcome to the Kingdom under the Mountain! Our dwarrowlings will be most excited to hear your tales, for they are unlike any other!”

Glorfindel nodded and smiled. The dwarves they had passed on the way to Thorin’s quarters were as enthralled as dwarves could be with an elf, for this was one of legend, of extraordinary feats, and he was most beautiful indeed, almost as beautiful as Legolas to many eyes, his face radiating optimism and joy. “Master Gimli, I am most happy to be welcomed here. And I am most excited to view for myself whether these gatherings of yours are indeed beyond compare, as the sons of Lord Elrond have told me.”

Dwalin’s voice boomed across the room, “Ah! Tell me, Lord Glorfindel, are you a master of the dances of Rivendell? As a fellow warrior I would judge it unlikely, but I will warn you as Gimli has already done that the dwarrowlings will be most excited to see you, as poor Bofur here has had difficulty remembering the steps to your dances!”

Glorfindel laughed, his melodic tone filling the spacious room. “I do indeed know such dances, and would be most happy to assist you, dear Bofur, in your lessons.”

The aged-yet-not-aged warrior turned to Legolas, nodding at him, speaking in his gruffly deep tone. “Master Legolas, I bid you welcome. Gimli has told us of your feats during the War of the Ring, and of your deep and true friendship throughout. Any dear friend of his is a friend of Erebor, regardless of what may have passed before. If you will recall, I am Dwalin, at your service.” He bowed slightly, in the dwarven manner.

Legolas nodded in turn, surprised by the warm welcome, given both history and this dwarf’s nature. He most pleased by this, and made a mental note to formally apologize to him and the others for his actions at an appropriate time. “I am most pleased to see you again, Master Dwalin, and happy that you are able to look past previous circumstances that I have come to regret.”

Dwalin was content with this response, and then turned back to Glorfindel. “Come, Master Glorfindel, for many amongst us will be most glad to see the Slayer of Balrogs. And perhaps you and I can engage some in battle skill training.” For while the dwarf was aged, he defied it, and had plenty of fight left in him.

Glorfindel smiled, as this sounded most amenable to him, and followed Dwalin and his fellow Company members from the room.

Gimli looked at Legolas, putting his hands of his hips with a playfully proud stance, and smiled. “Hmph! And you, how have you been? And where are your things? You shall stay with me, I am certain you have missed me too much to stay with Thorin here, kingly as he may be.”

Thorin had been observing the interaction keenly, with a hint of a smile on his face, resolving to maintain his own decorum. If Legolas did not return Gimli’s feelings, at least they shared a friendship like none other he had seen, and that made this an excellent match indeed. “I shall leave the two of you then, to catch up with one another. Seek me if you have need, and tomorrow we shall meet to discuss specifics.” He clasped each of them on the shoulder. “I am most glad that this will proceed, for I feel in my heart this is a good arranged match. I will have someone deliver Legolas' belongings to your quarters, Gimli.”

Gimli placed a broad hand on Legolas’ back, and led him out of Thorin’s chambers into one of Erebor’s wide, perfectly carved paths. “Come, my friend, we have much to discuss, and I am certain that you would prefer to do that amongst your trees, and not under the mountain. I fear you may
begin to find it oppressive soon.”

Legolas had no thought of this, and was confused, as he did not feel such a thing as of yet. “Mellon-nin, what do you mean?”

“Hmph, Legolas! You are a wood-elf. I think you may find our Mountain as oppressive as I did Fangorn. Perhaps more so. Do not worry, as I said, you will stay in my quarters with me. I will not abandon you to fear, just as you would not do to me.”

Legolas smiled. “But mellon-nin, I have lived in a cave much of my life. Surely this will be no different? But I would like to see the outdoors, it looked most interesting when we approached, and you can show me the surrounding sights and sounds.” It would turn out to be an unnecessary fear on Gimli’s part, but Legolas appreciated the time spent outdoors regardless, as that would always be his preferential choice.

They walked outside the Front Gate, to the plains area beyond, a grove of trees in sight. Gimli looked at Legolas out of the corner of his eye. “So tell me, what was your reaction to Thorin’s proposal?”

“Ah, mellon-nin, I must tell you, at first I thought Thorin himself wanted to vow with me.” He laughed, for he found it most amusing, as did Gimli, the contrasting melody and deeper roar twining together in the air.

“Aye. Well, for a time he postulated that I would be matched with Pippin Took!”

Legolas looked at him in surprise. “Dearest Pippin? How on Arda did that come to pass?”

Gimli shook his head, still chuckling at the idea. “It is a long story, my elf, I will tell you later.”

Then he caught himself, and covered his words. “Hmph. Well you are my elf now, are you not?”

Legolas smiled most fondly, his sapphire eyes glittering. “I suppose so, mellon-nin. I suppose so indeed. Here, this spot looks inviting, let’s sit here. You have most likely missed my singing to the trees and birds!”

“Aye, indeed I have. And I am certain you have missed my pipeweed smoke.”

Legolas leaned back against the tree trunk, soaking in the moments of this day. “You know, mellon-nin, I think I have.” He patted the dwarf on the knee. “This arrangement will ensure our wagers will see no end. And speaking of arrangements and Pippin Took, I think we should plan the betrothal ceremony such that he can attend, he will be most upset if he is not invited.”

“Aye, you are correct. Well, we can send word to him and the rest of the hobbits, perhaps Éowyn as well, I should like her to be present if she is able.”

They agreed this was a welcome idea, and then Gimli grew more serious, drawing on his pipe and asking Legolas after his father. “I am sorry that I could not stay there with you.”

Legolas was contemplative. “It is of no consequence, mellon-nin. In fact I deem this to be better, for had you stayed, Thorin might not have generated his proposal. With this turn of events the Elvenqueen cannot send you from my kingdom again. Although I am sure with time your way with words would have changed her view of you, regardless of circumstances. And I unfortunately think you will require your charm, for she is an elf like no other. And I…I am the opposite of charming with her.” He sighed.
Gimli smiled, his face gentle, most pleased that he would be able to support his friend in this manner. “I will be happy to do that for you, my elf.” He drew on his pipe, and they sat in silence, Legolas singing softly, Gimli blowing rings of smoke in the air.

Eventually Legolas spoke again. “I was surprised, Gimli, about the proposal, given all that I had heard of the dwarrowdams.”

Gimli frowned, not expecting to hear those words. “Aye? What did you hear of dwarrowdams?”

“Elladan and Elrohir told me. To be honest, at first I thought the letter you sent me was a proposal for me to review, a proposal for courting a dwarrowdam, much as you had me review Faramir’s joint betrothal and marriage contract.”

Gimli started to laugh. “Ah, Legolas, that could not have been further from the truth! I tell you, this is the other beneficial item with regards to our arrangement. It will ensure space from all of those dwarrowdams. It has been most trying.”

“Oh, in what way?” Legolas spoke in a most leveled manner, trying to hide his sheer joy at those words. Unfortunately he was too happy to succeed this time, and even-keeled he did not appear to be, not to the dwarf who had seen this before in other times and places.

“Ah, Legolas, you are too easy to read now, I know you too well. There is no need to be jealous, no one could ever overtake my friendship with you. Look, I would not vow with just anyone! You are special indeed.”

Legolas felt content with that declaration of ever-lasting friendship, and returned to his singing.

After a time, Gimli decided they should head inside, for his parents wanted to greet Legolas, and they should also make an appearance at the evening’s feast and ensuing revelry. “I will warn you, my elf, that the dwarrowdams may surround me, and you will have more opportunities to be jealous. So do not forget my words. I must act as though I consider them until the announcement is made that I have provisionally accepted a betrothal proposal. Which I hope will be soon, as I cannot take this much longer. Did you ever think of a quest that you could have sent me on?”

Legolas laughed. “No, mellon-nin, but that was only due to insufficient time, I would have determined something for you soon enough.”

And their hearts felt light as they went inside, for while neither suspected the other’s true affections, both the present and future certainly felt far more welcoming than what each would have had predicted just a month before.

They went to the feast after changing their clothes and then calling upon Gimli’s parents; the latter were not at their home. When they entered the large hall, Legolas marveled at the celebratory display, and delighted in seeing Bofur and Glorfindel teaching the young dwarrowlings to dance.

Legolas did not, however, marvel at the spectacle that descended upon them after his first brief observations were made. To Legolas’ mind, the dwarrowdams seemed to swarm Gimli, and this was not far from reality at all. One in particular stood out, Legolas guiltily realizing that he had not imagined a dwarrowdam could be so beautiful. This, he thought, must be the dwarrowdam from the
Iron Hills. He strengthened his resolve, remembering Gimli’s words, and let pleasant thoughts and feelings predominate in his being.

“Dear dwarrowdams, this is my most valued friend, Prince Legolas of Eryn Lasgalen. He was my companion on the Quest of the Ring, and I trust you will show him a good welcome.” And they did, greeting him with warm words and leading him to a table occupied by Dwalin, who was talking with a few others and drinking mead and dwarven spirits. One was particularly welcoming, her name Adlia, and she noted she was a childhood friend of Gimli’s. Gimli himself was soon occupied in conversation with his prospective brides, and Dwalin became Legolas’ primary conversation partner.

“So, Legolas, how was your trip here? It is good that you were finally able to arrive. And I am most sorry to hear about your father. How fares he?” Dwalin’s deep voice boomed over the ambient noise.

“He is doing somewhat better, thank you, although he remains quite ill. Lord Elrond has helped him significantly, as have King Elessar and Glorfindel, and as I have heard, your dwarven healers as well.”

“Aye, I am glad to hear that he improves, even if it is slowly. So Legolas, how long do you plan to stay under our Mountain?”

Legolas wasn’t quite sure, and he also wasn’t sure what Dwalin knew of the true purpose of his visit, so he was a bit vague. “Before the Second Battle, it would have been as long as Gimli and I would stay until our return to Minas Tirith to work on the Gates and gardens there, but now with my Adar’s injuries, I am not sure.”

Dawlin nodded soberly. “Aye. You know, laddie, Gimli speaks most highly of you. It is a bit difficult to get him to stop talking about you. Seems your ability to perform feats in battle has not lessened with time, and perhaps improved? I mean that as a compliment, mind you.”

They both turned then, their attention drawn by a loud chorus of laughter. Gimli, it seemed, was greatly entertaining to his admirers. And he appeared to be greatly entertained by them.

“Harumph. It has been like this since he got back. Nonstop. I have never seen anything like it.” Dwalin shook his head. “How about you, laddie, are you married? Do you have someone back home?”

Legolas shook his head. Based on the line of questioning, Dwalin obviously knew nothing about Thorin III Stonehelm’s plan. Upon reflection, he recalled Gimli’s words, that none aside from Thorin, his core advisors, and Gimli's parents would know he was Gimli’s suitor until the betrothal ceremony itself, in which the contract would be formally reviewed and signed, accompanied by the exchange of rings per elvish custom and the braiding of their hair per dwarvish tradition.

Dwalin continued talking. “Well, if you encounter anything remotely resembling the courting Gimli has experienced here, soon enough you will be matched. Everyone’s placing their money on the dwarrowdam from the Iron Hills.”

“Oh?” Legolas maintained an even composure.

“Aye. Not me, though. That sort of match would be a mistake, looks good on paper, looks good in person, but not a match.”

Legolas nodded, even though he didn’t quite understand Dwalin’s point or the reasoning behind it, surprised that the gruff dwarf was talking so freely. Then he realized Dwalin was simply making conversation, and he attempted to participate without demonstrating any ill feelings.
Dwalin continued his musings. “I think he’s got his eye on the dwarrowdam over there, the one with the light blue beads. Adlia. He seems to like her company the most, and she just recently submitted her proposal, so I wonder if he may have solicited it from her. He grew up with her and she is a warrior, as skilled with her axe as he is. I’ve commanded her in battle and she is both fierce and cunning. Doubt Thorin would approve of it, though.”

“Oh, and why would that be? I know little of dwarven courting, although I know Gimli’s status has made him a most desirable match.”

“Aye, the situation, as I am sure you can imagine, is both too politically sensitive and politically valuable. Erebor has a lot to gain by matching him, as you said, and a match with Adlia would not result in gain. I doubt it will ever happen. Ah, perhaps I am correct, though, and must eat my words, as they say. He has begun dancing with my pick, his childhood friend, Adlia.”

Legolas turned to look at the pair and could not move his gaze, the dancing reminding him of Gimli’s dance with Galadriel at Arwen’s wedding, yet this felt different, almost worse, his jealousy growing despite Gimli’s words. Time passed, and the dancing kept going. Legolas would have left to sing at the stars and clear his mind and heart of these unwanted feelings, but he had no idea where to go. So he put on his best mask, and appeared to dispassionately observe the proceedings to all but one.

Dwalin cleared his throat, interrupting his thoughts, his deep voice a low whisper that only the elf would be able to hear. “Master Elf, I am certain you remember Thorin of my Company? Thorin Oakenshield?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“I am certain that he loved Bilbo Baggins.”

Legolas looked at the dwarven warrior, puzzled and shocked, thoughts of Gimli driven from his mind from the unexpected words.

“He never did anything about it, though. He died, barely apologizing for his wrongs, and Bilbo never knew. And as I have been told and am sure you know more of than I, Bilbo raised his nephew and lives in Rivendell now. Maybe if Thorin would have admitted his care for the hobbit, he would still be here today. They relate together, you know, his lust for the Arkenstone and his treatment of Bilbo. Opening himself sooner to his true feelings for Bilbo may have held the former derangement back. Or if not, at the very least Bilbo would have known his heart. I am not certain he does. In fact, I would wager he does not.”

“Legolas, I am not telling you this to reminisce. I am speaking to you of this because I would consider it good advice to not make the same mistake. Is the lesson of Kili and Tauriel not enough for you either?”

Legolas stared into the crowd, his elvish inscrutability covering his face. “I know not what you mean, Master Dwarf.”

Dwalin snorted. “Aye, there is no need to speak further on it. You need not hide from me. Nor him. He would hear your words, Legolas. I know not what he would think or do, but it is not worth history repeating itself in that way. I counsel you to try. Otherwise you will know naught.”

Legolas decided to change the subject. “Dwalin, would you be able to lead me to Gimli’s home? I do not remember the way whatsoever, and I feel tired from my journey.”

Dwalin nodded, no reading between the lines needed as the excuse was a poor one for an elf,
especially what he knew of this elf, yet he would bring no quarrel to it. “Of course. Come, I will take you there.”

Legolas settled into Gimli’s rooms, which were small in number but comfortable. Unlike the holes of hobbits that he had heard so much about, Gimli’s home under the Mountain was carved with loftier doors and ceilings, so he had no difficulty moving about, although the furniture was somewhat ill-sized for his stature. A bed that would fit him had been moved into Gimli’s guest room while they were at the feast, but he was not tired, so he did not lay down.

Gimli had welcomed him to make himself at home, so he was sitting on the floor, flipping through a book of drawings when the dwarf returned. “Legolas! Dwalin said you were here.” He shook his head with false gravity. “I told you, my elf, that you would not be able to tolerate the scene. Imagine it for me!”

Legolas smiled, looking intently at his friend. “You did not seem so bothered, mellon-nin. In fact, you seemed to quite enjoy their attention. Their affections.”

Gimli snorted, walking over to his small kitchen, pulling out two glasses and a bottle of dwarven spirits. “Elf, you are seeing things that do not exist.” He walked over to where Legolas was sitting, glasses and spirits in hand. “Now, shall we?”

Legolas tilted his head to the side, his gaze most fond. “Mellon-nin, I do not think this is the night for the resumption of our contest. There are none here to witness the results!”

“Aye, elf, I know that. But I thought we should partake in a toast, for soon I will be rid of the dwarrowdam courting, and soon you will have no more need to be so jealous!”

Legolas laughed, taking the glass the dwarf proferred. He sniffed at it first, and then pulled his head back, wrinkling his nose. “Gimli, what is this? It smells most strong. It smells much different than those I tried in Minas Tirith.”

Gimli laughed, his deep bellow filling the room. “I told you before, my elf, you shall partake of our strongest spirits here.” He raised his glass. “None but the best for you! To the future!” He drank his quickly, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Legolas continued to sniff at the contents, taking a few delicate sips.

“Elf, at that rate, it will be morning before you finish it!”

“Mellon-nin, it is most strong. The flavors, they are potent. What is this made of? I cannot place the taste.”

“I am not entirely certain, my elf, as I have not been much interested in the creation of our beverages. I am only skilled in partaking of them!”

He refilled his glass, drinking it more slowly this time, while Legolas sipped his cautiously. Soon he felt it affecting his head, which troubled him at first for the implication this had for their previously-proposed wager, then secondly because he started to question his silence about his feelings, beginning to wonder if he should indeed follow Dwalin’s advice regarding disclosure of the true
state of his heart.

When Gimli refilled both glasses again, Legolas found he leaned towards bearing his feelings. “Mellon-nin, there is something I think I should tell you. I…”

He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Hmph. Pause that thought, my friend, while I see who it is who seeks me at this time of night.”

It was Glóin, coming to see his son and proposed future son-in-law. “Adad, we looked for you earlier, and at the feast as well, but did not see you.”

“You must have just missed us, then, lad, for we were there.” Glóin followed Gimli into the sitting room, and Gimli gestured for Legolas to stay seated.

“Adad, we have been enjoying the flavors of our strongest spirits, and it affects the elf; we did not expect visitors, or we would have waited. For he cannot match our own tolerance!” Gimli was most gentle in his chiding, and Legolas smiled.

Glóin chuckled a bit. “So this is how the two of you spend your time? How did you succeed in the Quest of the Ring if you imbibe so frequently? For I heard of your contest at Helm’s Deep, Legolas.”

“And then you did hear, Master Glóin, that I won that wager. For your dear son passed out from its effects.” Legolas laughed, feeling far more forward and casual than he would have been without the dwarven liquor in his veins.

“Aye, young one, but it seems our spirits affect you more than he.”

Legolas was absolutely feeling the effects in his head, his mind beginning to swirl, his self-control lessening. “Master Glóin, I am far older than you, although at times it may not seem it. Such as now. Perhaps I do feel a bit addled. I am not certain if I am making sense. If I may, however, I would apologize again to you, for those events years ago. Your son is the most handsome dwarf in Erebor, I think.”

Glóin smiled and waved a hand. “No need, laddie. Now, did you bring the contract? I would like to review it with my wife, to see if your mother made any changes to it.

Legolas nodded his head. “The King has it, he brought it with him.”

Glóin nodded. “I shall review it with him and my wife, then. Well, perhaps I will leave you to this, and seek you out tomorrow.” He left, and Gimli relocked the door behind him. He had forgotten about Legolas’ previous words, about wanting to tell him something, and Legolas had lost his nerve.

“Well, elf, do you think we should talk to Glorfindel, given the opportunity we have here? Ask him that which we had proposed Merry and Pippin investigate?”

“Mellon-nin, no! I am certain they faithfully gathered the information, and we will find out soon enough, for I cannot see Pippin missing our ceremony. And Erestor would not be pleased to find we had acted without his consent, I fear he would consider it a violation of his trust.”

They continued to talk into the night, and later retired to their separate rooms, each continuing to feel most happy for each other’s presence and upcoming pledge.
Legolas stayed in the Lonely Mountain for some days afterward, while Glóin and his wife, Nuris, reviewed the Elvenqueen's revisions to the betrothal contract with Thorin III Stonehelm. Gimli saw no need to review the contract himself; if Legolas and his parents were happy with it, he was as well. It would be formally signed at the betrothal ceremony, which would be planned with sufficient time for traveling guests to arrive.

When Gloin and Nuris accepted the Elvenqueen's revisions to the contract, Thorin III Stonehelm announced at one of the feasts that a match had been planned, with the announcement as to whom forthcoming when the contract was formally signed, per traditional protocol. All dwarrowdams removed their proposals, the courting events ending, much to the relief of both Legolas and Gimli.

Legolas reluctantly traveled back to Eryn Lasgalen with Glorfindel, for he would have preferred to remain with his friend, but knew his duty was back in his forest. His Adar was somewhat improved, although remaining unconscious still. Lord Elrond was increasingly concerned that he may need to travel to Valinor to further recover, yet all were uncertain whether he could indeed make the journey. Arwen and Aragorn decided to return to Gondor, with plans to return when the betrothal ceremony took place.

Time passed quickly, and soon enough the time for the betrothal ceremony arrived, with Arwen and Aragorn, Éowyn and Faramir, and Merry and Pippin traveling to the Lonely Mountain, lodged by Thorin himself. Sam and Frodo did not travel, busy with the dealings of restoring Bag End following the Scouring of the Shire, Sam also being occupied with his own wedding planned for late Spring and loathe to leave his Rosie, Frodo not necessarily feeling well enough to travel the distance. The friends spent the few days prior to the ceremony in one another's company, most impressed by the tale that Merry and Pippin told of what had awaited them upon their return to their homeland. Éowyn, of course, was most happy for Gimli, and she told him so each time that they were alone. Pippin, of course, needed to review the betrothal contract, and Merry insisted as well, Gimli's parents most willing to review it with them.

It had been decided that the event would be hosted in Erebor, for it was deemed inappropriate to have such an event in Eryn Lasgalen with Thranduil remaining ill, and the time of year was not conducive to a previously-discussed halfway point in the wilderness, the air being a bit chilly for such an occasion. On the eve of the ceremony, a dinner was held in Thorin Stonehelm's large private dining room for the relatively small group of invited guests. The Elvenqueen was the last to proffer a toast, presenting in dress and in action at her most royal. She spoke her own words of union of kingdoms, her face most beautiful to those present. She ended with a discussion of her hopes for the future.

“I should tell you, Gimli, Legolas, that I would like for you to pursue your plans for Aglarond and Ithilien. Gimli, per your dwarven custom, you are to ready a residence, yes?”

Legolas' face was impassive to most as she spoke, excepting Arwen and Gimli, who each sensed his
irritation.

After the dinner was over, Legolas strode quickly out of the room, Gimli following him to the dwarf’s quarters. He drew out his pipe, thoughtful. “Legolas, why are you so bothered by planning for Ithilien? You wanted this. Is it that you do not want to live in Aglarond with me? You know that we can split our time between each place as needed, she is not attempting to keep us apart.”

“No Gimli, she is pushing me out of Eryn Lasgalen, to see the full culmination of her rule. She obtains the benefits of our marriage, and even more, in that she rids the forest of me, for while my Adar lives I cannot take the crown. It all serves her entire purpose, a purpose of which I am not entirely clear.”

“I do not understand, Legolas. It does not seem so bad, to me, for her to rule your kingdom, while you take those who are more agreeable to you to Ithilien, to start a separate colony.”

“Gimli, if your Adad ruled Erebor and took ill, would you have it ruled in his stead by one you did not trust, one who seeks to further the isolation of your people against better judgment, one who would thwart some of what your Adad had striven for? Isolation will do nothing for the sustenance of Eryn Lasgalen.”

“But Legolas, perhaps in isolation they will be protected. Is that not possible? Besides, our arrangement is not one of furthering isolation.”

“The world changes, Gimli, isolation will not further the realm. Believe me, isolation is her long-term goal, and she has other motives of which I am not privy to, only my Adar might know. My Adar, he would not have sought the path she seeks, and he has kept our realm strong in the midst of evil for so many years. My duty lies here, Gimli. Do you really believe that she would do good for my forest?”

“Nay, I see a bit more clearly what you are saying, although I still do not fully understand, but there will be much more time for you to explain further. Legolas, I have no wish to upset you. I am sorry for that. I would do nothing to work at odds with you, please know that.”

“Mellon-nin, I know.” He smiled, knowing that his dear friend ever looked towards his best interests.

“Hmph. Well, let’s go to sleep, or at least I will, while you read and think and sing; tomorrow will be a long day.” They retired to their separate rooms, each looking forward to the events tomorrow that would put their arrangement into formal motion.

The next day, per dawrven tradition, Gimli was called to see Glóin and his Amad, Nuris, mere hours before the betrothal ceremony. Glóin spoke first. “So, my lad, are you ready? You embark upon a path that, to my knowledge, no other has taken, a dwarf marrying an elf. But we are most happy for you, that you will wed your One. Does he know that you are One to him yet? I know you have been reluctant to tell him.”

“Nay, Adad, he does not. But it does not matter, for my heart is glad.”

Nuris was most glad as well, and she hugged her son warmly. “I am happy that you did not need to
proceed with your alternative plan.” They all nodded in agreement. When Thorin had traveled to Eryn Lasgalen to present the proposed arranged marriage to the Elvenqueen and Legolas, Gimli had briefly considered a back-up plan, considering betrothal to his childhood friend, Adlia. He wasn't entirely certain, for she guarded her heart so closely, but he wondered from time to time if her heart was held by Dis, Fili and Kili’s mother. If so, the love was unrequited, a consequence of the difference in circumstance, as Dis’ had pledged to her One years before Adlia was even conceived.

Gimli had confided to his friend about his predicament, and while she counseled him to tell his One the truth, she also accepted that he could not. Regardless of whom she might or might not love, she was willing to consider an arranged marriage with her friend, one that would be in name only, but would offer companionship and joint rule in Aglarond. But she was most thrilled for Gimli when he told her his fortunate news of his alliance with Legolas, most happy that her friend’s heart would have some semblance of the peace he deserved. For while she knew from the stories of others that devotion to work could dim the pain of unrequited love within a dwarven heart, it surely would be better to spend life in devotion to the One who held that heart, even if the marriage was arranged and the love not necessarily fully returned. Dwarven marriage to One was completely faithful marriage, after all, during life and beyond, until the end of time and beyond remaking of the world.

Glóin laughed as he thought of the previously considered arrangement with Adlia, the idea of contracts accepted versus proposed bringing another thought to his mind. “Well, my son, you should be most happy for the elven ceremony then! This is not a simple marriage of convenience! You are lucky in that respect, for in a dwarven marriage the elven-style bonding need not occur!”

Gimli was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

Glóin looked confused at Gimli’s puzzled expression, as did Nuris.

His Amad spoke. “The elven ceremony, Gimli, you do not know?” Her eyebrows drew inward, the frown reflecting her own confusion.

Gimli shook his head.

Nuris continued to speak. “Gimli, my son, surely you know this, given all the time you have spent with Legolas? We ourselves learned of it from Thorin, after he met with the Elvenqueen and she added it to the contract. Elves do not marry in our style of ceremony, not fully. You must…how shall I say this…you must bond with him.”

Glóin saw Gimli’s continuing lack of understanding, and spoke more freely. “Sex, Gimli, elves bond via sex. That is how they marry. Our style of ceremony is simply for merriment only, it means little to them. You will vow yourselves in the elven manner when you take him, or he you. You have had dalliances before, surely you know how it is done! And this must be most welcome news for you!”

Gimli was somewhat shocked, and decided to seek out someone else to discuss this with, for he found it most strange, and he preferred to discuss it with anyone but his parents, and ideally with someone who might be more knowledgeable of elven custom as well. He found Aragorn in his guest chambers, a place of highest honor in Thorin’s palatial quarters. He asked his friend to discuss elven bonding with him.

Aragorn was surprised. “You did not know this Gimli? In all of our time together, even at my own wedding, this was not clear to you?”

“Nay Aragorn, it was not. There was nothing at your ceremony that divulged this.”

“Regardless, why does it trouble you? Surely marital relations cannot be excluded from an arranged
“It does not make sense to me, Aragorn. That elves would be…virginal? Unless they married?”

“Yes, of course, that is how they marry, they are one and the same. I am sorry, Gimli, I did not realize you did not know this. I imagine Legolas does not realize it either. Do not worry, he will learn to satisfy you. He may satisfy you well without practice, who is to say.”

“Nay! Aragorn, that is of no consequence to me.”

“What then?” Aragorn studied his face, then drew in his breath, a sudden realization coming to him. “Gimli, if you did not know this, you do not understand the exact nature and consequences of elven bonding, do you?”

“I do not Aragorn. I would like to know, so that I can meet any…hmph…expectations that might exist of me.”

Aragorn laughed. “The expectations, my friend, are not so different than any other bonding. Although I do wonder what will occur…Arwen chose mortality, so sharing fëa was not a question, but Legolas does not have that path.”

“What do I need to do for that? What do you mean?”

“I know not exactly, dear dwarf, for Arwen chose the mortal path. Legolas will instruct you, I am certain that he will expect you will have little knowledge of the specific details of this, in the binding of his fëa.”

Gimli nodded, his unexpected anxiety feeling somewhat eased, although his heart quickened at the thought that he would be expected from the beginning to share his bed fully with his soon-to-be-husband. This was an even better situation than he might have imagined.

Aragorn became more solemn. “I am impressed, my friend, with the ease at which you have undertaken this. I wish I could have met Arwen’s choice more wholeheartedly, for it indeed was her choice, as Legolas himself said that day in Rohan.”

“What do you mean, Aragorn? As you said, Legolas has no choice for a mortal path. It would not affect him.”

Further understanding dawned in Aragorn’s eyes, the dwarf’s too-ready acceptance of this situation becoming clear; the dwarf did not understand the implications whatsoever. “Gimli, while Arwen can choose the path of mortality, not sail West with her father, join me beyond the circles of the world after death, her death itself will most likely be more typical of elves, which would be typical of Legolas as well.”

Gimli frowned.

“Elves bond, Gimli, and it is not atypical for them to die, to choose to pass to Mandos, if their spouse passes away, especially if love is strong and true. Surely you have heard of elves dying in such ways. The loss of a spouse is by far the most common reason, although others exist. It is not unique to Arwen, Gimli.”

“But this is different, Aragorn, it is arranged, the level of love would be different.”

“We cannot know that for sure.” He put a hand on the dwarf’s shoulder. “It is a gift that is given to us, in a way, but it is not our decision to make. I have learned that with Arwen. It is easiest to accept
it; they have lived far more many years than us, and it is for them to decide. Who am I to tell her that she should spend the rest of her years alone without love, and, I would think, the same applies to your situation.”

“He loves me not, Aragorn.”

“Yes he does, Gimli, even if it is just as your friend. Though that may make death from grieved less likely, I am not sure.”

“And when I die, would he be released to love another?” For this is what the dwarf had thought would occur.

“I have no idea, Gimli, though that seems very, very unlikely. I know of very few instances in which that occurred; only one that I can think of right now. Not impossible, but it is far more possible that choice to follow into death would occur, driven by sorrow and the grief of loss. The pain of losing a spouse is very difficult for elves. But again, it is their choice to make. He is fully aware of the potential consequences, trust me. Perhaps, though, if you traveled to Valinor before you passed, his heart may be eased somewhat, although Lord Elrond has told me that even there elves can pass from grief, for the Undying Lands do not heal all wounds of the heart.”

“And if he followed me into death, what would become of him? I doubt I would be awaiting for him in the place beyond death where elves go, in Mandos. Would he travel to Mahal’s Halls?”

“You would know much more of Mahal than I, Gimli. I highly doubt Eru would be so cruel as to separate those who are soul bound beyond eternity. Not if solemn vows are made.”

And Gimli agreed, pondering that indeed, this was one purpose of his dwarven True Name, to find One after death, and then after the remaking of the world.

Gimli nodded. “But this is an arranged marriage, Aragorn.”

“Many grow to love one another more fully in arranged marriages, Gimli.” He put his hands on the dwarf’s shoulders. “Gimli, you must have pre-betrothal jitters, it is most unusual to see you this anxious. This anxiety is common enough when traveling down this path of pledging to one another, but I must admit that I am somewhat surprised to hear your questions, for it has always been you of all people speaks of unbreakable faith. You love Legolas already, as friends, that will only grow stronger. And trust me on this, dear friend, from one who has been there: My counsel is to not worry much of this. Worry is of no use, you know this, Legolas has made his choice. He is well aware of the potential consequences. And who knows, Gimli, he may not die of grief at all, but instead find you after the remaking of the world. It is unclear. Enjoy your time with him, my dear friend, there are many among men, among your own people, among elves, among hobbits, many who do not get to share their life with one they love, whether it is One or not. And if you have further questions, I am certain Lord Elrond or Galadriel would be happy to answer them. After you are betrothed, I think the Elvenqueen plans to formally ask Galadriel for her advice regarding Thranduil, does she not, and she will travel to Eryn Lasgalen?”

Gimli nodded in response.

Time for the ceremony was now drawing near, as Arwen interrupted them to tell them it was time to go, so the three then walked together to the betrothal ceremony location, where the contract would be formally proposed, reviewed and signed. Gimli felt consoled by Aragorn’s words, although his mind was still swimming with the implications.

Legolas was sitting at the large table at the front, the Elvenqueen by his side, both resplendent in
shades of gold. Glóin placing on the stone table the box that contained the elven-required, dwarven-crafted betrothal rings, as well as the box of beads that would be used to bind elven and dwarven hair to mark the betrothal.

Legolas felt his heart beat in anticipation, hardly believing this was occurring. He presented a most pleasant façade to most of those in the relatively small invitation-only audience, all of whom were seated in various chairs facing the table at the front of the room. Arwen alone could gauge his level of excitement, her own face beaming most happily, quite ready for this to be over such that formal discussion of wedding preparations could begin, something she had been eagerly anticipating. Pippin, of course, had also volunteered his assistance, such that he could provide, and it was merrily accepted.

They reviewed the contract in its entirety, line by line, Thorin then asking if any present had objections to the union prior the contract being signed, per dwarven custom. None answered, so he was very pleased to move onto the exchange of rings and hair-braiding, when he was most surprised to hear Gimli himself speak.

“I have an objection.” He turned to Legolas. “Please understand, my dearest friend. I could never see harm come to you due to me. I did not understand the implications of this. There are other ways to accomplish our ends. We shall find those. And you shall always be my greatest friend, do not question that. I simply cannot do this to you.”

And all in the room were stunned and confused, excepting Aragorn, who leaned back in his chair, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to telemachus, who provided a name for Gimli’s Amad, Nuris
On Objections

When Gimli spoke his objection, all in the room were taken aback, for what he said made no sense to most in the room. The objections piece, at this point, was a typical dwarven formality. Aragorn sighed and rolled his eyes once more, knowing what would come next, wishing the Dwarf had taken his counsel.

Legolas was devastated when he heard Gimli’s words. But he could also not believe it, uncertain he had heard correctly. “What? What did you say?” His voice was but a whisper.

"Legolas, I could never see harm come to you due to me. I cannot see you die for the purpose of an arranged marriage."

Legolas could not find words, for his heart had been ripped from his chest. He had gone from utterly joyous to utterly hopeless in the span of such little time. His face turned to stone. Arwen was equally as shocked. Many in the audience felt the same.

The Elvenqueen, however, grew to be somewhat bemused, though she did not show it. Per their proposal, she would keep the two shares of treasure should the dwarf change his mind, and in her thinking this objection did more to point out the humiliating rash thinking of mortals than anything she could have constructed, even as she had planned nothing to this effect. Mortals, it seemed, would create their own versions of dismay through their impulsivity. However, she also valued the potential protection to her kingdom that would result from this marriage, and that outweighed her smugness. So she spoke. “Fear not, Gimli, you misunderstand. Legolas’ fëa cannot bind to yours, you are a dwarf. When you pass from this world, he will be free to love another. He will marry a Silvan then.”

This did nothing to quell the agony that had taken over Gimli from the time he had spoken his objection. The ache in his heart just took on a different form.

Arwen spoke next, for while she would not betray her friend's confidence and disclose his true feelings, she could remain quiet no longer. “I disagree. That is not true on both counts. Gimli, your concerns are valid, but this is Legolas’ choice to make, one that he provides freely.”

Legolas, still somewhat stunned, nodded his assent. “That is indeed true.” He looked to Gimli, wishing he could say he wished to proceed with this, but worried, in a most-unelven manner, that there might be other motives for this disclosure, that perhaps Gimli was having other second thoughts. Gimli was one, after all, that could turn his mind upside down, interfering with attempts to be meditative and calm, and Legolas simply did not understand.

Thorin was next to speak. “Perhaps we shall take an adjournment, to discuss this further. Although I fear we may need to postpone this until the matter is resolved. I apologize that this was not foreseen, as we would have been wise to have consider this earlier in the process.” He turned to glance at Gimli, not understanding why this had become an issue now, wishing the Hero of the War had thought through this more carefully if it would problematic to him.

Gimli interrupted Thorin. “There is no need, Thorin. I cannot remotely consider doing this to an elf who does not consider me to be his One. It is cruel.”

“I would recommend, Gimli, that you consider this further, for if…”

The dwarf interrupted his king. “I am certain, Thorin. Nothing could change my mind.”

A small voice piped up, belonging to Pippin, who stood up for a better view. “Wait! I have an
objection!”

Another small voice piped up, belonging to Merry, who stood beside his friend. “Pip! We promised each other not to say anything!” Merry looked at the crowd, at the slight hints of dismay on Legolas' face, and then shrugged his shoulders in resignation. “I second the objection!”

They looked at each other, nodding. “Or, object to the objection?”

“Yes, we have an objection to the objection. We object to the ending. Not that we object to the beginning. We object to the…”

Thorin rubbed his temple. He understood, now, why these hobbits carried the reputation they did, for at minimum they made no sense. He interrupted them. “I would have an explanation please? I do not understand your objection, or lack of objection, or objection to the objection, or… oh, please just tell me your reasoning.” He shook his head, as he could not believe he had fallen so quickly into their garbled manner of speaking.

The hobbits looked at one another, each nodding knowingly, speaking quickly, words coming from one and then the other in rapid succession, so fast that none could follow who said what. “It’s simple, of course.”

“Easy.”

“Straightforward.”

“Reasonable.”

“Sensible.”

“Or not, depending on what you view of it.”

“True, depending. But most here would agree with it.”

“Perhaps.”

“Most likely.”

“Definitely yes.”

They finished talking and nodding to one another, their smiles growing to be most smug, and looked at Thorin III Stonehelm expectantly. Each had forgotten the end purpose of their conversation and simply waited for the dwarven King to speak. “And, my dear hobbits? The purpose of your objection is…”?

Merry spoke first. “Oh! Why it’s easy enough!”

And Pippin interrupted; for he could not resist being the one to say it. He was the one, after all, who had learned of it. “Yes, Legolas loves Gimli. He loves him as his One.”

They nodded to one another once again, crossing their arms in an almost victorious stance, most satisfied that they of all present had been the sensible ones here today.
Thorin III Stonehelm was most surprised at the hobbits’ words, not expecting this turn of events whatsoever. Nor did the others present, it seemed, judging by the silence in the room. So Meriadoc Brandybuck and Pippin Took believed Legolas was One to Gimli, he thought to himself. It was a most unexpected declaration, and, if true, gladdened his heart. Gimli had told him tales of the hobbits’ role in the war, of how he had grown to see them, and this seemed to be a keen example of their impetuousness mixed with their courage, honesty and optimistic hearts.

Dwalin, who had observed the proceedings thus far with great interest, was pleased in his own gruff way to see this turn of events. The aged-yet-not-aged warrior had not wanted to speak up about his own conclusions, as he did not want to be even remotely perceived as breaking a confidence by the elf. At the same time, it was difficult to sit back and watch Gimli make a decision under false pretense.

Arwen was delighted and relieved, for she had vowed to Legolas that she would not speak of his heart, and it wrenched her own to see the path toward dissolution that Gimli had been traveling. She felt empathy for Legolas, as she could sense his discomfort with the hobbits’ disclosure, the very faint rosy hue that covered his distant-gazing face, ears and neck an indication of the same. All things considered, however, she certainly believed it was for the best to have the truth known, although she wondered how on Arda the hobbits had come to this conclusion.

Éowyn studied Gimli’s face most intently, as did Aragorn. They along with Gimli’s parents wondered what the ginger-haired dwarf’s formal response would be. If the look on Gimli’s face was any indication, he was stunned, as frozen as a statue might be, staring at Legolas without seeming to realize the intensity of expression on his face.

Thorin briefly considered dismissing the others, to provide Legolas and Gimli what would likely be much appreciated privacy, but as soon as he had the thought he had to bid it to depart, for he would be unable to. It was dwarven custom to hear objections out in full amongst those invited to the contract-signing. As infrequent as objections were, it would be untoward to dismiss those gathered today.

And of critical import, there still was the chance the hobbits were mistaken.

So Thorin III Stonehelm proceeded with the question that was on his mind, the question that was likely on everyone’s mind regarding this declaration of Legolas’ heart. “And how did you know this, Master Hobbits?”

Merry, for once, was proud of Pippin’s greater impulsivity. “Pippin overheard Legolas talking to Arwen. That he said Gimli held his heart, that he was One to him. When we were traveling from Minas Tirith to Rohan, after the war was over. Pippin’s an eavesdropper, can’t resist it. He’s mischievous, you know.” And he said this both gravely and proudly, as he was never one to be subject to mischief, and clearly demonstrating that knew that this time Pippin’s eavesdropping had come to a good and useful purpose.

Thorin smiled. Mischievous hobbits indeed. He would reward these two most handsomely for their indiscretion later. He looked at Legolas, seeing the elven prince’s slightly flushed face and inscrutable gaze; this combined with the elf’s lack of denial convinced the dwarven king that the hobbits had indeed heard correctly. So he decided to forgo direct questioning of Legolas, and posed a broad question instead.
“Well, in light of this information, what do you have to say on this matter, Gimli? Legolas?”

“Gimli? Legolas?” They still did not speak as they were so lost in their thoughts, so Thorin spoke for them. “It is not my place to force a betrothal, but per our customs, Gimli, I do not think it would be ethical of you to force your hand in another’s judgment of how he would spend his time with his One. I would ask that we proceed as planned. Unless you have anything you would like to add.” His tone was firm, and he left an opportunity for the Hero of the War to add his own confession, but the ginger-haired dwarf continued to appear to be too stunned to do so.

“If there are no other objections, then, let us proceed. Gimli, I will assume yours is withdrawn.”

Gimli nodded, remaining mute, unable to form words.

The Elvenqueen was most puzzled indeed, interrupting the continuation of the ceremony. “I do not think this is possible; these hobbits, they are confused.”

Thorin turned to her. “You object, then?”

“No, I would like this to proceed. I would simply like to go on record that I think these hobbits are mistaken.” She did not say anything further, not wanting to jeopardize this arrangement by being argumentative, yet at the same time she could not understand the ease with which others thought this to be possible. Although, she noted silently, this was the kith and kin of a dwarf who thought Legolas might die someday, driven to grief when the mortal invariably died. Ridiculous. And equally as ridiculous, elves did not have One, not before they bonded, and bonding with a dwarf would be impossible. They could court more than once, grow to care for another if their feelings were not returned. No, this bonding was not equivalent to a true bonding, it was essentially a bonding on paper only. When the dwarf died, she would see her son bound to a Silvan, cementing that which her realm represented. Feeling generous in this moment, she even decided she would give him a choice between several elleth she trusted; the choice to wed had to be of his own free will, after all, and that would ease her ultimately desired path.

At least, she consoled herself, the dwarves’ judgments in non-marital matters appeared more sound. She did not blame them for their mistaken thoughts, however; elves were Firstborn, after all, and it was unfair for her to expect those beneath Éru’s favored children to understand their superiors. The Elvenqueen experienced an unexpected wave of pity at that moment, one that had never come across her before; hard it must be for these dwarves to struggle through their short lives with such disadvantages.

Thorin’s booming voice interrupted her musings. “So noted that the honorable Elvenqueen has no objections. No further objections, from anyone gathered here?” Nothing additional was spoken, so Thorin passed the contract to the key parties for signatures. “Be aware, that a traditional dwarven betrothal contract is binding. Little may force the undoing of this contract, with the key exceptions that were arranged in the terms, including death, treason and other grievous actions. Our dwarven agreement is somewhat more binding than the elven exchange of silver rings, and that commitment is regarded very seriously as well.” He said this for the benefit of the crowd as much as anything else, knowing many would be unfamiliar with the nature and purpose of today’s contract.

With the contract signed Thorin moved onward, hardly believing Gimli’s good fortune. The King Under the Mountain was most pleased that he had developed this idea of an arranged marriage that would indeed be so much more. He called Legolas and Gimli to stand at the front of the room, and many waited in silent anticipation for what would happen next.

Gimli stared at Legolas with an expression the elf could not entirely read, although he could see the hints of surprise, shock, and even fondness in his friend’s gaze. Those observing the proceedings
saw a confident ellon with a twinkle in his eye, making good on his promise to formally proceed with the betrothal of his arranged partner, not spotting the hints of vulnerability that resulted from the baring of his heart’s secret.

Glóin walked up to them, slapping Gimli across the back. “Laddie, you forgot these, you’ll need them.” He was most pleased to see this turn of events, and chuckled at Gimli’s uncharacteristic absentmindedness, going to stand to exchange rings without taking the rings that would be needed. Glóin’s heart was glad, for while he would never have imagined this day, particularly after meeting Legolas those years ago, he also could not deny his son’s heart, especially knowing the feelings were returned. A precious gift had been given to both of them, delivered by Mahal himself.

The rings themselves were most beautiful, crafted by Gimli who would allow no other undertake the task, and while he was no jewel-smith by craft, he was certainly skilled enough to create a breathtaking representation of his feelings for his friend. The wide mithril rings of intricate dwarvish pattern were inlaid with a multitude of tiny emeralds shaped into leaves and diamonds carved into stars.

As Gimli stood before Legolas with the betrothal ring that he would place on his dear friend’s index finger per elven custom, nay, not his friend, his One, his mind focused on that day in Fangorn a few months ago, on the moment before Elrohir had interrupted them with the news of Thranduil. Legolas had asked him who his One was. And now he felt as though the rocks in his head finally fit together, he finally fully believed all Éowyn had been telling him, though he rued it had essentially taken a sledgehammer wielded by hobbits to help him see this. He, too, would thank Merry and Pippin later.

He took Legolas’ right hand, studying it for a moment, while Legolas looked at the dwarf, his face seeming most neutral to those in audience but to those who knew him most well, uncertain. Gimli slipped the ring on his index finger, whispering so only he could hear, or so he hoped. “It is you, Legolas.”

Legolas looked at him, most puzzled, whispering in return. “It is me, what?”

“You asked me, in Fangorn, do you recall? Who my One was.”

Legolas held his breath, for the world seemed to stop.

Gimli’s voice remained but a murmur. “It is you, Legolas. You are my One.”

Legolas slid the matching ring onto Gimli’s index finger in a state somewhere between disbelief and sheer joy, his emotions echoing those of his friend. He held Gimli’s hand, and then smiled even more widely, his voice low enough that only the dwarf could hear. “I wager I would have eventually told you first.”

Gimli chuckled, his voice regular intensity once more, though none understood his words aside from Legolas. “Nay! I highly doubt that, my elf, for in this contest I would have been the winner!”

And then Pippin piped up. “The winner of what, Gimli? Best kisser? Go ahead and kiss him, Gimli! Kiss him!”

Not wanting to deny the hobbit, Gimli pulled Legolas’ head down towards his own. Legolas hadn’t kissed many elves before, but he had kissed a few when courting in years past, and it had never been like this; those kisses had been most chaste, mere brief touches of lips. Gimli’s hand held the back of his head, broad fingers threading through his silken hair, his other hand circled around the elf’s back. Seconds paused and became eternal minutes, and most in the room were even more glad for the couple at the sight, aside from the Elvenqueen, who narrowed her eyes throughout the display.
Gimli drew back to study Legolas’ face, pushing stray hairs out of the elf’s eyes. He silently thanked Mahal for his good fortune, his most marvelous good fortune, for his elf would be entirely his. He did not want this to end, but it must, knowing that later would afford them more privacy to discuss these new welcome developments and further demonstrate and proclaim their love.

Then Glóin presented the betrothal beads to each, for while the braiding itself would occur in private, an intimate occurrence that was for the couple’s eyes only, the beads were exchanged here, publicly, a symbol of his acceptance of the couple into his home.

And then Pippin shouted once more, “Kiss him again, Gimli! No, Legolas, you kiss Gimli this time!” Legolas was only too happy to oblige.

There was a feast planned that evening, in which the details of the betrothal would be announced to all of Erebor and celebrated, and many under the mountain were most excited for the time to arrive. But it was hours away yet, providing more than enough time for Gimli to lead Legolas back to his home before their appearance would be required. There were congratulations as they left the betrothal from those they had invited, but all left it simply at that, providing the couple the space to discuss this between themselves first. Questioning minds and joyous hearts could explore this welcome turn of events with the pair in the days to come.

All except Pippin and Merry, of course. Merry protested at first, telling Pippin they should give the elf and dwarf space, but Pippin would hear nothing of it. So they caught up to Legolas and Gimli, clearly excited and happy for their joy.

Legolas heard the hobbits approach, and whispered to Gimli, “Meleth-nin, we have company.”

And sure enough they did, Pippin breathlessly shouting to his friends, “Can I see the rings? They looked most beautiful from afar.” Legolas extended his hand, and Pippin studied it intently. “It is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, Legolas. And leaves? And stars? Gimli, will you make rings for Sam, when he marries Rosie? Maybe with tiny flowers?”

“Pip! Calm down a bit.” Merry shook his head.

“Hmph! If you think he would like that, I could. Do hobbits generally wear rings when they wed? What are your traditions?”

They talked of hobbit wedding traditions on the way to Gimli’s house, the newly betrothed wishing they had some privacy, yet also keenly wanting to share this moment with the friends who had brought them together, if that was what they desired. It was a small sacrifice for such a large reward, after all.

“Gimli, this is a most interesting house! It’s carved into the stone!”

“Pip, they all are! And we have been here before, when we arrived here, remember?”

“Well yes, Merry, but I haven’t studied it up close yet. Did you carve this too, Gimli? No wonder you created that crystal necklace for Legolas in Rohan so easily. Legolas, do you still have the necklace? Can I see it?” Legolas pulled that out also, as he did still wear it. “It is beautiful too,
Legolas, but I like the rings more!” The hobbit nodded thoughtfully, and Legolas smiled.

They sat in Gimli’s sitting room, all but Legolas smoking a pipe. They talked of the day’s events, the hobbits wanting to understand why Gimli thought Legolas might eventually pass from grief if they were to marry, and then Pippin curiously asking what plans they had for the wedding so far.

Gimli smiled, pretending to bluster. “Hmph! We have barely become betrothed, I think there is time to discuss that later. Let us talk, instead, of how you came to know this. I have been very curious about that.”

Pippin told them how he had accidentally overheard the conversation, although the others wondered how accidental it had actually been, and then Pippin had a question for Gimli.

“And when did you start to love Legolas, Gimli?”

Merry chimed in, asking the question that was on his mind. “And it is none of my business, I know that, but why did you hide it from each other? You didn’t seem very reluctant after we declared it for you.”

“Yes,” Pippin continued, “It seemed rather silly, to me.”

Gimli sighed. “It was silly.” He looked at Legolas, gazing at him with the love that was in his heart. “I do not know exactly when, it happened more gradually then suddenly, but before the end of the war, for certain. And you are correct, I should have declared my heart to him.”

“But it worked out for the best, Gimli.” Pippin sighed, for he liked all sorts of happy endings, including those to romantic stories.

“What about the two of you? Have you met anyone you care for, after the Scouring ended?”

Pippin giggled, and Merry snickered. They spoke so quickly it was hard to say who said what. “Estella Bolger!” “Diamond of Long Cleave!”

They talked for a time about the hobbits’ potential love interests, more in a joking manner than anything else, and then Merry escorted Pippin away, not wanting to overstay their welcome.

Gimli shut the door behind them, turning towards Legolas with a smile. “My elf, we must think of a way to thank them, although I would have told you the full truth eventually.”

“Meleth-nin, I would have told you first. I…” But he could not finish his sentence, for he was silenced with a kiss that lasted an endless time.

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The feast was lively and loud, as all before it had been. Legolas and Gimli entered the enormous feasting hall together, their hair freshly braided, seating themselves at the head table. As they walked by, few paid much attention to the elf, focusing on the dwarf, wondering to whom he would announce the plighting of his troth.

Thorin lifted his hand to the crowd, his deep voice booming. “Citizens of Erebor, I welcome you to the betrothal feast of Gimli, son of Glóin, Hero of the War.”

A loud mixture of clapping and cheer followed his introductory words, and he waited for the crowd to grow quiet again before he continued. “Our Hero has found his One, and for that I am most glad.” Silent anticipation awaited him, for this was most welcome news in this feasting hall that was filled
past capacity.

“I present to you, citizens of Erebor, Gimli’s One, Legolas Thranduilion of Eryn Lasgalen, previously the Mirkwood realm!”

There are few words that would describe the common reaction to this, for it was as unexpected as... anything that had ever come to pass before. Suffice it to say that shock would be an understatement. Gimli, pledge himself to an elf? Especially this infamous elf, the son of Thranduil, whom they had heard that Thorin Oakenshield had despised? His father had imprisoned the Company...but Legolas' bravery during the war saved those he quested with more than once...so it became not quite so much that this was Legolas Thranduilion, but that he was an elf.

There were more than a few whispers of Mahal help us and other statements of disbelief, but the shock outweighed most words, providing Thorin III Stonehelm the time he needed to outlay the benefits of this arrangement, a speech he had prepared back when he was uncertain whether the arrangement would partially or fully suit Gimli’s heart.

And when he ended with his reiteration that this elf was Gimli’s One, and that the elf viewed Gimli the same in turn, there were, surprisingly, no shouts of dissension. There was simply an uncomfortable silence, as the astonishment continued and his words sunk in.

It took Dwalin, well-regarded, revered as the warrior he was, making a toast to the couple to break the silence. And when Glóin followed with similar words, the disbelief began to subside slightly. Soon enough after that Bofur, Bombur, Dori and the other remaining members of the Company added their own supportive words, and the crowd began to move to some degree of cautious acceptance, which was more than Thorin himself had expected.

The feast passed in a whirlwind for the newly betrothed elf and dwarf, and during the dancing a veritable stream of congratulations came from well-wishers, some more clearly sincere than others, but none in disgust or disdain. The Elvenqueen did not present herself at the occasion whatsoever, likely not wanting to partake in this sort of event, and it might have been for the best, as slight doubts about this arrangement had begun to brew based on their initial show of affection. Gimli and Legolas could not take their eyes off one another; their love was unmistakable. They only parted when Legolas went to dance with Éowyn, joining the dwarrowlings being instructed by Bofur and Glorfindel, and Gimli gazed at his elf with open fondness the entire time.

The happiness and good cheer continued with their friends throughout the night, and finally they left the event, beginning the trek to Gimli’s house, stopping to kiss frequently along the way, when Legolas asked if they might go outside, to gaze at the stars.

Legolas was most pleased to be obliged by his beloved. “Fear not, meleth-nin, I shall sing to you of this day, for it has truly been a day unlike any other.”

“Aye, I imagine a year ago you would not imagine having this handsome dwarf for your best friend, let alone plighted to be your husband!”

“No, indeed not! And I am certain your Adad would not imagine he might someday put our wedding picture in his locket!”

They both laughed at this, settling themselves away from the guards who patrolled the terraces surrounding the entrance to the Mountain, and Gimli drew out his pipe. They sat in silence for a time, when Legolas suddenly spoke. “Ai! We forgot to ask Merry and Pippin what they learned during the task we assigned to them.”
“Hmph. Fear not, my elf, there will be time for that later, and they may not even have been able to complete it yet. Possibly not, given that they did not mention it. I think today our attentions have been better served elsewhere. You know, do you not, that if Pippin and Merry had not voiced their objections this afternoon, they might have at the feast this eve, for my mountain’s dwarven spirits had both of them in an entertaining and mind-bearing mood!”

"Drunk, meleth-nin, drunk! You do have a way with words at times. Though if they had not said something earlier, we would not be betrothed, and they may not have been in a celebrating mood this eve. I certainly would not have been.” And Gimli certainly agreed.

They sat side by side for a time arms entwined around one another, silent excepting Legolas’ soft singing. Each reflected on the day, each amazed that they had ended up here, wondering why on Arda they had worried about disrupting their friendship, why friendship had seemed more valuable to either of them than anything that might be gained by a risky disclosure. The reward far outweighed the risk, it seemed now.

Legolas was newly entranced with Gimli’s ginger-colored hair, with the majesty of his beard, with the beads woven into it that marked the dwarf as his, his. Gimli’s entire being seemed so suddenly and utterly foreign to him, his broadness a counterpoint to his own slenderness, the play of his muscles under his light formal tunic most enthralling.

He stopped singing and readied himself to speak, overwhelmed by his feelings and emboldened by the events of the day. “Gimli, the day is not yet through.”

Gimli opened an eye, for he had closed them as he pondered. The gaze he sent Legolas was questioning, as he was too relaxed to form words. Legolas understood, and continued, for a spoken question was not needed. Instead, he put his hands in his beard. “I like these beads, Gimli. I am happy you were able to craft such fine ones for us.” He rubbed the beads in question between his fingers, and then stroked the braids, the braids that marked Gimli as his. “And the rings, Gimli, they are without question absolutely perfect.” And he drew up Gimli’s right hand, reverently placing his lips on the finger that held the ring that marked Gimli’s betrothal to him.

Gimli had grown most speechless, his lack of words no longer due to relaxation or rest, and gazed most intently at the elf, who continued to talk softly. “I fear I am not sure what to do, Gimli. But I know you do, and I am certain you would not want me to be jealous that others have experienced something with you that I have not.” He continued to run his fingers through the unbraided parts of Gimli’s beard, and Gimli found himself most breathless.

“Have the spirits gone to your head, my beloved elf? What do you mean?” He was somewhat surprised by Legolas’ sudden boldness.

Legolas was warmed by the endearment. How had things changed so suddenly? “Nay, as you would note. Nay, I am most conscious indeed.” He looked up from his threading of Gimli’s beard, and ran a thin finger across Gimli’s mustache and then his lips. “You are indeed the most handsome, desirable dwarf on Arda. And I would beseech you again, you would not want me to be jealous of others, would you?”

Gimli was not entirely certain what Legolas meant, but he could not resist kissing him deeply while an idea crept into his mind. “And what stews in your heart that leads you to be jealous?”

Legolas laughed, merriment mixing with the desire in his heart. “I fear, my dear dwarf, that you know that far better than I. I do not jest when I say I do not really know, not enough to know exactly what to do. But you do; I know you have had dalliances with others.”
Then Legolas’ eyes grew dark, and Gimli could easily see the seeds of jealousy growing in them. And it was most endearing to him, for a dwarf fully understood jealousy in its roots and meaning. “Legolas, stop. Your jealousy is always so befitting of a dwarf. We are betrothed, to dwarves it is as serious a commitment as vowing. You are my One, there is no other for me. None. Nothing will ever compare to you. No one.”

Legolas leaned in to kiss him again, most excited that he could now spend endless time learning more of his dwarf in this very manner.

They kissed for a very long time, hands beginning to explore, when Gimli stopped him. His voice was unlike anything Legolas had ever heard, hoarse with desire. “Legolas, let me take you inside, I do not want to be untoward amidst the guards near this terrace, and I am beginning to lose my resolve.”

Legolas was struck by the wave of overwhelming devotion and love that flooded through his body. Gimli was so unlike an elf, but that made him all the more beautiful in his eyes. His heart sang with more clarity and depth than ever before.

Gimli was overwhelmed by a sudden desire to teach his elf right then and there of the ways of elven binding. But the events of the day had been overwhelming, and he had gone from feeling it his duty to call everything off to this; he knew he must honor his vow and wait, and Legolas reluctantly agreed.

So they returned to Gimli’s house and spent the night side by side, Gimli asleep, Legolas beside him, singing softly of the love in his heart. The love they shared would make this an arrangement between only-friends no more, and each knew that the other would hold his heart for eternity.
“He is awake, Lord Elrond.” Galion touched the Peredhel’s burgundy-robed shoulder to garner his attention. The Lord of Imladris sat in the morning’s mild autumn weather amidst a grove of golden-crowned trees close to the Elvenking’s Halls, absorbed in a detailed history of the Battle of Dagorlad that he had found in Eryn Lasgalen’s library.

Elrond rose immediately and tucked the book under his arm, swiftly moving to walk beside Galion and obtain a report of Thranduil’s awakening. He embraced the butler’s words, for they produced a wave of relief; he had heartfelt questions whether such was even possible on this side of the Sundering Sea. The Lord of Imladris had been tending to the Elvenking for weeks, and recovery had sized itself smaller and paced itself even slower, although all outmatched his initial expectations, when attempts to mend the Elvenking’s injuries were inwardly deemed futile by the greatest healer of Elvendom.

Even with his gifts of foresight, he did not see an outcome here, he thought somewhat grimly.

Elrond had experienced no hesitation whatsoever in his acceptance of the summons to assist Thranduil, while Glorfindel was clearly reluctant, the Captain of Imladris’ Guard questioning his Lord’s safety in such travels in light of the Second Battle Under the Trees. The Balrog Slayer would only consent if he himself accompanied Elrond to Eryn Lasgalen, leaving Erestor to govern Imladris in the absence of the Lord and his sons. Glorfindel led an escort of a large contingent of warriors, well prepared for a possible resurgence of enemy forces. No such attack had happened, but Elrond knew it was always best to be overprepared, war or not.

It had been a lesson learned in the hardest manner, resulting from the unexpected horrific assault on his beloved wife.

But the unexpected also presented itself in positive and welcome ways. Glorfindel had traveled to Erebor with Arwen and Aragorn, intent on bearing witness to a prime example, the betrothal ceremony of Legolas and Gimli. That event Elrond had not certainly not foreseen, even when the strong bond of then-deemed-friendship between the two warriors had been clear to him after his arrival in Minas Tirith after the War of the Ring. Elrond’s awareness of the affection the elf held towards the dwarf had grown even clearer when he witnessed Legolas’ jealous reaction to the letter Gimli had sent from Erebor to Eryn Lasgalen; the Lord of Imladris had discretely escorted his twin sons away from Legolas and Arwen to provide them desired yet unrequested privacy. Elrond had not discussed the event any further in light of his own tendency towards discretion, that combined with his knowledge he would be sought out if his counsel was needed. It certainly came as no large surprise to him that Legolas agreed to the arrangement of marriage between the two.

At least one of them was obtaining their heart’s desire, he thought, for he knew naught of the developments during the ceremony in Erebor the day before today.

While the events of yesterday’s ceremony in Erebor were rapid, Thranduil’s recovery had been slow. Aragorn, along with the Eryn Lasgalen healers, had certainly staved off Thranduil’s likely death; even Thorin Stonehelm had sent a when the injury was made known. Elrond had been stunned by the extent of injuries and Thranduil’s ability to remain in this world. But Thranduil was ever stubborn and dedicated, and of all elves, Elrond could see him being one of the last to succumb to damage to his hröa.
The Elvenking valued service to his kingdom above all else, and would not abandon his elves for Mandos’ Halls, or wherever his fëa might end up should he reject that call upon death, as Elrond suspected some, or many, of these silvans might.

Thranduil was as stubborn as Oropher, perhaps more, although he possessed an enhanced ability to be more open-minded, if only for the good of his realm. It was Thranduil’s leadership that had permitted the survival of his forest amidst their extensive diminishment in population after Dagorlad and during the increasing darkness over the third age.

Even now, Elrond saw the Elvenking’s concession of his forest after the War of the Ring as no such thing but rather as a positive, Thranduil’s manner of weaving new alliances within the changing world. His Silvans did not desire to sail, for the most part, and they would need to adapt in a world of men.

Galion interrupted his lingering musings after they reached the impressive walkway that spanned towards the entrance to the Elvenking’s Halls. “My King is not very responsive, Lord Elrond, but his eyes have opened, and he seems to follow with his gaze.”

“Did you witness this?” Their pace quickened even more, for Elrond wanted to see this for himself before Thranduil might slip back into unconsciousness.

“No, but the healers asked me to locate you as soon as this occurred. I have not seen it myself.”

They entered the Elvenking’s Halls, the guards stationed out front moving aside deferentially, and traversed the majestic indoor walkways that had been carved into the stone that housed the seat of Thranduil’s realm.

Elrond asked for additional details, although Galion had few, as he had set out to locate Elrond as soon as the request was made. So they walked in silence for the remainder of the short journey, and soon stood before Thranduil, who laid in his bed, two of his ever present healers keeping vigil by his side.

The Elvenking’s eyes were open with no glimmer of focus. His previous facial scarring was visible, no longer shielded by his ability to cover it, and new scarring traversed his body as an array of terrible tributaries. The horrific wound on his head had closed, but Elrond was concerned that meant little, and believes it was not entirely healed. Head injuries were not common amongst elves, and it was difficult to predict what the impact on Thranduil might be.

Elrond set to work, attempting to discern any change in his consciousness. When he pressed the King’s wrist to cause slight pain and gauge his reaction, as he had done so many times now, he was surprised when there was a purposeful response. The Elvenking moved his hand and whispered, somehow commandingly, “Daro!”

He repeated his test, with the same result.

“Daro!” The words were again just a whisper, but the deeply commanding intensity of his voice somehow remained.

Elrond sighed in relief, for this was more than he had hoped would occur. To this point, Thranduil’s limited utterings had been entirely incomprehensible and random, almost akin to the mutterings a man or woman might make when stricken with delirium during a strong fever. Perhaps Thranduil might recover after all; but if not, Elrond looked anew with heartened sight that the ever-present King of this forest might recover in such sufficiency to survive sailing to the Undying Lands.
Up to this moment in Elrond’s examination, and in all that had passed before, there had been no response to his own spoken words, but he attempted again, and indeed Galion's words now rung true; Thranduil seemed to locate him in his gaze, at least to some extent, although there was a degree of lack of focus. “Thranduil, it is I, Elrond. I have been here, assisting you.”

There was no response in words, but the intense eyes remained focused on him.

Elrond was most pleased.

Elrond strode to the door, asking a guard to send for Galion, who promptly appeared. “Galion, please have word sent to Erebor, to the Elvenqueen and the Prince. King Thranduil is not necessarily awake in the sense you would typically consider, but he appears to be regaining awareness. Please be certain it is clear that the extent to which he will heal is still unclear.” Elrond was certain this news would be welcome to Legolas and, he surmised, the Elvenqueen. While he certainly knew in a broad sense of their emotional distance, he also sensed that she did not want Thranduil to see his end. Theirs was a complicated relationship, it seemed, and it helped him to appreciate anew the one he shared with Celebrian, whom he knew he would see soon enough in Valinor.

He thanked the Valar for that.

The morning of Thranduil’s awakening, the day after the veritable whirlwind of betrothal of Elven Prince and Erebor’s Hero of the Ring War, Gimli awoke in his room, alone in his bed. For a moment, all seemed as it had been across his many adult years prior to the Quest, which had led him to his wondrous, beautiful elf. The ginger-haired dwarf’s lack of One had never troubled him, for he had his craft to devote himself to, namely his skills in means of battle and forging.

It was a sudden and troublesome shift when he had met and begun to love Legolas, when he thought he would belong to the category of dwarves with an unrequited love; that was most troublesome and unsettling, although the dwarf he was quickly came to a point of acceptance in the matter. Legolas’ friendship being enough to sustain him was a key factor in his own unwillingness to think open-mindedly about the matter, and listen to Éowyn’s words.

Soon enough the dwarf moved from the state between dreams and awakening, saw the ring of elven betrothal that he had crafted, placed there by his One, and smiled as he realized alone was now a far distant place that he would visit no more.

He rose, intent on finding his elf, who was nowhere to be found, at least amidst the rooms in his home.

“Hmph. Where has he taken himself to?” Not that it was out of character, for Legolas frequently spent time on his own, particularly during night hours when his non-elven companions slept and he did not. However, it was somewhat of a surprise, given the events of the previous day, and the manner in which they had settled into his bed together. And Gimli was loathe to be apart from the One he had recently gained.

Gimli dressed, braided his hair and beard, most happy to prominently display his braids of betrothal, already greatly anticipating the exchange of said braids for those of marriage and the elven binding that would follow.

“Hmph. A note would have been helpful! Here I will be, looking for an elf over the entire expanse of the Mountain. I am certain it will be easy as trying to find Merry and Pippin when they went to ‘a tavern’ in Minas Tirith. It will take hours!” But while his words might have sounded annoyed and
sarcastic, Gimli knew he was truly excited to find his One.

He had no sooner opened his door to leave than Legolas came into his arms, capturing his mouth in a searing kiss.

“My elf, I am glad to see that my instruction is paying off.” His eyes matched Legolas’, deep with newly found love and devotion.

“I think I need more practice, my dear dwarf. I will not settle for being less than the best.” And his mouth met Gimli’s again, this time more gently, but equally if not more passionately.

When they finally broke apart, Gimli drew back to look at Legolas, his mind and body enveloped in seriousness.

“My elf, if we do end up being parted for portions of the next year, it may be a good thing, for it is difficult for me to resist your binding request when you kiss me like that.”

The gleam in Legolas’ eyes grew brighter and more mischievous. “Like this?” And he moved down for yet another kiss.

“Aye, like that.” He took Legolas’ hand, fingers intertwining, realizing they were still standing in his doorway in full public view. Not that he minded others seeing his devotion to his elf; it was more others seeing his hardened desire that troubled his sense of propriety and privacy.

“Now where have you been?” Gimli posed his question as he led Legolas inside, shutting the door as they walked into his home…their home, it would soon be, should they maintain them in Erebor and Eryn Lasgalen, which seemed more and more likely with each passing day.

“I was summoned by my Queen, to discuss her wishes for our partnership, as she terms it. I tried to wake you, Gimli-nin, but you would not rise.” He smiled, most amused by the difficulty he had waking the dwarf in peacetime.

“Hmph, I was tired, my elf, yesterday was a long day. And what did you speak of exactly?”

“The Queen simply restated her desire that you create the settlement in Aglarond, and we also start a settlement in Ithilien. Gimli-nin, I have told you before, she wishes to have me as far away from Eryn Lasgalen as possible, exclude me from my father’s court. Drive the realm to her vision.”

“Hmph, it is a little premature for that sort of planning, is it not? Your father, he may yet still improve.”

“Or he may not, he may stay as he is. She even suggested we consider sending him to Valinor.”

Gimli was surprised, given what he knew of Thranduil, although the suggestion did make sense. He probed gently, knowing Legolas was reluctant to consider it simply because of the elleth who had suggested it. “Perhaps that might be best for him?”

A rueful expression grew on Legolas’ face. “And it suits her as well, Gimli.”

They were interrupted then by a soft knock at the door. “Hmph. And who would that be? I certainly have no desire to be disturbed.”

“Answer it, Gimli-nin.” Legolas was amused. He knew Gimli far too well, and his beloved, while generally welcoming and appreciative of the company of others, was not currently in a sociable mood. And Legolas was most pleased when he corrected his internal statement; no, Gimli was in the
mood to only be sociable with him. He again thanked the Valar for his good fortune, due in no small part to the hobbits.

What Gandalf had said before was true. Small people did indeed accomplish many things, of various types of great import.

On the other side of the door was Gimli’s Amad, Nuris, her handsome face framed by intricate braids, her eyes glittering with joy. “I could wait no longer to see you. I would share your joy!”

Gimli drew her into an embrace, and bid her to enter.

“And Legolas,” she spoke fondly, “how are you this morning?” Before he could reply, she drew him into an embrace as well. She put a hand to his cheek. “Your face is so serene, no wonder my son could not resist you.”

“Nor I him, my Lady.” His face was gentle, full of the conviction of his statement.

Never would she have imagined her son wedding an elf, yet she knew in her heart that his had made a fine choice. Would Mahal’s surprises never cease? “Please, Legolas, call me Nuris. Or Amad if you prefer.”

She stepped away from Legolas to address them both in her assured manner. “I shall not intrude long; I simply have come to bid you attend a luncheon with your Adad and I. We have invited your friends, and we would like to celebrate your betrothal; we barely saw you last eve.”

Gimli groaned. “Hmph. I barely saw myself last evening.” He shook his head, half chuckling at his own remark, to which Legolas simply raised a quizzical eyebrow and his Amad frowned. “I know you aren’t one for long gatherings either, Legolas, but at least you have the benefit of some wariness amongst my kith and distant kin. They spoke much less to you. At times did not even meet your gaze.”

Legolas was content with their reaction to him, and said as much. “They have been much more welcoming than I would have expected, Gimli-nin. It will take time for most dwarves to grow used to me, and even more for my elves to grow used to you. But it will do more for the grow of affection between our people than our simple friendship would have.”

“Hmph. And you say I talk too much.” Gimli smiled wryly, and then drew Legolas down into a heated kiss.

Nuris cleared her throat. While she had not seen her son thus with another, neither was she surprised or ruffled, and she smiled at them with merriment dancing in her eyes, smoothing her own fine beard and its braids that were drawn back into those elaborately detailed, strong designs with the remainder of her hair.

Gimli pulled back from Legolas, an almost imperceptible blush creeping over his face, matching that found on Legolas’. He had simply forgotten his Amad was standing there; was he so far gone already?

Apparently so.

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The newly betrothed elf and dwarf arrived at Glóin and Nuris’ home sometime later, reluctant to attend the luncheon in their desire to be alone with one another, although their necessary attendance was somewhat to Gimli’s relief as well, as Legolas continued to battle, even unknowingly at times,
the dwarf’s resolve not to bind in elven ways.

Their friends had already gathered, escorted by their lodging hosts as honorary members of the Company, per Pippin’s gentle insistence; the royal couple from Gondor, hosted by Thorin III Stonehelm, attended without him, as he sent his regards, reiterating his satisfaction with this embraced outcome.

“Gimli! Legolas!” Pippin ran to them as soon as they appeared through the front door, chewing on a huge piece of bread with cheese smeared across the top. He was most happy to see his friends, particularly given his joyousness in their marriage. He hugged them both, Gimli a bit taken aback, and Legolas grinning widely.

“Have a mind, Pip!” Merry strode up to them, smoking his pipe, balancing two mugs in his left hand. He stood there smugly, most happy for the previous day’s events, and proud of his role.

“Hmph. Well, we do owe you both a thank you. A gift perhaps?” Gimli waited, wondering what the hobbits might suggest, pondering on how unpredictable and imaginative it would be. He was proven correct, in that it was not what he had estimated.

“Oh, that’s not necessary Gimli, seeing you happy is good enough for us.” Pippin’s words made the dwarf stutter and blush ever so slightly, for it was not what he expected to hear; this hobbit of all beings turn down a present?

“King Thorin has already said he is giving us a reward, anyway. He hasn’t decided what it will be, but he said he wants it to be grand.” Merry inhaled from his pipe, enjoying this particular dwarven leaf he had been gifted, and passed one of the mugs of ale he was carrying to Pippin.

"Hmph, of course he would. Well, we would like to think of something also.” He looked at Legolas and they smiled, for they had discussed this earlier this morning, and had generated some ideas of gifts they thought would demonstrate well their appreciation for Pippin’s eavesdropping and their subsequent disclosure of same. Their parting-of-ways gifts had been well-received by the hobbits, after all; both hobbits treasured the pipes that had been crafted for them, showing them to any who would spare a moment and a glance. Granted, rewarding eavesdropping could appear somewhat counterproductive, but it simply could not be helped in this case.

“Ooh, like what, Gimli?” Pippin could not contain his curiosity any longer, continuing to chew on his makeshift sandwich and drink his ale.

“We haven’t decided yet, dear Pippin, but if there is something that you want, let us know, and we can try that.” Legolas laid a hand on the hobbit’s shoulder, his eyes brimming with gratitude and love for his friend.

So,” started Pippin again, constraint not part of his character now or in the past, “When are you getting married?” And then he looked thoughtful, “Or are you married already? The elvish part of the marriage? Did it happen last night?” And he spoke this nonchalantly, chewing all the while.

“Pip! None of your business, and close your mouth, the crumbs are dripping out!” Merry admonished him.

Gimli pondered the elven binding, his heart quickening at the mention, and then resolutely shifted away from those thoughts, inappropriate for company as they were. “Nay, my good hobbits, we shall not marry until a year from now, in dwarven or elvish manner, and I expect to see you both in attendance.”
Pippin, for one, could not understand the need for statement of the latter; he would not miss it for anything, and indeed he had ensured his full participation. “Of course, Gimli, Arwen told me that I can help her plan it. I will need to get some details from you later, though, so we can plan properly.”

“Such as?” Gimli was slightly concerned about what the hobbit might have in mind for the wedding. And given Pippin’s…proneness to accidents….the ginger-haired dwarf wasn’t certain the hobbit would be his very first choice for a wedding planner. On the other hand, if Arwen was in charge and Pippin her second, that would mitigate any serious problems, and the dwarf did find Pippin’s escapades to be amusing at times; in peacetime it might create a most interesting wedding indeed. He knew Legolas would agree; neither of them would care if the wedding was conducted with fires burning down their surroundings, just as long as it actually happened. Pippin’s planning might even make it less stuffy, for he had certainly been to his own share of sleep-inducing, stilted weddings. He chuckled at his imagining of the possible ways things could go awry.

“Why are you laughing, meleth-nin? And what do you need to know for your planning, Pippin?” Legolas’ confusion over Gimli’s sudden humor was overtaken by his own curiosity about what his unasked-for but welcomed wedding planner had in mind.

“Oh many things, things about both of you that I don’t know. Your favorite colors, we will have to create decorations just like we do back home, and, hopefully Gandalf can bring fireworks. Oh how could I forget the food, we will need to have a lot of food. Both dwarven and elvish. I will make my Dorwinion wine and dwarven spirits beverage again, I know you greatly liked it, Legolas!”

“That I did, dear Pippin.” Legolas remembered that night, when Gimli had danced with Galadriel at Arwen's wedding, and marveled at how everything had changed.

“Gimli! Come and see your other guests!” Glóin’s voice boomed across the room, and the moved to the large sitting room, where others had gathered. Gimli was immediately ushered away by Éowyn, who had been excitedly waiting to speak with him. She took him to a corner of the kitchen, where no one was at the moment, and hugged him. “I told you, Gimli; next time, you must promise to listen to me.”

“Hmph, well, I suppose you are right. Tell me, if they had not spoken, would you have intervened?”

“Not there, Gimli, I wouldn’t have had the wherewithal to disclose your secret in such company, to violate your trust. But I would have had words with you later! You were too absorbed in your thoughts to see the glares I was sending your way, but Faramir certainly noticed and wondered about my frustration!”

Gimli chuckled. He was glad indeed that he had not needed to witness such a display.

Across the room, Legolas and the King and Queen of Gondor discussed the previous day’s events, Elessar expressing his amused disbelief at the knowledge that had been hidden from him. “I am surprised, both of you, that you were able to keep this from me. Although I will tell you, I had suspected this might be the case.”

Arwen’s eyes narrowed as she regarded her husband. “You did not, Aragorn, you are just saying that.”

He raised his hands, his expression matching, certainly not wanting to cause an argument, but also somewhat incredulous that he was not believed.

“I believe you, Aragorn!” Pippin jumped into the fray, happy to state his opinion.
“You are indeed of the habit of overhearing others’ conversations, my dear hobbit.” Aragorn thought it was most humorous, as did the other two. As did Dwalin, who was standing nearby and had housed the hobbits during their stay.

“Aye, he is. My dearest wife had been most impressed both by his ability to empty the cupboards and his ability to appear at various moments. I fully understand the Tookishness that Bilbo used to speak of.”

After a time, Gimli and Legolas pulled Merry and Pippin to the side again. “Hmph. Tell me, dear hobbits, have you obtained the information I needed?”

“About your wedding, Gimli? No, we haven’t. Arwen has been busy here at lunch, and….”

“Nay, Master Pippin!” His voice lowered to a whisper again as he interrupted the hobbit. “I mean regarding Glorfindel, the mission that I sent Merry on and that which you volunteered to join.”

“Let me, Pippin.” Merry saw Pippin’s mouth open to speak on the matter, and he was concerned about discretion given Glorfindel’s nearness.

“We learned nothing.” Merry looked resolute.

“Yes,” Pippin said. “Nothing.”

“But luckily, we are here now, and we have the opportunity to learn more!”

“Unless nothing was what you wanted us to learn?”

“Yes, nothing?”

Gimli groaned. “Hmph. And tell me, Master Steward, when Pippin was in your employ, was nothing his key utterance?”

The hobbits exchanged glances, trying to decide what to say. In unison, their response was “Nothing.”

Gimli clasped Pippin on the shoulder. “And what is this nothing of which you speak?”

The hobbits exchanged glances, trying to decide what to say. In unison, their response was “Nothing.”

Gimli laughed. “Aye, Master Steward. I might feel the same.”

“Speaking of same, Gimli, I did not have a chance to review this betrothal contract of yours, and given your involvement in mine, I would request that I provide you the same honor.”

“Hmph. A man after a dwarf’s heart.” Gimli nodded, tapping out his pipe. “I like that, Master Steward, I like that indeed. Come, I will give you a copy, and before you return, you may review it with me.”

Faramir smiled. “And I trust you will travel to the wedding?”

Gimli frowned, looking offended. “How could I not? When is it, have you decided?”

And the afternoon passed in that way, friends old and new enjoying one another’s company,
discussing matters that seemed both mundane in comparison to the quest to destroy Sauron, yet equally if not more important.

The next morning, a knock came early to Gimli’s door. Legolas answered, as he was awake and easily heard the faint sound. It was a messenger from Thorin’s staff, bearing news from Lord Elrond regarding Thranduil.

He knew he needed to leave at once, bidding the messenger leave and going to wake Gimli, who blearily came to awareness.

“My Adar has awakened, Gimli, I must leave.” He did not want to go, but he knew he must.

The news slowly sunk in, for Gimli was still tired, his mind working a bit less swiftly during these peacetime awakenings. Then he nodded, clasping Legolas’ hand.

“Do you want me to travel with you, my elf?” Gimli thought it wasn’t a good idea for various reasons, but thought it best that he offered. Whatever Legolas wanted, he would provide.

“I think it would be best, Gimli, if you did not. Though it pains me to say that. I am not certain how my King will react to it right now, Elrond wrote that he is not himself. It is probably best to broach the news to him slowly. At an appropriate time.”

“Aye, of course, Legolas. You will send for me, then, if needed? Well, perhaps it would be best for you to update me; I may travel to Minas Tirith to work on the gates if you believe it will be some time, but I will let you know if I do. Besides, that will prevent me from showing up unannounced at your father’s Halls, the distance is too close and I shall dearly miss you!”

They bid their goodbyes, and Legolas left with his heart at ease, succored by the budding of his One love, hopeful that his Adar was on the road to recovery.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to telemachus for allowing me to use Nuris as the name of Gimli’s Amad...

I’m assuming that Galion is generally sound in judgment, essentially the Elvenking’s trusted right hand. Everyone makes mistakes (or have oversights), like letting dwarves and a hobbit escape in barrels (!), and in this story his are few and far between....
On Confusion and Adaptation

The trip back to the Elvenking’s halls was swift, and conducted in relative silence as the Elvenqueen and Legolas led Eryn Lasgalen’s delegation to the Wood of Greenleaves.

They were warmly greeted upon their return, for the elves of the realm were aware that Thranduil had regained some form of consciousness, and they began to grow hopeful that they would have their revered King back in his throne sometime soon.

Elrond had been alerted to their arrival, and was waiting for them in Thranduil’s chambers upon their return. He quickly briefed the Elvenqueen and Prince on Thranduil’s status, and they were both pleased to hear that the Elvenking seemed to follow moving objects and people with his gaze at least some of the time, and even occasionally uttered words that made sense given their context. They were also warned that more often still he presented an air of delirium, and that preparedness of knowledge was helpful, for such a state seemed almost worse than that of his deep, unrelenting slumber. It was such that Legolas saw his Elvenking upon his return, and it ripped at his heart but also heartened it, for Elrond clearly told him that this chaos in his manner of being was a needed sign, that this hurdle must present itself and be crossed if hope for his recovery remained.

After this first reunion of sorts of Prince and King, a one-sided reunion of which only Legolas was aware, Legolas sought his own chambers, intercepted on the way by Galion. The King’s faithful servant and valued right-hand joined Legolas within his study for a glass of wine and updating of news. The butler was fond of Legolas, having faithfully served his Adar for many centuries, and he was keen to learn more of the betrothal ceremony and the trip to Erebor. Legolas was equally keen to discuss his happiness in full with this elf, as he loved him as a member of his own family, and Galion had always been someone in whom he could confide.

Galion almost spit out his wine when Legolas told him of the Hobbits’ words and his true feelings for Gimli. He was shocked to learn that Legolas had grow to care so much for the dwarf, and surprised that he had not seen the truth of the matter himself. But the Prince was very skilled at hiding his feelings, an ability he had honed well based on his long training in his King’s court.

“I am pleased, Highness, that you are content with this outcome. I must tell you, however, that I do not think most of our elves will welcome this as keenly. It would be difficult enough for them to remotely accept a marriage of convenience to a dwarf, but binding out of love?” Galion felt shameful at his own inward shuddering at the thought, but hid his reaction well. “This will require exceptionally careful maneuvering and planning. I miss our King in this; he would have eased this rapidly.”

Legolas laid a hand on his shoulder, sensing his unease, and Galion was proud to see the strength on the Prince’s visage, proud to hear the regal calmness of his words. “I know, Galion, and we will find a way regardless. And no one needs know the entire truth of the matter yet. In fact, I think it best if they did not.”

Galion nodded his head slightly. That course seemed most prudent, and he agreed. And he decided was well-prepared to put his own hesitations and judgments aside to ensure the happiness of his liege-lord’s only child. The other elves, that was much less clear.
Thranduil quickly became consistently responsive to words, providing pleasing additional evidence to all of his stubborn resolve. It was to Legolas that he uttered his first sentence. His son had taken to reading books to him at Elrond’s suggestion, and the Prince found it also helped him pass the time in his separation from Gimli, which he felt most keenly.

“That is not one of my favorites, Legolas. Choose another.” The words were soft and commanding, a paradox of sorts.

Legolas almost dropped the book in response. “My King, you are awake!”

The Elvenking smiled slightly, almost grimly. “And I do not feel my spry self. What happened?”

Legolas bit back a chuckle at the comment, as it was somewhat uncharacteristic of his Adar to attempt to be wry; he simply smiled and began a short explanation. “You were injured, my Lord, in the Second Battle Under the Trees.”

Thranduil frowned; that battle was not familiar, and he prided himself on his perfect elven memory. Yet all seemed foggy in his mind, and the pain in his body, everywhere but especially in his head, grew. He lifted his hand to rub his temple, and felt the new scarring and remaining bandages. This did not seem minor to him. He posed his question to Legolas, almost dreading the answer, which was uncharacteristic for him. “Was I injured by a spider? An Orc?”

“Yes, by an Orc. Many orcs. They attacked without warning.”

Thranduil nodded slightly and then grimaced from the movement. “How was I injured? It seems the injuries were extensive, based on how I feel.”

Legolas was uncertain of how much to say, and decided minimal information would be best. “Yes, they were. Throughout your body, and your head. But I was not there, my King, the attack was by a mass force of orcs.”

“Oh,” he nodded again slightly, the pain in his head growing further. “You were off with Tauriel then. I am not happy you left, Legolas, do not do that again.”

Legolas frowned, for Tauriel no longer walked Middle-Earth, had not since her sorrowful heartbreak continued to consume her in the aftermath of the Battle of Five Armies over a half century ago. He spoke his next words gently. “I was not with Tauriel, my King. I was with Gimli. In Fangorn. Remember? From my letters?”

“Do not lie, Legolas, you know how I feel about deceit and disobeying. I know you followed Tauriel. I know not who this Gimli is; is it someone you met when you followed the dwarves to Laketown? And how did you end up in Fangorn?” The disappointment in his tone was clear.

Legolas realized exactly what his Adar referred to. “No, my King, I was not in Laketown. That was more than half a century ago.”

Thranduil was puzzled, not understanding. He looked at Legolas’ hand as his grip on his own tightened, and saw the wondrous ring on his index finger. “You are betrothed? To Tauriel? I will not accept that Legolas, regardless if you care for her or not. That partnership is not best for our realm, for you. Beside that, she is almost a sister to you. I forbid it.”

“My Lord, Tauriel is no longer here, remember?” He decided not to speak further, recognizing his Adar’s memory was lacking, and he was not certain if further discussion regarding the the object of
his affections would currently be helpful. In fact, he had his suspicions it most certainly would not be. It was time to call for Elrond, but his Adar had more to say.

“Well then, to who? And why is Tauriel gone? She did not stay with that dwarf, I hope! I saw how she looked when she spoke of him, I heard she was by his cell, but I did not think she would be so foolish! I will not stand for any of this, Legolas. Please tell me that you brought them back to seek penance? And I am most unhappy with the manner of their escape.”

“Adar, I think you should rest. Your injuries were extensive, and it would not do to become too active. Tauriel is not with the dwarf, at least not in this world. He died.” He did not say more, predicting that Thranduil’s reaction to Tauriel’s decision and the cause of it would be too much to bear in this moment if he did not recall it himself. Legolas knew that his Adar thought of Tauriel as a daughter, and he had witnessed his prior devastation, expressed in his own way; it would not do to repeat that now, not when he seemed frail.

Thranduil was silent for many long moments, and then spoke after he looked at Legolas’ hand as if seeing it for the first time. “Legolas, I am puzzled. You are betrothed? To whom? Is it Tauriel? I do not remember a betrothal. I will not accept that Legolas. You cannot bind with her. I forbid it.”

And now his Adar was repeating himself. Legolas recognized that his King was much improved from the state in which he had first seen him on his return to Eryn Lasgalen, but could not help the feeling of worry creep into his mind, for he had never seen an elf with memory problems such as these, aside from those who fell into the Enchanted River.

But even those were different. Falling in the river led to temporary loss of memory in its entirety, not this potentially unending loss of memory of over half a century.

Legolas stood up, knowing Elrond needed to see this, his concern growing. “Let me fetch Lord Elrond, my King. He will want to examine you.”

Thranduil looked at him, his expression completely neutral. “Elrond, why is he here?”

“To assist you, my Lord, I called for him to come.”

The Elvenking was somewhat confused, as though he could not quite understand why the Lord of Imladris would be in his forest. “Why?”

Legolas provided a short reply, hoping it would be enough to trigger his memory of that which they had just spoken. “To heal your injuries.”

Thranduil grew even more confused. His head was swimming, and it hurt. “How was I injured?”

“In a battle, sire, a battle with orcs.” The Elvenking recognized the expression of concern on Legolas’ face, and nodded slightly again, even though he still did not understand. Legolas went to find Elrond after asking the healer outside the bedchamber to return to the tending of his Adar.

After completing his examination of Thranduil, Elrond exited the King’s expansive bedchamber, joining Legolas and the Elvenqueen in his equally expansive and ornately decorated sitting room. Galion had summoned the Queen after Legolas had located Elrond, knowing that she would want to
be kept up to date on his status and would be full of ire if she was not.

The Lord of Imladris sat down in one of the brocade chairs between the two, his expression slightly grim; both the Queen and Legolas met his gaze as they looked up from their review of their respective planning and duties. “He has a long way ahead in terms of healing, and I have not seen this extent of injury before. I am hopeful that he will continue to improve, but I do not know if he will reach a point where he is able to resume rule. He is certainly in no position to do so now, but he is pushing for it. He does not comprehend the extent of his injuries, and his memory problems are making this realization more difficult. At least his body does not move fully of his own volition yet; I fear if that occurs, he will be a difficult force to contend with, literally pushing his way back to his duties. And I do not want to have to restrain him, he would not understand my order to do that, healer or not.”

Both Legolas and the Queen understood. It was a difficult task before them; Thranduil at the best of times had difficulty accepting their opinions and influence, not that Legolas would have ever imagined he would be in a position where he would present scenarios or plans for approval to his King with his Queen as his primary ally. For a moment, Legolas felt slightly hopeless, and briefly thought that managing this situation seemed almost as difficult as the Quest to destroy the ring. But he quickly recovered, and turned towards his Queen, his sapphire eyes meeting hers. “We must work together, else he may do damage to what he has striven towards all of these years.”

She nodded slightly in agreement. “Realize, Legolas, that I have always had the good of this realm at heart. And I will not see us fall to the influence of others. No offense to you, Lord Elrond, but that includes the Noldor of Lothlorien.”

Elrond sighed inwardly; he certainly knew this already, and he did not want to be drawn into the midst of any sort of dissension between Eryn Lasgalen and the realm of his wife’s parents.

Legolas looked at her somewhat firmly, as if reading Elrond’s thoughts. “Lord Elrond is well aware of this, my Queen, and we do not need to trouble him with the inner workings of our kingdom.”

She felt a wave of sadness cross her heart, as it seemed she had spoken more to her son over these weeks than all of the time that had passed since his birth. Yet he made little attempt to understand her, and he obviously felt just as Thranduil did; disinterested, discounting….she shook the sadness off, her face a cool veil as always. “I do not need you to present orders to me, Legolas. Remember your rank is below mine. Do not speak thus to me. You will suffer consequences next time.

She rose and swept out of the room, leaving Elrond uncomfortable, and Legolas rankled.

Over the next days, Thranduil continued to have little recent memory, and each time he saw Legolas, he would inevitably ask several times about the betrothal ring. Legolas, leaving his Adar’s bedchamber after his most recent visit sought out his Queen, having come to a decision. He soon found her in her apartments down the hall of the Royal Wing, granted entrance by one of her attendants.

She sat in her large study, which was much more sparsely decorated than Thranduil’s, reviewing items of import. Legolas had rarely been in her quarters, primarily because she lived in another part of the forest, but he knew she preferred simple to ornate, basic not grand, quite unlike her spouse.
They were unlike each other in so many ways, yet so alike in others; stubborn, impenetrable, dedicated to their tasks and their realm.

She did not glance up when he entered the room, but she did speak coolly after he briefly bowed to her. “And to what do I owe this pleasure, Legolas?”

“I would like to tell our King about Gimli.” He could not cease thinking about it, deciding it needed to be done, and knowing he best gain her permission as his Queen, given the importance of the information.

She looked up, her face unreadable. “Why? I do not think, in his state, that he is in a position to understand our noble motives there.” She looked down again. “Nor do I think he will understand your silly whims with regard to your friend. Your immaturity and misguidedness is amusing, Legolas, but it will not be to our King. Not now.”

Legolas detailed his reasons, convinced she would understand. “I am concerned about him learning this from someone else. His visitors are still few, but he begins to retain a bit more recent knowledge, such as what he has eaten during the day or what book I have read to him. He would not be pleased with being excluded.

She nodded, deciding this was correct. “It will be best, then, if you tell him. In his state he feels much ire towards me. More than usual.”

“As you wish, my Queen.” Legolas bowed his head and exited, relieved that the Elvenqueen would not join him.

He hurried down the wide hallway of the royal wing of the Elvenking’s Halls, both excited and nervous to take what he deemed to be the final step in ensuring his arrangement with Gimli would come to fruition. His King had always been reasonable, given time to think and ponder, and he knew he would not stand in the way of Legolas’ heart, regardless of his current feelings towards dwarves or how close in his mind the Company’s Quest was to this decision.

Thranduil had clearly told him several times that he wanted him to find love, find One, and while he didn’t speak of his own lack, they both knew that was his motivating factor in his discussions with his son.

The Elvenking’s response to Legolas’ disclosure was guarded as his son spoke of finding One, and then horrified and outraged, in his manner, which was more subtle than that of most elves, but clearly unhappy nonetheless. This betrothal was particularly nonsensical to the Elvenking given the absence of any memories between the point of Thorin Oakenshield’s escape from Mirkwood in wine barrels and the current time.

“This makes no sense, Legolas. You would bind yourself to the son of Glóin? The one you called a goblin mutant? You told me this!” He recalled that dwarf, the one with the locket, and his mind filled with all of the overwhelming reasons why this could not, should not, come to pass.

“My King, please remember that you have lost memories since that time. Decades have passed. Sauron has been defeated, remember? We are at peace with the dwarves, who now reside in Erebor. They are our allies. Gimli was my companion during War of the Ring. This alliance will do much good for our kingdom.”

“I fail to see how that could be the case, Legolas.” This entire conversation was making Thranduil’s head hurt further, and it was one he wished he was not having.
Legolas knew he should not push further, given that his King seemed to be in little position to understand, but neither could he resist. “I need your blessing, Adar. I told you, I love him. You have always wanted me to find love.”

Thranduil’s eyes widened; he could not comprehend what he was being told. “A dwarf? You love a dwarf?”

Legolas nodded. “More than anything.”

“And how did you come to be betrothed? He did not ask my permission, I am certain of that, whatever you may say about my memory.”

Legolas raised his eyebrows, uncertain how to frame his answer, but then he decided the honest route was best; it always was with his Adar. “You were injured, my Lord, unconscious from the battle. I loved him secretly, and he loved me, but we did not know this.” He smiled as he remembered. “But for once, my Queen was helpful. She and Thorin III Stonehelm, the King of Erebor, arranged a marriage between us.”

Thranduil was aghast. “First, Legolas, you mean Oakenshield. Thorin Oakenshield. Second, I will not permit any arrangement she has facilitated! Never! Nor one in which my permission has not been granted!” His face grew grim, and then his eyes burrowed in pain, his body beginning to shake.

Legolas ran for the healer who had moved to wait outside the King’s chambers while they talked, and then went to find Elrond.

After half an hour, Elrond emerged from Thranduil’s bedchamber and sought out Legolas in the King’s study. “He had a seizure, I believe, Legolas. We must keep him calm. What occurred before this?”

Legolas nodded, even though he did not understand what a seizure was; he could inquire later and focus on the Lord’s questions for now. “I was telling him about Gimli.”

Elrond immediately understood, and placed a comforting hand on the Prince’s shoulder. “He will come to understand, I think, when he regains his faculties and can process information more effectively. And if he does not, you will be King, and you may do as you wish.”

His confidence and even manner buffered Legolas’ resolve. The Lord of Imladris then left the room, leaving Legolas alone with his thoughts. He did not move until he was interrupted by the Elvenqueen, who spoke his name firmly to gain his attention. She sat in a chair across from her son, her face an impenetrable mask.

“I heard what happened, Legolas, and I will assist you. I will ensure our King agrees to our plan.”

Legolas frowned, not understanding how this might be. If his King did not listen to his son, why would he listen to the Queen? “I think that now is not the right time, were you not told what occurred? I wager 10 bottles of Dorwinion from the Second Age that he will not even remember me telling him of it, let alone be in a position where we can convince him to agree.”

“There are ways, Legolas.” She knew this to be true, even if how was not immediately clear.

He frowned. “Such as?”
“I am not certain, Legolas, but I just feel there are ways. He would not have fought this before his injury, there must be a path. We will find a way to adapt our plan to his current state, find a way to generate his assent. We need to gather more information first.”

“Are you speaking of something that is not noble?” In this moment he believed with every ounce of his heart that she would be capable of being underhanded; she could not be trusted.

Even in the face of contrary evidence he believed this. Thus far she had helped him find his true love, even if she did not realize it, and he felt a sudden wave of guilt for treating her poorly. He would never remotely entertain the idea of speaking to the King in the manner he spoke to her, and even if Thranduil shared his inclinations towards her, even if he learned his perspective on her from his King, perhaps it was time to consider softening.

She did not sense any change in his demeanor. “Do not question me on my morality, Legolas. I have never done anything thus, regardless of what your Adar may have told you.”

Thranduil had indeed not told him any such thing to question her virtue per se, and Legolas quieted even more.

“I would like to make this mutually beneficial, however.” She stared at him intently.

“Oh?” His expression was quizzical, and the growing ideas about what she might say flowed through his mind.

“Yes. You agree to establish your realm in Ithilien as you originally planned, and rule there as an arm of Eryn Lasgalen. Adapt yourself to my vision, and I will ensure your betrothal is not sundered.”
On Resolve and Purpose

The Elvenqueen was persistent, Legolas admitted to himself. She would see him leave Eryn Lasgalen, using his desire to wed Gimli as her leverage. She had indeed determined a weak point in him, and he was so unused to interacting with her, he did not know in what manner to respond. His momentary guilt at his continual coldness towards her evaporated, replaced by the persistent emotional distance and distrust. “I do not think that is for the best, establishing a realm in Ithilien, not with what has come to pass. At least not for now. My Queen, why would you even speak of sundering my betrothal, this arrangement was your idea in the first place! An arrangement to benefit our realms, not to benefit you.”

She smiled; her son had much to learn of politics, it seemed. His naïveté might have been charming to her in a different time and place.

They both looked towards the door as Galion cleared his throat, realizing he had walked in on an unwelcome conversation, but seeing as he had overheard Legolas’ words, her wanted to ensure they were aware he had stepped in. “Legolas, the Elvenking calls for you.”

Legolas stood and bowed his head to her. “We will discuss this later, my Queen.”

She stood as well, resolved. “I will join you, Legolas. I would like to talk to the King myself regarding these matters, our plan.”

“I have hardly even thought of this so called-plan, let alone agreed to it. Beside that, he will not remember our discussion.”

She grew impatient with his belligerence, although a casual observer would be hard-pressed to determine whether either was experiencing any emotion whatsoever based on their unreadable expressions and the neutrality of their words. “Yes, but I would like to garner his reaction. If he reacts poorly, it will limit our options further, will it not?”

Legolas refrained from rolling his eyes and began to walk out of the room. He found her a bit infuriating, to say the least. But now was not the time for an argument. He would save further discussion for later. He turned to her as they walked the short distance to his quarters. “Lord Elrond said we must keep him calm.”

She almost rolled her eyes in turn. “I am well aware of that, Legolas.”

Thranduil was sitting on his bed, his head resting against the intricately carved headboard. His eyes settled on his Queen, narrowing in disdain. “I did not call for you, I asked for Legolas.”

She bowed. “I understand that, my King. I simply have come to discuss a proposition.”

His eyes narrowed further. “Regarding what? To this day, all that you have proposed has begotten ill.”

“I think that is not entirely true, and you know that. Now, Legolas and I would like to know if you will allow him to settle a realm in Ithilien.”

Legolas interrupted, trying to keep his voice soft and calm, his words carefully measured. “I do not currently need to settle there, my King. She speaks of future possibilities.”

She waved her hand. “Consider this hypothetical, then. Will you permit it?”
“My son, who has just followed those dwarves to Laketown, rule a realm in Ithilien? I think not! Why would we even consider that? With the threats in Mirkwood, this is hardly the time to reduce our numbers and create a satellite realm!”

She smiled gently at him, an expression of fondness almost crossing her face, an expression that she quickly hid; as he spoke those words their purposes seemed one and the same. “Recall, my Lord, that you have lost your recent memory due to injury in a battle. Our forest has been scoured and there is little danger. The events with the dwarves were several decades ago.”

Thranduil would not hear of it. “If there is little danger how was I injured? Again, I think not with regard to this plan.”

Both the Elvenqueen and Legolas, as well as the other elves who interacted with the Elvenking, were patient with his lack of memory and knew he sometimes needed frequent reminders to hold a discussion. But it did not ease the wrenching they felt in their hearts to see their King rendered thus. He had always been strong, impenetrable, undefeatable.

It was never a question of Thranduil’s survival. Legolas had never remotely considered needing to rule his forest.

Not until now. If Thranduil did not recover sufficiently to rule, he would be sent to Valinor. The crown would pass to his hands.

Was Galion correct? Would the elves of Eryn Lasgalen reject his binding with Gimli out of love? Would he need to reject his love to meet his obligations, his duty?

His thoughts scattered as the Elvenqueen continued in her calm tone. “It was an unexpected aftermath of the War of the Ring. We anticipate fewer skirmishes in the future. And our calculations indicate we have enough warriors to do this.”

Thranduil saw no purpose in that argument. “Even if that was true, what does it matter to our forest? We need no satellite realm! We surely have enough upon us as it is.”

Her tone continued to be soft, well aware that riling the Elvenking unnecessarily was a poor choice for many reasons. “Legolas made a commitment to the King of Gondor. He will heal the forests in Ithilien, and establish a joint realm with his betrothed, an alliance which will be most beneficial to us in terms of additional protection if needed.”

Thranduil almost snorted as he thought of the most likely option. “Not an alliance with Lothlorien, I hope!”

She smiled. “Of course not. That is most ridiculous. No, the arrangement is with Erebor.”

His eyes widened. As if that was not ridiculous? “With a dwarf. A dwarf. What, is he betrothed to the King under the Mountain? Oakenshield?!”

Legolas jumped in, concerned that the conversation would escalate the King’s emotions as it had earlier in the day. “No, sire, it is Gimli, Gimli son of Glóin.”

For the first time since he had regained consciousness, Legolas saw a glimmer of recognition flicker in his Adar’s eyes, and, for a moment, an inexplicable dread, which was confusing to the Prince. “You care for this dwarf, Legolas?”

“I do, Adar.”
It was true, and Legolas’ devotion was clear. Thranduil could see it, but he needed to hear it. “As much as you care for Tauriel?”

“More, Adar, much more. It does not even compare.”

The Elvenking shook his head slightly, unable to do more without wincing. “Legolas, it is a terrible idea to bind with a dwarf. For so many reasons. He will die soon enough; the kingdom may not support it; everything.” He hesitated, and for a brief moment Legolas thought he looked panicked, but it passed just as quickly. “I do not think I can permit it. Unfortunately, ion-nin, your place is here, and if you marry, it should be with a Sindar. One I approve of.”

Legolas sighed. His Adar’s unrelenting insistence on binding with a Sindar would have become laughable long ago, if such a thing were funny. There were so few Sindar in the realm, and all were bound. And his King would never have entertained the idea of binding with a Sindar from Galadriel and Celeborn’s realm, not before the War of the Ring, at least. Why propose something that was impossible? Could he truly not see past his own single-mindedness, that which he criticized the Queen for?

The Elvenqueen stepped in, knowing that there was a potential opening where matters of the heart were concerned. “But my King, if this is one Legolas cares for, as has been your wont for him all of this time, and if our elves see it as a marriage of convenience, which is all it will be in reality, for an elf cannot bind with a dwarf, what does it matter? Particularly if those who are more amenable travel with Legolas to Ithilien.”

Thranduil closed his eyes, tired of the conversation, many unspoken thoughts milling in his mind, so many signs pointing toward a disastrous outcome. But if this was indeed love, love of One, he would need to try to find a way, and that seemed futile at the moment when everything was considered. And then he looked pointedly at his wife. He had no desire to follow a scheme of her concoction, although he grudgingly admitted in his mind that her words made some sense. It felt too complicated, too befuddled, too unpredictable, too difficult. Yes, too difficult. His voice hardened, as his heart had those long years ago. “Go, I do not want to discuss this further with you.”

She nodded and bowed, sensing that she may have made a slight inroad. When she shut the door to his bedchamber, Thranduil spoke, a new faint recollection of his state in his mind. “Legolas, remind me why your mother is here? I cannot recall, but it is on the tip of my mind.”

“Sire, you were injured in a Battle, and she now rules per our traditions. Until you are cleared to return to rule.”

“I do not trust her fully, Legolas, this you know.” He sighed. “You would think a King could modify those traditions, those laws that have her rule in my stead, but no. I must tell you, Legolas, and I have never spoken so directly of this before, there are things that she has done that are not forgivable. You must not permit her to rule in your absence. I cannot condone this settlement in Ithilien solely for that reason, and I know naught what to say about this dwarf. But I see you care deeply for him; I just hope for your sake this feeling passes.”

Legolas was not one to defy his King, but neither could he stand by in the face of that statement; he could not disregard that which he had just found. It was worth more to him than anything. “I am betrothed to him, my Lord, I will marry him. I must. I cannot imagine life without him.”

Thranduil shook his head. “Thank the trees that there is a waiting period, in which you can come to your senses. But I must grant my blessing, and I do not. Not until I learn more. You know this, I told you when you came of age, and I am very disappointed that you have disobeyed my direct order. Do not proceed further, Legolas, without my approval.”
Legolas nodded, for the first time feeling shameful about his betrothal decision. Not because he betrothed himself to a dwarf, but because he knew very clearly his King’s edict, and he had disobeyed it. “I am sorry, Adar.” His words were almost mumbled as an elfling might.

Thranduil nodded. “Do not disappoint me further, Legolas. Do not proceed without my approval. We cannot simply undo this betrothal, the impact it would have on our ties to the dwarves is not clear, and if nothing else it would look ridiculous to back out without clear reason, but neither can you proceed. Do you understand?”

Legolas nodded, relief seeping through his frame that his King had not sundered his betrothal to his love.

He did not realize that Thranduil would have, had he not sensed the depth of emotion his son bore towards this dwarf. But neither did the king know what to do; this was immensely complicated, and he knew what Legolas wanted could not come to pass. And he also knew his son would never understand.

He had not thought Legolas would find love, not after he lived centuries without it. Elves found love early in life, and while Legolas was relatively young, he was far past the point of typical binding age.

After some moments, Legolas thought that now would be a good time to ask the lingering questions he had regarding the Elvenqueen, while this moment of clarity lasted. He spoke softly, son to father. “What has she done, Adar? All I know of is the isolationism. That seems misguided, not unforgivable.”

Thranduil considered the question, and then looked away, his face completely neutral. “It is not for me to say, Legolas.”

“Please Adar. If I end up ruling, I must know.”

He contemplated his son coolly, and decided against disclosure. He would not pass from Arda; he would not permit it, and therefore Legolas did not need to know. “If that time comes, Legolas, the information will come to you.”

There were some things that were better not to be known, Thranduil had decided.

And then the moments of clarity were lost, and Thranduil slipped back into a state of delirium.

Legolas sought out Galion as healers tended Thranduil, needing answers, tired of this situation, the uncertainty, the warring emotions. “Tell me, Galion, please. I must know that which my King will not disclose. How can I make wise decisions if I have not the information?”

Galion clasped his hand. “If our Lord will not tell you, I cannot. He would not wish it, and I cannot commit that act. But you can trust me as an advisor, Legolas; come to me with decisions to be made, and I can give you input. That could be a way around it. And if the time comes, if you gain rule and still are unaware, I will tell you what I can.”

“But Galion, he may not even be of sound mind in his decision to not tell me!”
Galion considered, but his course remained the same. “I have served your father many years, Legolas. He has never chosen to tell you more. I am not certain I would decide the same were I in his position, but I do know him well, better than any other. I am confident he was thinking clearly.”

Legolas wheeled away in frustration, and Galion briefly reconsidered. But then his musings were interrupted by a guard.

“Galion, Mithrandir has arrived.”

Mithrandir’s arrival had caused a bit of a stir, as it always did. Especially now, with his sleek snow white hair and white robes, and so many elves wondering if the rumors were true, that his death and reembodiment had caused the change in the wizard's appearance. He had finally received Elessar's summons, when the King of Gondor had called for his assistance as well as Elrond's during his initial tending of Thranduil.

Legolas happened across his Quest companion accidentally that evening in an enormous room that seemed to vent to the outside, but was covered as precaution with impenetrable glass. It was filled with plants and even trees, one of several such refuges the wood-elves had constructed within the Halls, as living without these would have made the seat of Thranduil’s realm a cavernous stone dungeon to them.

He strode toward the wizard, grinning widely, settling himself beside him.

“Gandalf, it is good to see you. Although I am certain my King would not enjoy the smell of your pipe in his favorite conservatory.”

Gandalf looked at him from under his smooth snow-white brows, humor etched across his face. “Well, then, it is good indeed that I smoke here, and not in his chamber, is it not?” And then he became serious. “I am not a healer, Legolas, but I did receive word, and I will see if I can offer any advice.”

Legolas nodded slightly, suddenly overcome, tears forming in his eyes when he thought of all that had passed since Elrohir had burst into the campsite he shared with Gimli in Fangorn. He stared at the myriad of plants lining the walls and floors of this enormous room, trying to will his tears away.

They talked for a time of lighter things, Gandalf sensing Legolas’ need for this. The wizard was happy and amused to learn of the betrothal, something he had definitely not expected when they gathered in Rivendell prior to the Quest.

“Ah, Legolas, would I have known this would occur, I would have greatly enjoyed telling you so in the beginning. The shock on your face would have given me a chuckle, though I doubt you would have believed me. And where is he? The good dwarf, who was your sworn enemy at the beginning of the Quest?”

“He remains in Erebor, it seemed best not to upset my King with the news.” He wished it was not the case, and that he was here now. And even moreso he wished that Thranduil would assent as he thought he would; he would have wagered anything on that. And lost, as it seemed now, lost so unexpectedly.
Gandalf nodded, sensing Legolas’ struggle. “He will come to accept it, Legolas; he desires for your happiness above all, and he is not himself.”

Legolas smiled, his ageless, beautiful face brightening. “You are more forthright than I am used to, Mithrandir.”

Gandalf smiled, then drew on his pipe, puffing circles into the air. “I would lend you hope, Legolas, for it seems yours has darkened unnecessarily.”

Legolas sighed. “It’s not that, Gandalf. I have no doubt I will be with Gimli. Whatever it takes.” He wavered at his words, but did not want to tell this to Mithrandir. “I feel…” He paused, as though considering whether he should tell Gandalf this, but he knew the wizard would hold his confidence. “I am frustrated that my King will not discuss information about the Elvenqueen with me, and I am not certain if I can trust her. And I do not want to be King, Gandalf.” He spoke the thought that had grown in his mind, the solution to the growing, nagging problem. “I would give her rule, Gandalf, but I do not know if she can be trusted. I cannot stay here, not like my Lord has. I want to marry, travel, follow through on other obligations, sail. Most of that would be impossible if I must rule.”

“Such is the curse of noble birth, is it not?” Legolas swiveled to see Gandalf’s face, wondering at his tone, but saw only sympathy.

Legolas sighed. “I suppose it is. Mithrandir, we thought it would be more difficult in Erebor, easier here.”

“Ah, but I know that was when you were speaking of traveling as friends, and assuming your King at the helm. Things change. But do not fret, you will find a way.”

“I am not fretting, Mithrandir.” He turned to the wizard with eyes blazing. “We were up for a challenge before, and I am up for it now. It is just more complicated now. But even that is not my primary concern. No, it is my Queen.”

Legolas bore his sapphire eyes on those of the wizard, leaning his head of pale hair closer towards the wizard’s white tresses. “What do you know, Gandalf? What do you know of my Queen?”

Gandalf hesitated. It was not his place to interfere, especially now that his own quest was ended, now that he had seen Sauron destroyed. But he would also see this situation resolved for the elf.

“Of course I did not know her during most of her life, Legolas, but I do know that she cares for you. I know as well as you do, that she strives to protect your realm from influence, and that she believes her goals to be true. She has a mind similar to your grandfather in that sense, I imagine. I think that is why he chose her to marry your father.”

Legolas nodded. None of this was news.

He leaned back, puffing circles with his pipe, and chuckled. “Talk to her, Legolas. Just do not tell her who sent you, I am not certain she likes me.”

Legolas laughed. And he wasn’t sure why.
He quickly found his Queen in her quarters, reading a book. She bid him to sit, pouring him a glass of wine. They talked coolly for a time of court matters, and soon enough Legolas drew the courage to speak directly.

“Why are you and Adar so distant? So cold?”

She looked at him in surprise, not expecting this. It wasn’t accusatory, it was questioning, and she felt herself soften in return. Her eyes grew distant, as though searching for a memory she could not find. It was a different gaze than that which passed Thranduil’s eyes on recent days, for his was one of delirium, while hers was purposeful. But then she shook her head - what was searched for could not be found.

She looked at Legolas guardedly. It was an expression he had never seen on her face before. It softened him in turn, and for a moment he felt her vulnerability through the fëa-bond between them that was never in use, that always seemed closed.

She stood up, and went to a different room, and then returned with a small locked box made of oak, intricately carved with leaf patterns. “Under the desk in his study, Legolas, you will find the key. You cannot tell me the contents, I swore to our King that I would never look or question, and whatever either of you may consider me, I do not break oaths. I am not sure that I should give this to you, these are not the specific conditions under which he instructed me to give this to you, but it is close enough.”

Legolas frowned. He hesitated taking the box, as though he did not want to know what the box held. For a moment, he had a mental image of sailing to Valinor with Gimli, and his heart felt at ease. That was all he wanted, not this.

Not to rule Eryn Lasgalen. Not to have his Adar injured, with memories he might never regain. Not to be constantly reminded of his lack of bond with the Elvenqueen.

He could not even bring himself to call her his Naneth. He wondered if he ever had.

But perhaps opening this box might provide some answers.

He went to his King’s study, and found the key after some searching; it was certainly well-hidden under the desk. Legolas opened the lock, surprised by what he found inside, drawing his hands over its fine construction. He had for a moment thought it would be some sort of jewel, some memento his King had collected, perhaps the white gems he had wanted from Thorin Oakenshield.

But no, it was a book. A small book that must have once been finely constructed, but was now worn and scratched on its cover and bindings. The parchment was thick, meant to preserve the words written within across ages.

He opened it, and began to read.
Unexpected Learnings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Elvenqueen had no knowledge of the contents of the box she and Galion had pledged to safeguard, no awareness of the book held within. Nor did any of them truly understand why Thranduil had entrusted her with it, aside from her single-minded dedication to their realm, which in itself was likely explanation enough. On his first pass of the initial pages Legolas was most puzzled, the effort to keep these contents hidden under lock and key most surprising. There were references to plans for feasts and begetting day celebrations of various unnamed elves in the realm. Legolas began to wonder why in the name of Elbereth this would have been kept in such secrecy. But as he flipped further, he suddenly realized the first section contained Galion’s scribblings and notes, and then, midway through, there was a shift to Thranduil’s flowing script.

It was Thranduil's section that was of interest, and his short perusal of the first entry made the secrecy a bit less nonsensical, although Legolas wondered how much of this was indeed secret, or if it was meant to be secret only to him, something no longer spoken of in the realm:

She has traveled East, I am certain of it. I know not when she left, but with her has gone a group of elves from the southern quadrant. My Lord Oropher had refused this, but now that he has passed, she has decided to go, against my direct orders. I fear she has lost her mind; she believes the Blue Wizards, Morinehtar and Rómestámo, are emissaries of Oromë, tenders of the woods, healers of lands, sent from Eru to assist us. That they share our vision of healing the forests and protecting the land, although their purposes are not simply that. I am certain that she believes they can cast spells and release the fear of our elves lost in the Battle of the Last Alliance within the Dead Marshes, including my King Oropher; she said as much several times. I worry this is why she chose to leave, and worry even more what will come of it.

She spoke of visions of them. A calling for us to join them, to heal the forests, to travel east and fight the growing darkness, to revel in the basic plane of nature and learn how its forces can be channeled and directed. To rally those others who will assist in some unnamed evil, including certain Avari.

It seems most unnatural, unwise.

The writing ended, and many pages were ripped out. The next entry in this journal-of sorts was gripping, and Legolas could only guess what had come before. And he wondered why it would have been carried and completed thusly; perhaps it was a retrospective recounting?

We stopped for the night in a copse of trees. I finally assented to her casting a spell of protection after all of the others were killed. I know not if any continued to pursue us, but she thought with this we would be undetected. I know not what happened to Morinehtar; I hope that he did not perish in our escape from Rómestámo. I grieve the loss of our warriors, I had not realized the extent of what we would find there when we set out to find them.

We could not find the others.

The entry ended there, and the next pages were similarly ripped from the book. He skimmed the next words, reading of collection of herbs and plants from the southern forest and the peak of the forest's mountains, and one plant in particular of which Legolas had never heard, which was strange, as he knew all flora in the area extremely well.
Galion and I assisted her today with wiping her memory. She has asked for it for some time now, such that she would forget these spells, forget Rómestámo’s influence on her, be more resistant to Rómestámo’s call. She fears she will be called again, and she does not trust herself to resist. At least she has remorse. She spoke the words at the mouth of the Wooded River, after she told Galion what to do.

I did not assist, as I knew, as did she, that she would not remember Legolas. And while I curse her misjudgment, while I still rankle at her surreptitious leave against my order, I could not and still cannot fathom her forgetting him; they have little relationship with one another in the first place. But that is what led her to offer what she did, and if I had done that, I would want to forget as well. For eternity.

And it seems to have worked—she does not remember any of her travels, of her apprenticing with Morinehtar, of her entanglement with Rómestámo. She does not remember Legolas.

She does not remember any of the harm she put herself in.

The harm she put all of us in.

All she speaks of now is preservation of the realm. Cold. Calculating. She is more adamant now than she was prior to Dagorland.

She has cast no further spells, the memories of the wizards have not come back.

I have settled her far away, as we had agreed, with a settlement of elves who isolate themselves, who have the least desire to settle elsewhere. They are strong of mind, they are loyal to both of us, they will report to me regularly. I hope this will protect her from further calling.

More pages seemed to have been torn from the book, and then there were notes about the unceasing infestation of spiders, postulation if the further-growing darkness was related at all to Rómestámo. Discovery of the effects of a fall in the Wooded River, before it became labeled as Enchanted.

I worry that the Wooded River is now ensorcelled by the spell she cast on herself at the mouth of the river. A warrior in training from the northeast ward fell in it today, and lost his memory. It is different than when she lost hers, completely global and far-reaching across his entire life, and it seems to be lifting slightly. My elves are now calling it the Enchanted River, though none seem to know the true cause.

More fell beasts descend upon us. I worry they are sent from Rómestámo, that he may be responsible for the ever-deepening darkness, even if he did not seem evil himself in the manner of Sauron, simply more misguided. Necromancy. I have debated calling for Mithrandir; I have not told him what has happened, but if these indeed were wizards, he may know. I am not certain, however, that he can be trusted, not after what happened with Rómestámo.

And at the last entry, Legolas was entrapped; the words seemed so ludicrous, and yet his blood ran cold.

I cannot rid myself of his final words, this so-called sorcery, it is burned in my mind—“Your fair son, he will marry one with hair of red hue. Your Queen has offered it and ensured it, the holding of his heart. The incantation has been spoken, only the binding remains. And then what shall pass will be glorious! I foresee most, all your elves apprenticing to us, heeding my call!”

What possessed her to offer Legolas to this…sorcery. I cannot forgive her. I cannot. And Morinehtar’s warning to me…it is unspeakable.
Legolas put the book down in the box with shaking hands, as though it burned. The writing somehow was incomprehensible, ridiculous, nonsensical, fear-inducing, mystifying, a kaleidoscope of these and more. He drew a deep breath, and went in search of Gandalf, hoping the wizard could help him make sense of everything swirling around him.

Chapter End Notes

Of course there isn't much written about the Blue Wizards. Their Maiar names were Alatar and Pallando; Morinehtar (Darkness Slayer) and Rómestámo (Helper of the East) were likely their Middle-Earth names and I am using them this way. They were Maiar of Oromë, Lord of the Forests. Their arrival date in Middle-Earth isn't clear; it could have been 1600 SA, or between 1000 to 1100 TA with the other wizards (when Greenwood fell under the Shadow). They may have traveled to Middle-Earth with Glorfindel if the first is true, or with Saruman in the case of the second. I have chosen the first as that seems to be what Tolkien settled upon later, but of course either is possible.

Their goal was to strengthen rebellion against Sauron in the East, and possibly to try to locate him in the early TA. Tolkien writes “What success they had I do not know; but I fear that they failed, as Saruman did, though doubtless in different ways; and I suspect they were founders or beginners of secret cults and "magic" traditions that outlasted the fall of Sauron.” Tolkien also writes, however, that the army of Sauron during the War of the Ring would have been impossibly large (undefeatable) without the assistance of the Blue Wizards in the East.
Prelude as Interlude: Thranduil’s Beloved

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Second Age 889, Amon Lanc, Eryn Galen

Two elvish maidens sat in a grove near Oropher’s rustic yet majestic halls in Amon Lanc, their silver-gold locks gleaming in the early morning sunlight, sapphire eyes twinkling. They were beautiful beyond renown, and much sought after, yet all elvish maidens kept their distance of late, whispers of impending betrothal staying any displays of interest. One weaved the stems of golden-hued flowers together in an intricate pattern, the end product not yet clear in her mind; the other read a healer’s journal brimming with lore on herbs, intent on learning even further about the healing properties of particular plants found within Oropher’s burgeoning forest realm.

Oropher’s kingdom had been established for nigh under a millennium, and many Silvans had joined the far fewer Sindar in settling high within the trees of their vast woodland home, intent to return to simpler elvish ways. Their numbers grew over time, the result of the blessed arrival of much-welcomed elflings as well as the migration of additional elves whose hearts resonated with the intent of Oropher’s realm.

The younger elleth, Cóleth, looked up from her book to gaze at her sister, Gwíneth, out of the corner of her eye, sadness filling her heart as she did so. Oropher’s son, Thranduil, was due to announce his betrothal to Gwíneth this very eve, with the ceremony itself to follow, and the irony of the situation pierced Cóleth to the core. Gwíneth felt some fondness for the Prince, but she certainly did not love him, not as he loved her. Cóleth was the only elf who knew the secrets of her sister’s heart, as she tried to sort out her emotions and make decisions, most difficult decisions indeed.

The betrothal had been arranged just over a millenium past the reaching of majority for both elves, as Oropher in his fastidiousness wanted to ensure a match that would be at minimum passingly suitable for both parties and, much more critically, further the vision of his realm. In Gwíneth he had found that. Her family was Sindar and well-respected, her Adar being one of his key advisors, her Naneth being one of his top healers. Gwíneth had the keen intellect of her Adar, the talents of her Naneth, a charming personality, a stunningly beautiful and impenetrable countenance, a practical yet kind nature, and much, much more. She was a natural ruler, a natural leader. In addition, if the King was honest, he knew Thranduil had longed for the elleth from the first time he had set eyes upon her. But that was a secondary benefit, and certainly not a key consideration in the King’s calculations.

He cared not whether either loved the other; duty to the realm must be foremost, after all.

None knew of Cóleth’s true regard for the Prince, aside from her older sister and the King himself. She, like her sibling, was too skilled at hiding her emotions for such to be known, both elvish well-trained by their Adar in sharing only what was necessary. Each generally suffered in silence, and like most of the elves in this growing forest realm followed Oropher’s example, placing allegiance to their cause and kingdom before their own base needs and desires.

Cóleth knew naught else that she could do, and neither did her sister.

To watch her sister marry the One she herself loved, one that her sister loved not, to bear his elflings…in her estimation, there would be nothing greater that Cóleth could do for Oropher’s realm in the name of duty. It was the same for Gwíneth. Cóleth thought of that often, that this arranged marriage would place as much, perhaps more, toil on her dear sister’s heart. She felt great shame.
when this notion became difficult to hold in her mind for any length of time, as it tended to be quickly and unbiddingly replaced by the guilt-ridden jealousy that ravaged her when she thought of her sister obtaining the prize she most desired above all.

Jealousy of which her sister was well aware, and greatly sympathetic towards.

They had attempted to barter with their parents, in a way, to switch places, but their Adar and Naneth would have nothing of it. Cóleth had even approached King Oropher in well-veiled secrecy, proclaiming her undying love for Thranduil and speaking of how it was greater than her sister’s, which in truth was none at all. While he believed her, he cared not. He dismissed her words, attributing them to unbecoming envy, and told her so. “Put duty afore your own emotions, dear one, and do your kingdom proud. Should something befall your sister, I shall have you assume her role, but we both know that shall not come to pass. So stand tall.”

Cóleth knew then that her King would have chosen the same course even if Thranduil had not loved her sister, perhaps even if he had loved a different elleth, such as she herself.

As Cóleth thought of the Prince, it seemed he materialized before her eyes. Not to see her, of course, but her sister.

“And what are you making?” Thranduil gazed down at Gwíneth, looking keenly at the flower chain she had created.

He was beautiful, one of the most glorious elves that had ever graced Arda, and Gwíneth took some brief solace in that, in the majesty inherent in his being, but it soon dissipated, replaced by her sorrow.

She gazed up at him in return, masking her feelings with a presence of warmth, pulling forth all the favorable emotions she held towards him. He was so smitten that no elf could help but notice how besotted he was. No elf could help but wonder once again if the rumors of an impending betrothal were true. “Why, my Prince, perhaps it shall be a crown of flowers for you. To match the one of berries that you favor in the Spring.”

He nodded and grinned widely, in a manner far more effusive than any expression he had ever displayed for any other elf. His King found such displays unseemly, but Thranduil cared not, particularly given that Oropher grudgingly permitted his affectionate displays towards Gwíneth. “I should like that. I stopped only to bid you well and now I must take your leave, as I am late for a meeting with my King. I shall see you later this eve, at the feast. It will be held within my favorite part of this wood, to honor my most favored elleth.”

Gwíneth bowed her head slightly at his regard, and then smiled after him in turn, partially for propriety’s sake until he was out of view, and then pulled up her sister while clasping her hands. “Come, it is time.”

They walked to the glades that their horses tended to roam, beckoning them forth with discrete sounds not unlike the horses’ own yet somehow different, and then traveled the near twenty miles to the western edge of the forest. Any who would have seen them after they dismounted would have thought they were simply joyous kindred spirits holding hands and enjoying the musical melodies of their wood, searching for flora as was often their wont.

Undetected they soon came to a solitary outpost that stood in the Vales of the Anduin, one of many such structures scattered across the river’s vast fertile valleys, placed there by the men and women who had settled in small villages outside of Oropher’s forest realm and the corresponding woods of Lothlórien. This particular outpost was a halfway point between the closest human settlement and the
ellith’s own abode near Amon Lanc.

Gwíneth turned to Cóleth, her sapphire eyes a mixture of grief, longing, and the bittersweet knowledge of the path before her. “This may be the last time I am with him, if my betrothal is to be announced this eve.” She clasped her sister’s hands. “Know that I thank you for standing by me all this time. And I hope you never have the pain in your heart that I have in mine. Marry only for love, my dear little sister.”

Cóleth was puzzled at the solemnity of her words. “Why are you so wistful? It need not end now.” She was struck by an idea, yet another in a seemingly endless string of potential solutions. “I will declare your mannish warrior as my lover, as my One and Only, and you can see him secretly that way, when he visits me.” It was her boldest idea yet, aside from her heartfelt disclosure to Oropher. Gwíneth appreciated the potential sacrifice, for actually making this pledge would mean Cóleth might never have another, not if she declared him as One and acted as though she had vowed herself to him before Eru. Yet both would know who truly held the younger elleth’s heart, and it seemed it would be One she was not fated to have.

Gwíneth tucked strands of wayward hair out of her sister’s eyes, praying to Eru that her sister would find love returned someday, and that her heart would forget that Thranduil had unknowingly held it. “If it were so easy, I would have done such already. None in our kingdom would suffer me, or you, with a human love. You know this. For all they say that is positive of Elrond Eärendilion, they sometimes seem to truly forget from whence his heritage actually arose. There are few elves, I think, on these shores who would actually suffer such a union.”

Cóleth’s eyes burned with fury. “It is the Noldor of whom you speak; if it were not for their moralistic rules, their high and mighty attitudes, their hypocrisy, it would be different. Even in our prejudice we can not escape their influence.”

“Perhaps, yet it is also not so simple as that, dear one. But wait, I see them approaching in the distance.” Gwíneth kissed Cóleth’s brow.

Soon enough, the small group of human warriors was near. As Cóleth gazed at Gwíneth’s love, she still did not understand the appeal. He was not nearly as comely as Thranduil, and his body was so different from that of an ellon. Even his name—Garrick—was strange to her still.

But, as she knew all too well, little choice did any have in the One who held his or her heart.

Gwíneth and Garrick were, as was always the case, enthralled with one another, and had eyes for none other as he drew nearer to her. They departed into the privacy of the outpost, and the small party of warriors removed themselves as well, Cóleth going with them to the shelter of a copse of trees a distance from the structure. It was far enough that the men could not hear what happened within, although all knew well enough what was occurring. Yet it was not far enough to engender true privacy, for Cóleth’s elven ears could hear much when her sister was loud enough with her love, which was often.

It was always the same group of men who met here for these liaisons as they traveled on their patrols. They were indeed the same small group as they had been the first time the sisters had happened upon them, traveling for the day outside the bounds of their forest realm. They did so against the express orders of Oropher but had been able to sneak past its borders in no small part due to minimal border patrols due to times of relative peace as well as their own impressive stealth, each with sufficient Silvan combat training to enhance their inherent abilities. Each had wanderlust, in their way, and they desired to see what lay beyond their forested lands, a desire that Oropher did not support in any degree.
The men ensured their patrol traveled this way often, for they knew their captain had fallen in love with the elf, and the sisters traveled often as well, for the liaisons were carefully scheduled. None within Orophë’s forest realm knew how far they went, simply thinking them to be exploring the trees and searching for flowers and other plants, as each shared a keen love of the same and learned from their Naneth.

All who gathered near the outpost were keen and intelligent, skilled enough to never be caught in their abetting of this most atypical courtship, and several potential trysts had been cut short out of fear of discovery.

For all knew that it must be kept secret.

On the very first encounter, nothing had occurred aside from professions of attraction, but the men had thought the elf had cast a spell on Garrick, and Cólèth had thought her sister may have gone mad.

Yet both Gwîneth and Garrick were reasonable, staid and true, and soon enough those initial presumptions were forgotten, replaced by the truth of an apparently forbidden love, a love so strong that those party to it were gladened to assist in their frequent liaisons.

“Is it true, then? That she will marry the Prince?” Cólèth’s musings were cut short by one of the warriors, Malin, who sat beside the fire he was kindling.

She sighed in resignation, and told him more of the situation than she ever had before. “Yes. Her efforts to dissuade our parents have come to naught. And once our King has set his vision on a path...it is nigh impossible to steer him from it. Even I, in vain, attempted to modify his chosen course.” She stared off into the distance at the outpost, and then moved her gaze downward to look without seeing at her hands. “And she will not speak to any of the truth, the one thing that might change minds and decisions. She will not disclose that she loves another. Because he is a man. She does not think it will make a difference. It likely would not; our King is single-minded.” She looked up at Malin, and furrowed her brow, an unusual expression for the elleth to his recollection. “I do not understand why they do not try to find a way to be together.”

Malin listened gravely to her words and then smiled, although to Cólèth his grin seemed barely visible amongst the scruffiness of his mustache and beard. She had initially found the men’s facial hair distasteful, yet had grown used to it over time, although she doubted she would ever find such things attractive. He spoke to her kindly, warmly. “I know you do not understand, at least Garrick has said your sister has told him this about you, that you have an unrealistic romantic vision of their eternal happiness,” and he paused as he heard her gasp, amused at her reaction. “Do you really think it is so surprising that I know this? I could easily have guessed at it myself. We have known each other nigh on, what, two decades now? You never ran from us, nor looked at us with disdain, but equally as much you told us of your kindred and how they would react with disgust. Aye, our people would do so as well. So how is the couple’s inaction a surprise?”

He grew more serious. “He wanted to ask her to escape from all that faced them, to disappear, yet thought better of it.”

Cólèth gasped again, this time out of the realization that a way out may be yet found. “But that is a marvelous idea, I had thought of it myself, yet she said it was not possible. Yes, we must make that happen.”

He shook his head. “He cannot do it. His life is but a drop in time compared to hers, and he said he cannot bind with her and have her face her death from the sorrow of grief. He cannot do that to her.”
She grunted, and he was quite shocked to hear such a noise coming from such a beautiful, dignified creature. She waved her hand. “I learned to make such utterances from you, so stop staring. Pity her own stubborn mind!” She leaned in closer, conspiratorially. “They simply have to complete the most intimate act, just once, and vow to one another before Eru. I am certain they could be housed somewhere. How is that not feasible? Such are our customs, our way of being.”

He sighed again, for he agreed, but his captain certainly did not. Or more accurately found the ensuing consequences too painful to entertain. “As I well know.”

Cóleth shrugged. “One of them must offer it to the other, for they are both too stubborn to act. Surely death would be purposeful for her, such that they can be together in an afterlife, Eru granting them that grace, and I pray that she would heed her fëa’s true call and follow him beyond the circles of the world should it be permitted, not stay tied to these shores for eternity as an unbound spirit as some Silvans amongst us might. I cannot see how Eru would not permit their eternal union, not when he has given them this love to share. It is unusual, yes, but it would be unwarranted cruelty to have just this taste and nothing further.”

“Ah, I see evidence of your romanticism even now.” He smiled fondly, and she slightly scowled at him. “But do you not tell me on visits past that the Valar are cruel?”

“The Valar, at times, of course. They must have such tendencies to have allowed the Noldor to commit such an atrocity as the kinslayings, no matter their supposed response and banishment. If they are so far-seeing, they should have intervened afore anything untoward occurred.” She sighed, knowing that it was not so simple, her words having sprung from that place of contempt all of her folk felt towards the atrocities committed by those who had lost their way, lost their sense of humility, lost the sense of reverence for Arda and all living things that should flow through the veins of every elf. No matter, however, now was not the time for such musings. “Excuse me, I should not speak so harshly of the Valar, yet this is Eru’s decision, to my mind, and if Manwë and Mandos must offer judgments towards an elf who loves a mortal, it should reflect His will. I am not so presumptuous to know His intent in such matters, but surely He has demonstrated His will in the past, and unwavering devotion and faith to One’s true love would see that replicated again, of that I believe.”

Malin nodded; they had talked of such items frequently enough that he understood her beliefs. “Regardless, Garrick is convinced that escaping with her is a bad idea.”

“Worse than seeing her married to another? That is the worst pain imaginable! How can they forfeit this, their true love?” Her eyes glimmered with unbidden tears, her general veiling of untoward emotions continuing to be cast aside in this time and place. “I do not understand how they can throw this gift into the Void.”

Malin himself gasped at her words and whispered solemnly, leaning close to her. “Do not speak of such a place, of such actions, it is forbidden amongst my people.” He straightened once more, and his words reminded her yet again of the differences between them. “He makes his choices out of love for her, out of his own beliefs, please try to understand that.”

They sat in silence for a time, Cóleth not able to think of things to say due to the melancholy in her heart. She preferred to speak with the men during these excursions; otherwise she was subjected via her keen hearing to the noises within the outpost, the sounds of pleasure and professions of love, and it made her feel yet again as if she was intruding on her sister’s privacy.

She blushed when she thought of how much more intense those sounds might be if they ever engaged in the vowed acts that would bind them together.
The other men joined them around the small fire, cooking various food items, and they talked of various topics, of life in human settlements, which Cóleth always listened to with undying interest, as did her sister. She tried bits of the men’s cooked offerings, which she always did, and in turn presented that which she had brought; it was rare that either actually enjoyed what the other proffered, but they certainly had grown accustomed over the years to the attempts to learn more of the other's culture in these and other ways.

She was about to ask if one of the men would play a mannish card game with her when all too soon the pair emerged from the outpost. Cóleth knew it was past the time when they should leave, but she had not had the heart to interrupt Gwíneth; it seemed cruel. Let Thranduil wait for that which he coveted.

That which would break her sister’s heart. That much was obvious. The tears streaked down her sister’s face as Garrick tried to comfort her.

Gwíneth may hold the Prince’s heart, but Cóleth knew with reasonable certainty that the Prince would never hold Gwíneth’s.

For Gwíneth’s was held elsewhere, regardless of their lack of binding.

Cóleth had initially thought her sister driven to madness when she professed love for the male warrior.

Now the clearer certainty was this: She was driven to semi-madness out of her sorrow, and in her limited sight could not see the options before her, even if the path might be difficult.

A resolve grew in her heart. It would be up to her to try to convince her of the errors of her decisions before the betrothal vows were exchanged. Cóleth’s own love for Thranduil played a role only so far as it helped her to see the folly in giving up that which was so wholeheartedly returned by Garrick.

Gwíneth still had time, even though limited, to make the correct choice, to be party to an ongoing union of returned love, and Cóleth swore to Eru in that moment that she would try her best to ensure it happened.

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Second Age 890, Amon Lanc, Eryn Galen

Gwíneth sat in her bedchamber within Oropher's Halls, frantically packing a rucksack. She uncharacteristically cursed when she heard a knock at the door, yet was relieved when the visitor turned out to be her sister.

"Cóleth! I am gladdened that you are here. Come, I need you to assist me." She gracefully ran to her desk, its wood glimmering with golden strands that ran through its polished surface, which had been naturally molded within of the tree that grew within the room. There she grasped several scrolls of parchment tied with ribbons made of woven greenery, and placed them in her sister's hands.

"Additional invitations? Surely the guest list is long enough, how could any elf have been missed?" She giggled, shaking her head at the sheer enormity of the wedding that approached.

Gwíneth gravely, frantically shook her head. "No. These are missives for you to guard. Please.
After I have left. For our King, our Prince, our parents."

Realization slowly dawned within Cóleth's mind. "You cannot be serious...I know I advised you so, but that was before...that door has closed. The wedding is too close, you cannot break the betrothal now."

"I know it is unseemly, cruel even. Yet I must go. I cannot deceive anyone any further. As you would say, it has ever been a challenge to breech my thick skull on this matter, though perhaps not an insurmountable task." Cóleth smiled in response, for her words were true. "You need not deliver them, just hold them until I am outside the borders, delay as long as you can. Then leave them for Galion to find, he is diligent enough that he will see them delivered to their rightful readers. Please."

Cóleth was shocked; she had certainly not expected this turn of events. "I know naught what to say. But I will do as you ask. When will you leave?"

"At dawn." She grabbed her sister in a sudden embrace. "I shall never see you again once I leave, in all likelihood; know that I will forever treasure our memories together."

Gwíneth returned to her packing, less frantic now that the most important aspect of her leave-taking had been attended to, while Cóleth sat on the bench that had been shaped out of the tree within the room in much the same manner as the desk, letting the sudden change in events and all of the emotions it brought forth wash over her. After a time, she spoke. "I believe this may be a mistake, Gwíneth. The time has passed."

She looked up from her sorting of possessions, their sapphire eyes meeting. "What do you mean?"

"Our King will not be pleased. He will take it out on Adar. You know this, it was a key reason for staying your choice when you wavered."

She was thoughtful for long moments. "We do not know this for certain. Adar has been his advisor for so long. And you shall take my place, you told me our King said this."

Cóleth nodded. "Yes, it is true, and I cannot believe I should reject the opportunity placed before me. The opportunity for both of us to be with the One who holds our hearts. Yet I shall. And beside any practicalities, what of your doubts regarding binding with a man? Regardless, it is too late."

Gwíneth's head bowed, her silver-gold hair forming a curtain around her face. "That is not so; it is already done."

Cóleth stood as still as the mighty oaks surrounding their favored forest glade, frozen in disbelief. Surely it could not be, Gwíneth, ever the dutiful one, bound to her human love? When had this occurred? And then she knew; it had been when her sister had left on a meditative retreat for a fortnight over a month ago, a common enough pursuit amongst the wood-elves, particularly when they faced major life events. Except she must have used the retreat as a ruse. Perhaps not purely intentionally; it was unlikely that she had planned to bind, this Cóleth knew. Yet seeking romantic favors from another when betrothed was unseemly enough, unheard of in her estimation...and so far beyond that, binding with another when betrothed?

And then she stayed her judgmental thoughts, for she knew this would be best for all in the long run, and at least her sister had come to the decision her heart so greatly desired. At least she had finally headed her heart's call, and acknowledged so fully the one who held it. That took courage beyond imagination, for suddenly Cóleth was not so certain after all what her sister's ultimate fate might be; lingering in Mandos alone for eternity, perhaps? Perhaps the doom of men might not be granted to
those who were not favored by the Valar, and wood-elves were surely not, at least as the Noldor might estimate.

Yet would Eru himself have favorites? Surely not, surely it was faith that mattered?

Cóleth grew solemn as her own faith wavered in those moments, as the seriousness of her sister's decision loomed large within her mind.

Cóleth drew closer to her, settling beside her on the floor. For the first time she noticed the very slight coldness of her sister's hands, the barely perceptible paling of her skin. "What is this?" She gently lifted her sister's chin, her puzzled eyes studying her sibling's face.

She sighed, a slight, near imperceptible sound. "It takes not only loss of one's bound partner to fall into the pallor of grief, dear sister; it apparently can result from threatened loss of love. I cannot be apart from him, it started when I betrothed, I simply hid it from you. This has been gradual enough; you are the only one who would notice, I think." She bowed her head in shame, for in all of this, she believed she had been a complete and utter coward.

Cóleth drew a deep breath, pensive for many moments as she considered her words. "Well, I remain somewhat perplexed. If you were beginning to fall into heartbreak, yet then bound yourself to him, would you not be tied to life now?" She straightened, ready to speak her heart. "I wish you had come to this course sooner, decided on these actions before you betrothed yourself. But thank Eru you have not yet wed Thranduil, for then the option would have been lost to you. Though there really was not much choice, was there?"

"Not after I gave my heart to Garrick, no. Not to survive my heart breaking. And do not worry, I seek penance and forgiveness from Eru for my actions, for violating my betrothal vows, and not simply plead for those who walk amongst us, Thranduil, our King, our parents. Only then might I find peace, I surmise, Eru willing."

"I think you overreact somewhat, my dear sister, for while it is most untoward, surely far worse breakings of trust have been committed amongst us. But it is apparent right before my eyes that you cannot bear to be apart from him as you consider your course, even as the signs of your grief are slight enough. Should I call for Naneth?" Their mother's healing skills were noteworthy, and certainly might be of some assistance.

She gasped in dismay. "No! She must not know this. It is for your knowledge only. Beside that, I will be with him soon enough, and then I shall lose this ache in my heart, although I will miss you so." And then her ever-present shame bore to the surface. "I am so sorry to place this burden on you, I should never have involved you in this."

"Gwíneth, you are not yourself. You do not speak clearly. Come, rest for awhile, and I will determine what might be done for you, I know enough to seek out answers unnoticed, and surely..." There was a knock at the door, and both turned towards it.

Cóleth immediately stood. "I will send them away. I imagine it is one of the wedding planners, determining what particular color of firefly you would prefer to alight the glade with each meal course at the feast." She snorted in jest, for the intricacy and extravagance had been unlike anything she had ever seen; a rarity in this realm that made its fair share of attempts to be rustic, even as its King and Prince were sometimes not, both appreciating protocol and finery, jewels and elaborately crafted natural items. Yet everything was natural in its source, each had supposed, and if they preferred complexity of pattern over simplicity, surely it might be just a matter of taste.

And as Cóleth had surmised, the elf bidding Gwíneth's leave was Galion, who was charged with
heading any and all domestic projects, regardless of his actual level of involvement in any specific
details.

He saw Gwíneth sitting on the floor of polished oak, yet he did not allow himself wonder why; his
discretion was the key reason he served in his key role within the royal family, for a butler was privy
to much, and reservedness was key. "My Lady, this message has been delivered for you."

She rose and walked over to him. "From the Prince? Does he request to see me?" It was unusual
for Thranduil to send her a written invitation, yet not out of the question, as he did so occasionally
when he planned dinners or other outings for her enjoyment. She felt even more strongly her guilt
and shame, for she had never wanted to hurt him, and she knew her decision would hurt him
terribly. She somehow brought out warmth in his demeanor, and by leaving she imagined he would
retreat into coldness.

But surely Cóleth's unwavering devotion and love would be enough to warm him over time, as the
King's secondary plan came to fruition.

"I know naught who it is from, my Lady, simply that it is to be delivered to you. It came from a
messenger who has since departed."

He bowed and left, shutting the door as he did so.

She threw it on the desk, amidst a pile of others. "Yet another message of congratulations from elves
I have never met and would likely never meet. I should wonder if Lady Galadriel might send one to
me." She shook her head ruefully. "Our King would not be pleased with that, I assure you." For
once she read each note of congratulations, she passed them along to her King for his perusal, such
that he would know their contents and advise her in a proper response. He had become her personal
tutor in royal etiquette, and she wondered yet again, as she did many times each day in her wedding
planning and developing closeness with the royal family, how this represented a return to the natural
ways of elves. Yet it was necessary, she supposed, for while Oropher deigned to keep their realm as
non-interconnected with others as possible, pure isolation was not feasible, and maintenance of polite
yet distant relations a necessary result. He had greatly reduced bureaucracy as compared to other
elvish realms, eliminated much of the hierarchy in their society to the point where it was almost
nonexistent aside from the royal family themselves, and focused his subjects' attention on true elvish
matters, tending to flora and fauna, celebrating the gifts inherent in Arda, tending to that which had
been marred by shadow or darkness....

Cóleth interrupted her reverie. "I am going to go now and research what I might do for you here and
now, and I shall return later. Will I see you at dinner?"

"Perhaps. I should sort these missives before I leave, it would be unseemly to leave them
unattended."

Cóleth raised an eyebrow, and then sighed in relief. *This* was more like her sister, dutiful until the end.

Cóleth returned later that afternoon, having found little with regard to broken-hearted grief that might
be of use, knowing that reunion with her love was indeed the solution, but she had learned of some
minor aids, and brought an assortment of herbs to her sister's chambers. Certainly their potential
benefit might be an elvish folk tale rather than true elvish medicine, yet it certainly couldn't hurt.
She was surprised when Thranduil opened the door after she knocked and waited patiently for a response, and even more surprised to see her sister on the bench molded out of the room's tree, wracked with devastating tears. He beckoned her to enter. Cóleth walked up to where she sat, briefly bowing as to Thranduil as one should to royalty of the realm, and then took Gwíneth's hand.

"I shall take a brief leave, I need to see to some unfinished tasks, but I will return shortly." He nodded and left.

"What is the matter, my dear sister?"

Gwíneth looked up, her eyes glittering with tears. "He has passed beyond this world."

Cóleth gasped in surprise. "But that is not possible. He is not that old yet, not even for a man. He has some years left in him." Unless...but no, surely the world would not be so cruel?

"That is what the message was. That he is dead."

Cóleth's eyes widened. "But, you just saw him."

Gwíneth closed her eyes against her pain. "He was killed in a skirmish. Malin sent the note, perhaps it was he who delivered it to our patrols, I know naught."

Cóleth did not know what to say, although she did feel some amount of relief that the missive came amongst the delivery of so many others, some of which were also borne by mannish messengers. At any other time, Oropher would have questioned the contents.

"You are losing the will to live because he is dead. You must have known it somehow, deep in your heart, due to your bond."

She shrugged, unable to talk through the tears streaming down her face.

"What did you tell Thranduil?"

"That a friend died, one he does not know. Which is the truth."

Cóleth nodded.

They sat in silence, aside from the sounds of her sister's weeping, Cóleth trying to offer what limited solace she could.

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*Second Age 973, Amon Lanc, Eryn Galen*

Gwíneth stood near the dias in Oropher's throne room, waiting for her Prince to return. Cóleth knew she could be found here, and was gladdened to see that she was alone.

But when she approached, she was surprised to see her head bowed in sorrow.

"Whatever is the matter? Is it..." Garrick, she would have said, but she was stayed by Gwíneth's hand.
"Speak not of him. I think I have realized it was folly for me to have believed I could have bound to him. Such a thing is impossible. Yet I do still sorrow over his loss, as ever I shall. It is why elves should not mingle overmuch with those beyond our race."

Cóleth knew her sister had many strong attributes and abilities, but her skill in the arts of denial in matters of the heart was particularly breathtaking. For several years now she had spoke of her denial of their bonding; yet Cóleth was ever-patient with her, for she knew it was her way of coping with her loss.

She hoped that one day Gwíneth could come to terms with it and admit the truth to herself, such that she could properly grieve.

Gwíneth continued, her tone losing its protective coolness and becoming more heartfelt. "And I have burdened you, betrayed Thranduil, ai! I cannot bear it any longer, I must tell him the truth."

Cóleth gasped. "Certainly you jest. He would not be pleased. And he need never know."

"But it eats at me. I cannot bear the deception."

"Your marital vows were honest, you prayed for absolution from Eru, as you still do; I see not how telling our Prince would accomplish anything."

Gwíneth nodded, tears streaking her face. "I did not want to involve you in my deceit. Ai, what a mess I have made of things."

"Surely you overreact, as you always do when you think of this. You waver between a cold freeze and an immense gale when you speak of it. You know as well as I that telling him will not ease your heart."

Indignation crossed her face. "It would if he forgave me." She raised a hand to her brow, closing her eyes, attempting to master her raging emotions. "Garrick held my heart. He still does. It was entirely false pretense. I shall tell Thranduil today, and if he casts me away, so be it."

Cóleth was yet again unsure what to say. Gwíneth had occasional moments such as these, in which her grief overcame reason and her guilt ate at her being. She merely needed to wait for it to pass, as they had begun to occur less often and with lesser intensity. She had never led Thranduil to believe that she loved him, and she had entered her marital vows most solemnly, having learned from her ill handling of their betrothal.

Cóleth was certain that the seriousness with which Gwíneth held her marital vows to Thranduil was the source of her guilt, and perhaps she was correct; perhaps she needed to seek forgiveness from him to find peace.

They were interrupted then by the subject of their conversation, who suddenly stood beside them in all of his majestic glory. "Gwíneth, my One, please come. Our King has guests in attendance that he would like us to meet." Cóleth gazed at him as he spoke, and her heart ached as it ever had, although none present would have guessed.

He lifted a hand to his beloved Gwíneth’s face. “Why do you cry, my sweet one?”

She smiled wanly. “I am simply sad that I have not been able to conceive.” It was not a complete lie, for there was truth in it, the omission being in the whom she would have wanted to conceive with. He whom was forever lost to her.

She could take this deceit no longer, falsehood building upon falsehood. It was too much. She was
not an elf built for such dishonesty.

He kissed her brow. “Fear not, when Eru is willing, we will be blessed. There is no rush.”

He nodded to Cóleth, who bowed in turn, and led Gwíneth to the King’s private study, holding her hand firmly.

They later retired to their rooms in the royal wing of Oropher’s Halls, Gwíneth weary from the events of the day in various ways, yet another day that she wished she could erase from her mind.

Thranduil knew of her unhappiness, and was glad that they finally had privacy in which he could comfort her fully. He sat with her on the long, elaborate settee in their sitting room, stroking her hair. “My One, you are so cold. Surely you cannot be so unhappy because of this? Because of an elfling we have not yet had the blessing to conceive?”

She smiled wanly, working up the courage to tell him the full truth. He was a doting spouse, and he had grown very dear to her, but he did not hold her heart. He knew this; the Prince was under no false impression, yet he was ever-hopeful and confident that someday he would win her love in turn.

“She smiles wanly, working up the courage to tell him the full truth. He was a doting spouse, and he had grown very dear to her, but he did not hold her heart. He knew this; the Prince was under no false impression, yet he was ever-hopeful and confident that someday he would win her love in turn.

“Let me warm you,” he whispered, and he carried her to their bed, planning to reinforce their binding to the best of his ability. His abilities in this domain were profuse, she would admit, but it was just not the same as it had been with Garrick.

Who was dead.

"Stop. There is something I must tell you."

He pulled back from her, studying her intently. She did not often speak this forcefully. "It must be most important."

"It is." She wrung her hands. "Thranduil, there was another, before we betrothed. Then after, he..."

He put a finger to her lips. "Hush. I need not hear of this. Nor do I want to."

"But..."

"I am most serious. Surely you can understand that I have no desire to learn of one you may have had feelings for? Shared something of yourself?"

"But..."

Thranduil kissed her tears away, and she was more lost than she had ever been. He was all she had now, she lamented, and she cursed her decisions. She should have listened to her sister. She should have fled with her love and never betrothed herself here; Garrick might have survived then, and Thranduil would have the love he so very much deserved from her sister.

But she could not tolerate the thoughts, and pushed them out of her awareness as quickly as they had entered it.

Thranduil was ever-patient in his loving ministrations, and she eventually responded to him in turn.

Yet her shameful guilt returned afterward, as did her never-to-be-spoken wish that it was Garrick
with her now, even though his mortal lifespan would have naturally fulfilled its course and ended several decades ago even if he had been most blessed in terms of length of time on Arda.

And she wept in despair once more, Thranduil holding her close.

Second Age 1600, Emyn Duir, Eryn Galen

“Are you certain?” Gwíneth turned to one of her handmaidens, wanting to ensure she had understood the summons correctly.

Her handmaiden nodded and curtseyed, and Gwíneth yet again waved it off, not one for such displays. She had long thought Oropher a bit too firm with regard to his penchant for royal protocol, but recognized it was necessary to ensure the firmness of his rule. At times she had attempted to convince him to relax somewhat, but he would have nothing of it, while Thranduil would raise an eyebrow and smile slightly. The Prince was yet again pleased to see that there were few bounds to her charismatic and direct manner of speech and statement of reasonable opinions, even those with which he disagreed.

She never shrunk from her royal duties, yet he also knew she would be satisfied in any sort of role within the kingdom, governing it or not; perhaps not, if she had her choice, he wondered at times, given her greater proclivity for all things Silvan.

Yet today the meeting was not in regards to protocol, but rather mysterious visitors who had arrived the day before. They traveled through the Greenwood, their eventual destination East.

She was curious to meet them, Morinehtar and Rómestámo, and her hervenn was requesting her to join them during a meeting.

Apparently they had traveled from Aman with Glorfindel of the House of the Golden Flower, reimbodied after the fall of Gondolin. Certainly he would be the center of many tales to be told across all realms, for it was not often that one met a Balrog-Slayer.

Unfortunately, the illustrious elf was not in attendance, having stayed in Lindon per the rumors circulating around Eryn Galen, dedicating his service to Elrond Eärendilion. Which was strange, given that Gil-Galad was High King of the Noldor, not his herald.

Yet the Noldor were strange, and she had ceased trying to understand them long ago.

She hurried down the meandering hallways to the rustic yet elaborate conference rooms, in her graceful way, uncertain if she was more excited to meet these wizards or to see her hervenn, the latter continuing to surprise her. She was growing more than fond of him, something she would have never guessed, and something that he keenly sensed as well.

She knew exactly where to go, as their bond drew her to his side.

He had made a place for her to his left, and gazed at her lovingly as she sat down. He spoke in her thoughts, something that they had begun to do well over short distances, bringing her up to date regarding the proceedings thus far.
Little had happened, it seemed, aside from the wizards’ sincere professions of appreciation for the Greenwood, which led her to be even more intrigued by these blue-robed visitors. Thranduil had known she would be, hence his summoning.

The pair of blue-clad wizards then discretely sought information that might aid their cause in rallying forces of good in the East, with the leader of the pair, Morinehtar, often waxing poetically about the far East, the true home of elvendom, with forests that Lord Oromë himself had revered beyond the expansive plains. One of Oropher’s advisors asked if they sought a guide from Oropher’s kingdom for the next part of their journey, and the Elvenking immediately quashed such talk.

“With all due respect, my new friends, none of my elves will travel.” Oropher looked pointedly at the wizards, who were somewhat baffled, as they had not requested such a thing, and then the King’s gaze settled on Gwíneth. Sensing her unspoken affinity for the leader of the pair, Morinehtar, as well as his knowledge of her occasional-yet-resisted wanderlust, he repeated his proclamation. “None.”

He repeated it to her several times over the next centuries when she broached the subject of the blue wizards, her interest in them abundantly clear, although Oropher was not quite sure of the reason for it. And additionally Oropher did not quite comprehend Thranduil’s response, as his son thought her curiosity was somewhat endearing, ever-respectful of her desire to learn. Yet true to his King’s vision he was moreso dissuasive of her regard for the wizards and what they might have sought in the East, Gwíneth wondering if it involved their possible rejuvenation of the land, a most-Silvan mission, or improvement of their skills in magical domains.

Magic, particularly that in the vein of sorcery and enchantments, Oropher knew, was not something to be dabbled in, and while the wizards had not specifically spoken of the latter, they were wizards, after all, and not to be thought of further. He made certain that the Prince conveyed this to Gwíneth yet again, ensuring Thranduil’s enamored nature never outweighed his good judgment when it came to his beloved.

Second Age 3284, Emyn Duir, Eryn Galen

Cóleth inspected the irises that grew in abundance in the clearing that was surrounded by fir trees, delighted to revel in their beauty. Their move northward centuries ago had been a good choice, she realized, and Greenwood the Great was truly so at times such as these, even as darkness grew across all lands. The song of the trees was strong here, the music of the forest rang true in her heart.

She turned at the gentle hand on her shoulder. “Gwíneth! It has been too long since I have seen you!” Forgetting all royal protocol, she grabbed her sister in a hug, kissing her cheeks in joy. She stepped back, studying her older sister’s dear face. “How were your travels to Imladris?”

The countenance in front of her fell. “Lord Elrond was not able to determine why I cannot conceive.” She wrung her hands. “I thought it would be different now….because before….”

Gentle hands stroked her hair. “Now that you love him, versus before when you did not, especially when your love for Garrick was foremost in your heart, and you were racked with guilt.”

She nodded, tears streaking down her face. It remained difficult to think of her love for the mannish warrior, and she continued to foster some regret over her decisions over two millennia ago, yet she
was ever-practical, and knew nothing could be changed. She had come to terms with it quite well, aside from the development of a sense of haughty superiority with regard to her own people. And she continued to amaze her sister with regard to her tenacity in rejecting the idea of her avowal and marriage with the human, believing that a bond as strong as an elvish one was impossible. Both her prejudice and her misunderstanding of interracial marriage were the product of her denial, reflecting her ongoing means of coping with his loss, her guilt, and her too-late decisions.

But regardless of her beliefs in these matters, nothing would modify or influence her regard for her Prince, as Thranduil held her heart now. It was true that free of Garrick's presence on Arda, she did indeed truly bind with Thranduil, and her heart began to open to him over time, such that her love for him now was breathtaking.

Shamefully, guiltily, she did not know if she would now change her path. She thought she would not, and it seemed at times that this was a travesty of his memory. One she knew she would not have been able to bear if it had been reversed. And then she drew her newly-grown prejudice about her like a cloak, and it completely and utterly surmounted those thoughts.

Each time Gwíneth had spoke of her conviction, which was an extreme rarity now, she expressed her firm belief that she had never experienced a true binding with Garrick, and Cóleth would nearly roll her eyes in disbelief were it not for the sorry state of the one who held that belief. It was a shame, she thought, that Gwíneth was so driven by denial in the name of her heart's protection that she could convince herself of this.

Yet Gwíneth loved the Prince of Eryn Galen, that was certain, even more than she had loved her dear Garrick, and neither sister would have thought that to be possible.

Thranduil was too doting, too loving for it not to happen. They had too much in common, and he had been somewhat dear to her before her beloved's death anyway.

Gwíneth was still confused when she pondered it. How was it possible to have two that she considered One? Two that she considered beloved? It seemed to be a rarity amongst elves, yet it was a reality that she faced.

But perhaps it was not reality at all. Perhaps she had fooled herself in her relative youth about her feelings for the warrior, convincing herself it was love when it was simply a fling.

Deep in her heart she knew this was untrue, but she had to keep that tucked away to ensure her heart stood no chance of cracking further, and much more importantly to ensure it did not reveal its secret to her beloved elf prince.

Her sister, however, felt free to break into her brooding. She knew Oropher was continuing to pressure them to conceive, for times such as these made the need for an heir even more apparent. "Fear not, perhaps it is the incursion from the Darkness that prohibits you from conception. You would not be the only one. In a time of greater peace, it would be different."

Gwíneth knew this was true, but she could also sense Thranduil's growing disappointment via their bond. The bond itself had slowly grown deeper over time, becoming a source of strong support to her, and in truth it was far stronger and without compare, greater than anything she had ever shared with Garrick, both due to their short time together and the very fact that Thranduil was an ellon, not a man.

She had not thought of Garrick in many, many years, and wondered why she did so now. Perhaps it was due to spending time with the Peredhel, whom she greatly respected, he who was one of the few non-Greenwood elves that Oropher would suffer advice from. Seeing the Lord of Imladris courting
his Lady amidst the Last Homely House's whispers of possible betrothal, marriage, and future elflings simply presented reminders of what might have been had she married and had children with her previous mannish love, Lord Elrond himself being a keen example of human-elf progeny. Yet she also knew she could not bear to part from Thranduil now, and thought it strange she would think of the one who no longer held her heart, who hadn’t for so very many years.

Her heart was held by Thranduil now, and had been for so long.

Cóleth kissed her forehead. “Go seek your hervenn. He shall make you feel better.”

Gwíneth kissed her sister’s hands in turn. “I know this is difficult for you, that I have what you do not. I am sorry that I grew to love him. I am very sorry.”

Gwíneth felt the hands she held squeeze hers. “You know that if it must be anyone else, it would be you whom I would see happy.”

“But will you not entertain any of the new suitors we have arranged for you?”

Cóleth shrugged. “None have struck my fancy yet. But please continue to solicit offers to court me, for my own sense of desirability grows each time.”

They both laughed, knowing she was the least likely elleth on Arda to grow vain; she simply waited for an ever-romantic ellon to sweep her off her feet. And then Gwíneth left, her heart’s content and call more clear than it had ever been before, reveling in the happiness she had known for many years now, grateful once again for her second chance in matters of the heart, her blessing of a second love.

Gwíneth found Thranduil in their quarters, led there by their ever-growing and deepening bond, and he was most pleased to see her. His initial efforts in their marriage had paid off fully, in his opinion, and for many centuries her utterly devoted love for him resonated in his heart.

He was a confident ellon, and knew if he set his mind to something he would see it through.

He was most glad he had seen this through.

“My sister said to seek you, that you will comfort me in my sadness.”

He knew what she sought as a balm for her melancholy mood, as keenly as she sensed his disappointment. He was glad for that too, that they shared their inner experiences. He had long ago realized she had been closed off for the first decades of their relationship, and gradually opened herself over time as she grew to love him in return.

“I would be happy to assist you, meleth-nin.” And she was keenly aware of his dedication to his task, of his wholehearted pursuit of their oneness and her relief.

Afterward, as she lay tangled in his arms, her mind relaxed, thoughts of Garrick came to her unbidden once more. Strange, she thought anew, that she should think of him now, when he had not bedded her in so very long. And then she turned the thoughts away, focusing on the love before her, Thranduil.

She sensed the tension in his body before he spoke, and knew her error before she heard his words. “Strange indeed you should think of a man? One that you loved? Laid with?” And he swept her
thoughts as they often did with one another, but she did not have time to guard those betraying memories, and he knew in an instant what had occurred.

He pushed her away. “Your One? You bound to him?” His face was a mixture of anger, hurt, dismay. “Why on Arda would you lie, then, that your One was me?”

She knew not what to say, not how to explain it. She only knew that he was. “But you are.”

“Not if he was! Then what are you, a wench?! A whore?! You laid with him after our betrothal! Thought of him when you were with me!” He choked on his words. “And let me comfort you when he died, and when you wished for children by him!”

She had seen his cold temper before, but never with her. And it was worse than any display she had ever seen with others. His frosted gaze as he said the words, tilting his head in his cold manner; the ice grew in his heart as he closed himself to her.

“No, I…”

“There is nothing you can do to explain yourself. The deceit is what bothers me most. You vowed to me to ever be honest. And you have broken that vow, broken it in so many ways. You vowed to me when you loved another, a man! A man whom you desired to have children with! Do you still desire that?! You lied to me, led me to believe it was me you wanted!”

"I tried to tell you..."

"You took comfort in my misunderstanding. Should you have told me the truth..."

He left her alone then in his fit of terrifyingly cold rage, and she wept as she never had before, not knowing if he would ever come back to her, as forgiveness did not run deep within the veins of Thranduil Oropherion.

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Second Age 3434, Plains of Dagorlad, near Mordor

“He is dead. You are now Queen. You have all the power you desired now.”

Gwíneth looked up at Thranduil from where she tended to the wounded. Tears filled her eyes; she had never wanted any such thing, yet a century and a half had passed with spoken denials to no avail. She could no longer find the words. Not now, not here. Not when he was more cold than ever before.

She was so very relieved to see him, although she did not go to him as she so dearly wanted to, to hold him, to console him; he would simply push her away. As he had done so many times before. And he would not want the other elves to see direct evidence of his true lack of regard for her, she knew all too well that he would not be able to contain himself further here, what with all that had been lost, their King, their kindred, their elves. Since the events of a century and a half ago, they did what they could to minimize awareness of their extreme emotional distance, and had generally succeeded thus far, all elves attributing the complete absence of affectionate displays to the demands of the growing darkness and, perhaps, to the understandable stress of their conception failures, unaware that they no longer shared the same room within their chambers, and certainly never shared
a bed.

So she did as he desired now and as ever, and stayed where she was, ever-apart from her beloved.

She knew she would have died on the spot if he had been killed.

And perhaps that would have been a good thing, so that they could spend time in Mandos, begin anew. But would he heed that call, even reject it solely out of his disregard for her?

She did not know if she could go on any longer. Her dear sister had died in childbirth a mere two years ago, finally binding to one whom she cared enough to truly consider wedding, and after her scant years of happiness death had been her reward?

And now this. All of these elves, her friends, her kindred, her people. Dead. Due to Oropher’s distrust of the Noldor. Hatred of Gil-Galad.

Distrust that she had supported over these long years.

Combat tactics about which she had been mute when Oropher had asked for her opinion.

Tactics with which Thranduil had clearly disagreed. She had, in her befuddled state of mind, not clearly supported her hervenn, her dear meleth.

What in Eru’s name had she been thinking?

Why did she make the wrong choices?

Her sister would have said yet again it was because she grieved the loss of Thranduil’s love, that she remained heartbroken, and who in a state of heartbreak thought clearly?

But her sister was not alive, due to an ill-fated childbirth borne of a match that Gwíneth had herself brokered. Perhaps it was Gwíneth’s fault that her sister was dead.

Perhaps it was due to her ill judgment that two-thirds of Eryn Galen’s army was decimated.

Perhaps it was entirely true, as Thranduil had said those years ago, that she was nothing but a misguided, deceitful whore who cared only for herself.

That must be the reason why she had not been able to provide him with an heir.

Perhaps it was completely the case that everything was her fault. That she was failure personified, and it seeped into anything she touched.

She could not strike the images of the battle or its bloodied aftermath out of her mind. Nor the images of Thranduil’s pain, images that constantly besieged her.

She felt she was truly going mad. Her sister had entertained the idea so long ago, when she had first met Garrick, her mannish love, but that was not madness.

This might be madness.

Yet she was now the Elvenqueen. Duty presented itself before her in an ever-unfolding, endless tapestry that was more desolate than the plain in which she now stood.

She did as Oropher would have ordered and desired, and pushed the pieces of her shattered heart to the edge of her hröa, descending into a cold tether of duty that anchored her to Arda, pulling the
mantle of unwanted rule around her.

She would serve her people, as she had failed to do thus far. This she could do.

It was the only penance that she could provide.

Chapter End Notes

fēar = plural of fēa = soul/spirit
hrōa = body
hervenn = husband
meleth = love
elleth = female elf
ellith = female elves
ellon = male elf
ellyn = male elves

Notes on Eryn Galen... Oropher initially settled his elves in the south of his forest (Greenwood), centering his realm at Amon Lanc (technically a tree-less hill, but I can't see wood-elves not trying to grow trees there, so I have a few growing in his Halls). He then moved the realm to the northwest i.e., the high hills/mountains of Emyn Duir; Oropher settled on the western edge of these “Mountains of Mirkwood.” Around TA 1100, when the shadow fell over the forest, Thranduil had his caverns built and settled his people in the northeast of the forest. (Oropher may have moved the elves additional times before what I've described).

Notes on Gwíneth's bindings in this story... I'm basing her “second binding” to Thranduil loosely on Finwē’s; when his first wife (Míriel) chose not to leave Mandos after she passed away following the birth of Fēanor, he was permitted by Manwē to remarry. Manwē decided that Eru's elvish "one spouse for all eternity" rule didn't consider death—if the deceased spouse did not want to be reimbodied the marriage was void after ten years (giving the Mandos-held spouse time to reconsider his/her decision to stay there for eternity).........in a nutshell I'm assuming permission to remarry might inherently exist for Gwíneth as her first spouse was human and could not return to Arda after death, giving Gwíneth a choice to maintain her original vows or "break" them and of her own free will vow to another. (And in vowing to Thranduil I'm assuming it prevents her dying in grief from the loss of her first spouse).

Other Random Notes
Given the sanctity with which Tolkien's elves viewed marriage and sexual matters, and the seriousness of the process (including betrothal), I'm assuming Thranduil and most other elves would have felt betrayed by Gwíneth's actions as she should have revoked the betrothal before taking such significant action towards another suitor. (although Thranduil is much more unforgiving than most elves).

Imladris was founded approx. S.A. 1697, so in this story Glorfindel would have first met Elrond in Gil-Galad’s realm. The One Ring was crafted approx S.A. 1600.

There will be a second “prelude” Thranduil/Elvenqueen chapter later on, detailing key events in their relationship during the third age....but next I’ll go back to Gimli and
Legolas...
Chapter Summary

Back in Erebor, the afternoon of the same day Legolas and the Elvenqueen left for Eryn Lasgalen after receiving word about Thranduil’s awakening…..

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Following the awakening of Thranduil and the subsequently summoned departure of the newly-betrothed Prince of Eryn Lasgalen and the Elvenqueen from Erebor, Gimli turned his attention to planning, reviewing his potential projects with Aragorn, including rebuilding the Gates of Minas Tirith. The pair sat at a long table in one of the large empty feast halls Under the Mountain, Elessar enjoying his relative anonymity in Thorin III Stonehelm’s kingdom, Gimli enjoying the sudden absence of dwarrowdam attention following his well-publicized betrothal to his One.

“And what was this that Arwen mentioned, that the Elvenqueen desires you to build your abode in Aglarond? I would like that, for that was our original plan, and it was a welcome one.” Aragorn sat back, raking his hands through his hair, relaxed for the moment, as tomorrow he, Arwen, and their guards would begin the return journey to Minas Tirith, where the endless task of rebuilding the White City and his Kingdom would unfold.

“Aye, as would I.” Gimli lit his pipe, inhaling slowly, savoring the leaf that the hobbits had brought with them to Erebor. “But Legolas is concerned about leaving his mother to rule alone, so our plans may be delayed."

“Yet she wants you to build this abode regardless?”

“Aye, it was a stipulation in the betrothal contract. But the contract says nothing of it being lived-in, only speaking to its construction. I already have my home here in the Mountain, and so that would be a fine substitute.”

Aragorn sat back further, putting his feet on the long table in a most-unkingly manner. “Substitute for what?”

“Living quarters. I must have them built before we marry, a place of our own to live in. It is written into every betrothal contract and for good reason. But I already have my own, so I simply need to modify them to meet his needs. It would be an endless source of gossip if I did not; it just is not done.”

Aragorn laughed. “And marrying an elf is not an endless source of talk, even here?” For all that Erebor’s inhabitants had been grudgingly polite in public, Aragorn knew that the arrangement was not an easily-accepted one. But what existed was enough, Aragorn knew, based on his conversations with Thorin III Stonehelm.

“Hmph, you have me there.” And yet Gimli smiled, for he simply could not wait to marry his elf, and he had never been one to care for the murmurs of gossip, so that mattered little. It was not as if Erebor was the Shire, in his mind, filled with grapevines that grew idle chatter.
The dwarf and former ranger each wished they would not have to part again, for the bonds crafted
during their harrowing journeys were strong and without compare, and being apart from the
fellowship felt almost worse than being sundered from family.

“You could live there part-time, you know, and then travel back to Eryn Lasgalen for the remainder
of the year.” Aragorn broke the silence, and then drew on his pipe.

“Hmph, I am glad you appreciate our company so much. In fact, if I did not know any better, I
would say you sound as though you are on the edge of wistful. Jealousy, however, remains the elf’s
domain.” Gimli studied his friend further out of the corner of his eye. And when his friend did not
deny it, he knew. The Three Hunters had grown as close as Sam and Frodo, and while Aragorn had
his Evenstar exceeding every romantic expectation, his fellow hunters were marrying one another;
perhaps, in the back of his mind, he feared he would not see his now-dearest friends as often as they
had planned after all.

“Well, no matter, I will make sure the elf and I visit you, I should not want you to miss out on our
company. And beside that, there are projects to be completed. No dwarf commits to a task and then
abandons those plans.”

“Plans? What plans, Gimli?” Pippin sat down beside the ginger-haired dwarf, an enormous plate of
food in his hands.

“How did you get that?” came the almost-immediate response from Merry, who was approaching
the table from the other direction with Bofur and Dwalin.

“Fwom cwook” Pippin mumbled, his mouth full of assorted dwarvish baked treats that were so
delicious that in his hunger he utterly forgot about his table manners.

Merry scowled at the lack of sharing, and Bofur happily assisted his new friend. “The cooks, Merry,
in the feast hall kitchens; they must still have leftovers from the betrothal celebration. I can go grab
you a plate, if you like. Seems your friend here has made acquaintance with them.” Merry
brightened, for he was indeed starving, having his last meal over three hours ago, and he gladly
followed Bofur on a hobbit-sized snack-finding expedition.

“S’wha plans, Gim?” Pippin chomped away at his decided favorite on the heaped plate, a hardy
dwarvish bread made with mushrooms and a soft cheese.

“Hmph, Pippin, you eat more than a warg rationing for winter!” Gimli shook his head in amazement.
“Surely this little hobbit consumes more within a dwarven stronghold than an entire party of dwarves
would eat in a hobbit hole!”

Aragorn raised an eyebrow; the warg reference was a new one. And Dwalin sat smirking, not
entirely certain that he agreed with the latter comment; at least he knew Bilbo Baggins would
disagree, based on the Company’s clearing of his Bag End cupboards.

Pippin swallowed his food and took a long draught of ale. It was strong and tasted of the earth, and
he dearly enjoyed the new flavors. “I was trying to say, what plans are you making, Gimli?”

“Hmph, plans to travel to Minas Tirith, to work on the Gates, potentially Aglarond…”

“Well, what of your wedding plans, Gimli? That’s far more important.” The hobbit turned to
Aragorn, most serious in demeanor. “Arwen and I met this morning, I think you know, and we made
a list of all the things we need to do.”

The King of Gondor had no such idea, but he did know his wife was most excited to assist Legolas
with his wedding planning. “I was meeting with King Thorin this morning; I actually have not had the pleasure of Arwen’s company since you saw her. I am glad that both of you are so focused on seeing this task through.” He shifted in his chair, studying Pippin intently. “I am almost envious that you did not devote yourself to planning mine, but certainly the Council of the White City had many of their own plans. I would have preferred you steering the helm, I think.

Before Pippin could respond, Dwalin spoke, somewhat concerned that the event could get out of hand, not knowing enough about this hobbit to realize that was an unwarranted assessment. “Hmph. Just make sure there is not too much of a ruckus.” And he wished the talk would turn to something else; he was not so enthralled with this talk of weddings. His steadfast warrior spirit simply was not interested.

Bofur, however, would disagree. “Nay, a ruckus, perhaps not, but Dwalin, surely you realize that a dwarven wedding outdoes any other. I have heard many a tale of your attendance at weddings, nay, I have seen it, seven days and nights of merriment with serenades for the couple unmatched on your viol!”

Dwalin grumbled but said nothing, for it was true; he may be gruff, yet he was also deep-feeling, and certainly had his own times of merriment, particularly when he viewed One’s love for another.

“We’ll show the elf, I am certain of that.” Gimli stroked his braids, excited to think of yet another way he could compete with his elf.

“We’ll show the elf what?” The words came from the Balrog-Slayer, newly in the room, his light elvish steps leading him to almost appear out of nowhere. He stood near enough to hear Gimli speak, a smile forming across his flawless, timeless face.

“Hmph, not you, Master of Balrogs, the elf,” as though such a mistake in understanding was nonsensical.

Glorfindel laughed, a melodious tinkling of sound echoing through the large hall. “Yes, the elf, the One who is most important to the Hero of Erebor, at least.”

“And you, Master Elf? Who holds the heart of the Balrog-Slayer?” Gimli turned at Dwalin’s question, most amused. To the casual observer, such blatant interest might seem unusual for the renowned, gruff warrior, but Gimli knew he cared more for matters of the heart that his brusque manner might suggest. Dwalin’s questioning of Glorfindel was one such example, as he was obviously puzzled about the unmarried status of this elf of legend, and curious to know which elf, if any, the Balrog-Slayer cared for. Unmarried dwarves of renown made sense to Dwalin, but not elves, although he wasn’t certain he could articulate his reasoning just yet.

Dwalin felt Gimli’s merry gaze upon him, and turned his head slightly, shrugging “What?! Why stare at me like that?”

“Hmph! It is as Bofur says, you are more interested in weddings that you lead on to be.”

“Aye, and you know not of such things, of interest in weddings? You who pine for your elf even though he has just departed this morning?” Dwalin’s comment led Gimli to a state of bemused silence, and the question posed before Glorfindel seemed to be forgotten.

“Bofur, what did you mean about seven days? Are dwarven weddings seven days long?” Pippin was curious, briefly overwhelmed at how expansive the task would become; he and Arwen had only been planning for a celebration lasting part of a day, after all.
“Aye, the celebration afterwards lasts that long, of course. Marriage is a most wondrous gift amongst us; there is no greater cause for celebration than finding One, perhaps only exceeded by the birth of a dwarrowing.” The latter, in fact, was the very reason Bofur had dedicated his life’s craft to the carving of toys for young ones, for there was no greater gift in his eyes. “Why should marriage not be celebrated for seven days and nights? It is only by Mahal’s grace that love is found, and it should be recognized by all.”

The hobbit was entranced for a moment after Bofur finished speaking, appreciating the romantic ideals, then thought for a moment about the planning implications of a celebration extended by six days beyond that which he and Arwen had begun to design, finally simply shrugging his shoulders. “I’m certain Bombur will help us plan out the menus for that many days of feasting. Think of it Gimli, this entire wedding will be so grand, grander than your caves, better than my dwarven spirits-dorwinian wine mixture. We’ll put in the best ingredients from your traditions, and I shall make certain it’s delightful; your betrothal ceremony was mostly stuffy.”

“Hmph! Stuffy! I think not.” It certainly had not been stuffy in his point of view; no, he remembered the ceremonial sealing of their betrothal following the dwarven contractual signatures and elven ring exchange being most enjoyable.

“So Gimli, what will you do for your wedding speech?” Merry was curious; this was one of the things Pippin could not stop talking about, and he’d hoped an answer might quell his cousin’s thoughts. And he was intrigued, for Gimli’s words were completely enthralling at times.

The ginger-haired dwarf looked at the hobbit, uncertain what he meant. “Master Hobbit, what speech?”

Pippin answered. “Why, the groom’s speech, of course. Everyone in the Shire does one, surely you do them here, a wedding cannot be properly done without one. Although both you and Legolas will need to do one, I suppose. And you should start on it now; it will be even more poetic you than your beautiful words about the Glittering Caves. But that should be easy enough. And what about music? Bilbo told me that dwarves play wonderfully, and I’ve seen that it’s true; I think you should write a song. And the floral gifts for Legolas’ attendants? And who else shall you give floral gifts to? What types of flowers do you grow down here?”

Bofur spit out his ale, laughing. “There are no flowers Under the Mountain!”

Dwalin leaned, back, pensive. “Aye, the beauty here is in our craft, the timelessness of rock and stone; flowers cannot match that beauty whatsoever, and they simply wither and die, what sort of gift would that be?”

Pippin was most offended, whether more due to his hobbitish love of nature or on behalf Legolas, he could not say.

Gimli realized this, and he did not want to malign his to-be-mate or the hobbit in any way. “Master Hobbit, is this an elvish tradition of which you speak? Do elves present floral gifts to one another at their vowing ceremonies? And what of these attendants?”

Pippin’s indignation died down quickly upon Gimli’s words. “Elvish? No, well, at least I don’t know.” He looked to Glorfindel, who shook his head; so it was indeed a hobbit custom. “It’s just a good tradition, passed down from generation to generation, and I want this wedding to be well done. The flowers are given from you to your family and other important guests, they are the most critical
gifts of the wedding! And the attendants, surely you have people who stand by your side when you make your vows.” At Gimli’s blank gaze, Pippin muttered in an almost-Bilbo fashion. “Well, that won’t do. It’s lucky you have me here, Gimli, and Arwen too, otherwise this should have been a mess.”

Bofur shared a playful glance with Dwalin, glad neither of them was betrothed to an elf with the Queen of Gondor and a hobbit of renown planning an elaborate wedding that appeared to be well on course to mixing customs of various races, including customs not belonging to those being wed. But Gimli felt differently, partially because it reduced his own need to plan this celebration, as he was not fond of such details, and partially because he did feel fondly towards this young, exuberant Took, and was curious what the result would be. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, Master Hobbit.”

Pippin went on and on, some elements of his plans Hobbitish, some dwarvish, some elvish, some entirely of his own design. Some items he saved for Legolas to weigh in on, although Glorfindel answered questions and provided suggestions. Dwalin grew weary, for this was the sort of detailed talk he cared not for, while Aragorn almost snickered at his ginger-haired friend, most grateful that his wedding had been simple beside that which Pippin and Arwen seemed to be planning, though he wondered if the complexity had more to do with Pippin than anything else. Yet, perhaps not.

The extraverted hobbit grew even more excited when Faramir and Éowyn appeared, Arwen accompanying them.

“Arwen, I have accomplished a lot today!” She sat beside him, as he reviewed the details of his potential additions with her.

“Ah, my dear, that sounds lovely.” She then turned to kiss her spouse on the cheek, and he drew his arm around her.

“And what of you, young couple? When shall you wed?” Dwalin’s firm countenance gazed warmly upon Faramir and Éowyn, for he liked this young female warrior, the slayer-of-Angmar as assisted by the non-wedding planning hobbit.

Faramir’s kind face was keen. “When all of the conditions in my contract have been met.”

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. “Contract? Do men have such things?”

“No, not to this extent, and certainly there is not a written contract as such in Rohan. No, this came courtesy of dear Gimli here.” Faramir glanced fondly at the ginger-haired dwarf, still amused, and perhaps amazed, at the manner in which a dwarven contract could be as intricately crafted as the stone that they carved.

Dwalin’s bittersweet emotions were apparent in his words. “Ah, Balin would be proud.”

There was a moment of subdued silence, and then Gimli broke it. “Aye, he would indeed. He could write a contract like no other.”

Éowyn answered in turn, gazing lovingly at her to-be spouse. “Well, Gimli followed his example well, then, and Faramir is certainly bound to many things within the contract Gimli crafted, including the quest my brother sends him on from here.”

“Oh?” Gimli sat back, stroking his betrothal braid absentmindedly. “The specifics were decided?”

“Yes, I thought you knew. He is to search the area of Framsburg for something of an ingredient, be it the starter, the honey, or other. For the Rohorric mead that will grace our shared cup at our wedding. I hope it will not be too cold or snowy there, but Éomer wants a product regardless.”
Dwarven eyes widened at the mention; not solely due to possible danger, as the ruins of Framsburg had been home to unknown dangers in years past, but also due to the import regarding historic relations. Framsburg had been the seat of the Êothéod, home to those who would become the Rohirrim. When Fram killed the dragon Scatha and claimed his hoard a millennia ago, the dwarves of the region were infuriated when he sent them Scatha’s teeth on a necklace, denying them any claim to the treasure; they killed Fram in retaliation, and thus began strained relations between the Rohirrim and dwarves.

Éowyn knew immediately of the source of their reaction, and sought to quell it. “Fear not, dear dwarves; you did not participate, and we cannot hold the ills of ancestors against one another now, on either side.”

Dwalin and the rest were appeased, and decided it best to leave bygones be bygones, so to speak. This wedding between elf and dwarf would serve to cement relations between more than just those two races, he realized. “Spoken well, Witchking-Slayer. So you travel to find ingredients for mead?”

“Yes, as I said, we shall share it at our wedding ceremony, drinking from the same cup, the ingredients being gathered by the father of the bride and the groom himself. We cannot wed until the mead is brewed, and should it be foul the engagement would be nullified. Typically we do not travel so far for ingredients, and at times in our history it has been more a matter of ceremony than anything else, but my brother thought it would be fitting, as we were near to a seat of our ancestors.”

“Fitting indeed, he looks after his sister just as well as I do.” Gimli was most pleased at the resolution Eomer had deemed fitting to this quest, for he knew of the generalities when drafting the contract, but was most pleased to see the specifics had been decided in such a decisive and grand manner.

“I’m in.” Bofur blurted.

“Aye, me as well. The ruins remain, I have been there once and may be able to guide you somewhat, as has Gimli, I think. Although there are others who have been there more often. And Balrog-Slayer, you shall come also, protect this old dwarf from trouble.” Dwalin thought an adventure sounded like a nice change of pace, a way he could participate in these weddings in a manner he was interested in, and while he jested about his own haleness, he did think having the Balrog-Slayer along was a most good idea. Though the War of the Ring had just ended, relatively speaking, he was certainly not interested in twiddling his braids Under the Mountain, being a chief of its forces in a ceremonial manner.

Faramir was concerned, for he certainly did not want to breech his contract. “I am not sure that would be permitted, I would think Éomer would want me to complete this task on my own.”

Éowyn shook her head. “No, it is fine to have an escort. Why not have friends guide your way?”

“Well if you’re going, so am I.” Merry would not be excluded, not if it involved an adventure or Rohan.

“Well, as Dwalin said, you might benefit from having me as an additional guide.” Gimli folded his arms across his chest. He frowned slightly in a thoughtful manner. “And we should also take Adlia, my childhood friend; she is one of those who has been to those ruins more than I. And her skill with an axe, I should add, almost exceeds mine.”

Dwalin’s eyes narrowed and smiled. “At least when you were dwarrowslings, she bested you in combat more times than I could count.”

“Oh, I want to go also, but I need to plan this wedding.” Pippin was a bit downcast.
Arwen met his eye. “If you would like to go, feel free to do so. Wedding planning can wait, there is more than enough time.”

He shook his head. “No Arwen, I’ll have to return to the Shire sometime soon, and I need to get a lot of things done, especially since you have to return to Gondor. Besides, I’d rather plan the wedding and the party anyway. Soon enough they would need to return to the Shire and assist in the rebuilding of it, but their taste of life beyond its borders had been powerful, and they also knew that their life’s path could no longer be found solely within its rolling green hills.

Merry frowned at his decision. “Are you sure, Pip? Miss out on an adventure?”

“Yes, normally I would, but I am really quite busy, and we can’t stay here forever. We have to assist in the Shire, and there’s Sam’s wedding to come in the late Spring as well.”

And so it was decided. The next day, Aragorn and Arwen departed the Kingdom Under the Mountain with their retinue of guards, traveling to Minas Tirith with her twin brothers. Éowyn would accompany the Gondorian party with her own guard most of the way on the journey homeward, as a bride of Rohan assisting with the groom’s task would be viewed as ill portent. Faramir, Gimli, Merry, Bofur, Dwalin and Glorfindel planned their short trip to the ruins of Framsburg with Gimli’s childhood friend Adlia readily agreeing to be their chief guide, the group departing the day after King Elessar left. Pippin stayed Under the Mountain, the hobbit being absorbed in his planning tasks.

And over those brief days of consultation with Pippin, Glóin and Nuris, Gimli’s Amad, developed a sense of amazement at the sheer level of detail with which this hobbit was capable, captured by how he could craft an event with the intricacy with which they carved stone. He was similar yet different from Bilbo, Glóin realized. Gimli’s Adad imagined that had the Company shown up on the like of Peregrin Took’s doorstep in search of a burglar, they would be immediately well-welcomed and embraced, and thrown an elaborate party the likes of which they might never have seen before or since.

This, Glóin realized, was the impulsive and adventurous Tookishness of which Bilbo occasionally spoke, tempered by an intelligent mind and most caring heart.

“My Queen, a small party from Erebor has arrived.” Galion stood near the finely crafted open door of the Elvenqueen’s sparsely furnished private study, respectfully keeping his distance as was her preference. He had long ago grown used to her coldness, and it no longer was a source of worry for him as it had been three millennia ago, when she retreated to a state of dispassionate logic and rarely traveled out of it.

Her lack of apparent warmth far exceeded Thranduil’s, and all in the wooded kingdom had grown used to the impenetrable wall surrounding the royal couple, attributing it in no small part to the demands of unexpected rule and their respect for Oropher, who would have wanted rulers in his stead who were guided by reason, even if said reason might prove their undoing, for little good came out of love and matters of the heart were always the more risky prospect.

The Elvenqueen looked up from her work at Galion’s words, not ceasing her sorting of the well-organized piles of parchment reflecting the mundane tasks that comprised far too much of the rule of Eryn Lasgalen. “I have been expecting them,” was uttered in her clear and commanding voice. For
indeed she was, the delegation that would symbolically receive this first bequeathing of the betrothal requirement, food stores to cover Erebor’s winter needs.

Galion was startled, not expecting that she would have anticipated this particular group. “I had not realized, my Elven-Lady. I shall bring them to you at once.” She met his gaze and nodded slightly, dismissing him, and wordlessly turned her full attention back to her work, sorting through her neatly organized piles in search of her food provisioning requisitions, a dwarven organizational system she had adapted from Thorin III Stonehelm.

The butler returned some minutes later; she looked up at the trio of visitors for but a second, and then returned to her work. “I have been planning for your needs, and Thorin has approved this first quantity of transport to Erebor, deeming it sufficient for the winter. Of course if more is needed it can be arranged. Just let me calculate…”

And then her flow of words stopped as realization sunk in, and she looked up again, hardly believing her eyes. She recognized one of the dwarves, the head of the delegation, but could not immediately remember his name, Flori? Mori? Wori? No matter, it would come to her shortly, and he was not the reason she was uncommonly struck in this moment.

She had no difficulty recalling the names of the one who stood beside him, for he was most memorable indeed.

Peregrin Took, the hobbit.

In that moment she resembled Thranduil, her head tilting to the side, eyes studying the scene before her impassively. Yet her crown was made of simple woven floral stems, unlike the impressive and elaborate branches-and-leaves creation that the woodland King favored.

Surely Thorin III Stonehelm had not appointed him to be an emissary? She knew he seemed enamored of both hobbits at the end of the betrothal ceremony, for their intervention had impeded Gimli’s attempt to be foolish and sunder the contract before it had been signed, citing the fading consequences of the death of an elven spouse.

Misguided ginger-haired dwarf indeed; no mortal could truly bind to an elf. For all of the talk of One, they certainly had little true understanding of the true workings of life and love.

Workings of which she had convinced herself long ago, her conviction stronger than any metal object forged by any dwarf on Arda.

Dori immediately recognized her hesitation, and his deep voice carried across her chamber. “I bear greetings and well-wishes from King Thorin, my Lady, and lead the group that will transport the stores, for which our kingdom provides thanks. The hobbits have traveled with me for separate reasons, which they shall explain.”

The Elvenqueen liked this dwarf, as much as one could like a dwarf. He was direct and to the point, had no tolerance for silliness, and she knew he was brutally talented on the battlefield. As for the hobbit? That was left to be determined, although she had heard of their exploits as well, and as such would be most polite, for any who assisted in the downfall of the Dark Lord required a show of respect. “Well met, Master Dwarf. And you, Master Hobbit? How might our kingdom assist you? Do you require an elven escort to take you back over the mountains to your home?” The mountain road might be covered in some amount of snow by this time of year, although it had not been when they traveled to Eryn Lasgalen, yet none of that was relevant to the elves, as they could most easily carry this hobbit and his cousin across any snowy pass.
Pippin grinned. “Oh, I don’t need assistance, but thank you.” He was unsure what to say next, wondering how this ever-proper Queen might receive him. Would she be firm and intolerant, similar to Gandalf’s manner when his fireworks were borrowed during parties at the Shire? Would she retain the distance and coldness she had expertly displayed in Erebor, on those rare occasions that she was seen outside of her guest rooms? Perhaps she simply took herself too seriously and needed to ease her mind. Nothing a drink or a few and a pipe couldn’t solve while telling her some proper stories, he hoped.

The hobbit then tangentially wondered if Queens ever partook of a good pipe; he had not seen Arwen do so as of yet, and she had not wanted to when Merry had nicely offered. But he had seen dwarrowdams in Erebor enjoy a good smoke; and if there was a dwarven Queen, he would bet she would enjoy a wedding gift of assorted pipeweeds from Longbottom. Come to think of it, Legolas and the elves of Imladris did not partake either, so perhaps it was a pleasure forbidden to elves in general, much like sexual relations were, unless they were married, of course. Pippin sighed, feeling sorry for these poor creatures and the pleasures they were missing.

No wonder so many of them seemed to have trouble relaxing and acted so prim and proper.

The Elvenqueen raised an eyebrow, waiting for what might come next from his mouth, slightly concerned in guarded anticipation of a repeat of the exuberant display she had witnessed Under the Mountain.

At her unspoken signal for further words, Pippin answered, his head nodding excitedly. “Yes, I don’t need assistance, I’m here to assist. I’m here to help plan Legolas’ wedding. Where is he, by the way, as I would like to see him?”

She waved the question off. “He departed with Mithrandir, and this is somewhat fortuitous, as his message to Gimli can be taken to Erebor when Master Dori returns.”

“Oh? Where did they go?”

“To Orthanc, on some mission that Mithrandir was determined to complete.” Legolas had not wanted to tell her anything else, aside that they planned searching for records that Curunír may have held in his former stronghold. She assumed it was for Mithrandir’s own benefit, or possibly something that might aid Thranduil, and she had decided it was not important to press further. Perhaps Legolas had finally come to his senses and he would also scout Ithilien with the Wizard while he was in the south, even beginning work on his abode there.

She did not know, of course, of the existence of Thranduil's journal, and certainly was not aware that Legolas had taken it to Mithrandir immediately upon reading its key passages. The wizard quickly surmised that the spell Thranduil referenced was not likely to be a farce. However, he was most uncertain about any causal effect it may have had on the love Gimli and Legolas shared, and he was also unsure about any possible consequences of their binding. Legolas was initially devastated, hoping beyond reason to have heard that the entries could be disregarded, yet Mithrandir helped him to see that the situation was far from futile, rather it was merely not understood. Mithrandir hoped that a search of Saruman's previously-held fortress might produce records of import to the potential enchantment, given Saruman's extensive travels with the Blue Wizards and his penchant for fastidious record-keeping. As long as the records had not been destroyed by the Wizard of Many Colors, there would be something of interest to find.

But no one aside from the wizard and Prince of Eryn Lasgalen knew of that true mission, and the hobbit brushed off the absence of both, knowing Gandalf to be one to travel often and unexpectedly, not questioning Legolas’ accompaniment. “Oh well, you’re still here, so I am at your service.” He bowed in the dwarvish way, and she frowned at the gesture. “I thought you would need the help, as
being Queen must keep you very busy.”

She must have looked slightly at a loss for words for a moment, as the hobbit immediately explained himself further. ‘Party-planning is a specialty of hobbits. Don’t worry; I’ll help you plan the best party this forest has ever seen! It’s very important that it is spectacular and smooth, to help all of your people accept this union. Surely you know that.”

She came as close to groaning as she had in three millennia.

The hobbit, she soon learned, would not take no for an answer. He was completely and utterly dedicated to his task of assisting with the planning of Legolas’ wedding.

She soon decided it was not worth sending him away, as she had done with Gimli when he had first arrived in the wooded realm. When she said she did not need help, the hobbit had looked so despondent and deflated that Galion’s skillfully restrained urging to let him proceed was grudgingly accepted, in no small part out of her respect for the hobbit’s significant role in the War of the Ring. If planning a wedding was his strong desire, well, she could consider him justly rewarded in allowing him to do so, for anything that was not to her or Thorin’s liking could easily be modified.

And she had no preconceptions about hobbits, having relatively little contact with them before now. Where she felt an air of superiority over dwarves and humans, and distrusted, even hated, many Noldor, the hobbits were more of a mystery to her, and she had not quite formed an opinion yet.

Especially since the antics of the two in Erebor contrasted with the casting of the Ring into Mount Doom by another two, and that was a feat like no other.

Dori and his escort departed the day after their arrival, for the need for food in Erebor was growing, yet the hobbit yet again had no desire to return to the Kingdom Under the Mountain. No, Pippin was determined to stay in the wood for a time and plan the wedding.

He sat near the Queen’s desk, sorting through the outlines Arwen had made before she left Erebor. “Now this is the schedule I came up with for eating. I know you like feasts in the forest, at least that’s what Bilbo’s stories always told of. And we have to plan for seven days of feasts, given the dwarvish custom.” She raised a fine silver-gold eyebrow at that, and Pippin was happy to believe that he had impressed her. “So on the first day I thought we would serve an elvish breakfast and then a dwarvish second breakfast, with some music in between, Glorfindel said Lindir would come, he’s a fantastic singer, although I’m sure you have some here you also want to include, Bilbo said singing and dancing are important parts of your celebrations… and then for elevenses we could have some hobbit food, you’ll like Bilbo’s pot pie recipe, and maybe we can serve my dwarven spirit mixture then, you know I mix it with Dorwinian wine and it’s quite tasty, and then…”

She raised a graceful hand to interrupt him, for she could not follow his fast speech, perhaps because some of the terminology. Second breakfast? Elevenses? Who ate two breakfasts? Might hobbits eat six or seven meals per day? She knew the hobbits had large appetites, she had seen evidence in Erebor and even here, following his arrival yesterday.

“Perhaps, Master Pippin, we should consider your reviewing your plans with Galion. He would be happy to do so, as he manages our celebrations, and…”

“Oh no, that won’t do, in the Shire the parents are involved, you need to be as well, Queen…” He
stopped, realizing he did not know her name. And so he asked, “What is your name? I’d like to refer to you properly, Elvenqueen just seems so….formal and cold. Not that it shouldn’t be formal, of course, that’s why I’d call you Queen. Such as I would Queen Arwen. Or King Thorin. Did I tell you that King Thorin gave Merry and I several beautiful gems before we left? Would you like to see them? And we gave him some ale that we had made, as hosting gifts.”

He then looked somewhat forlorn. “I didn’t expect to travel here, so I didn’t bring you a gift from my home or make you anything.” And then he brightened somewhat. “I could make you something here, though. Yes, I shall.”

And then he moved to obtain her permission to leave, for which she was glad, as then she could return her attention to what she deemed were actually important matters.

Talking to him, well, **listening** to him, was exhausting; she had perhaps heard more words from his mouth in one day than she did from the elves in this kingdom combined over the span of many fortnights, sometimes years.

He turned back to her before he left the room, his voice gentle. “But what is your name? I should like to call you by it, it seems more proper, after all.”

Persistent, he was. “It matters not.” Her voice was slight, almost small, as though it pained her to think on this, and Pippin grew confused. But he respected her words, knowing he could push her too far, and left, off to find something to create for her as thank-you gift for hosting him.

That evening the Elvenqueen sat strictly upright in one of the smaller and less-utilized conservatories, the room filled with beautiful fragrance and a myriad of greenery designed to resemble a glade of flowers amidst a grove of trees, gaining what solace she could in her duty-filled being from the plants amidst her, some of which had once been her favorites, when she had had feelings about such things. Just as she was thinking of climbing into the room’s large birch tree for brief repose, she was interrupted by Galion.

“My Elvenqueen, the young hobbit seeks an audience.”

She beckoned the butler to bring him forth, and gracefully stood near a branched trellis overlaid with ivy and roses near the center of a softly flowing stream of water.

Pippin bowed to her, having learned quickly from Galion the differences between dwarvish and wood-elvish ways of greeting royalty, his eyes filling with amazement at the sight before him. Never before had he seen such a wondrous cavern, filled with flowers and plants and **trees**? Surely Bilbo would have loved such a sight as well, and he began to understand how different these wood-elves were from the elves of Rivendell. He made a mental note to ask if he could take some of these indoor varieties to the old hobbit, and then moved forward to her.

The pre-Quest Peregrin Took might have been intimidated by one such she, but the War of the Ring had changed all of them, and he knew in his heart that she was cold, but it wasn’t the coldness of evil possession or a maliced heart. Rather, he wondered if she was lonely, or needed some loosening up.

“This, Queen of the Forest, is my gift to you, for hosting me here.” He presented her with a small package, obviously having obtained woven fabric from Galion.

It was, to her eyes, a messily-woven strand of the few assorted flowers that grew from bulbs and
seeds in Eryn Lasgalen in the mild autumn and winter months, the greenery of their stems braided together. The workmanship was nothing like that of an elf’s, and it was doubtful it would hold for any significant length of time, certainly not as an elf’s floral stranding would.

Yet it ever-so-slightly pierced her frozen being, and tears came to her eyes as vague recollection surfaced of a task she used to enjoy in a time long ago, when her life was so different. Yet her momentary grief was not simply the result of that; this gift crafted by Peregrin Took could very well be the only symbol of care and kindness she had received in over three millennia.

In that way it was one of the finest and most precious things she had ever seen, something that her shattered fëa battled to denigrate versus treasure, though she knew not how to say anything at all, not words of thanks and certainly not being able to voice what was vaguely percolating in her being. And then icy tendrils in her hröa expanded within her, refusing to melt, consolidating and growing.

Pippin patted her on the hand, perhaps the first touch she had felt, or allowed, since…when, the elfling Tauriel?.....and then the young hobbit silently left the room.

And perhaps something cracked more significantly then. But it quickly melded together, her armor pulled round her once more.

Chapter End Notes

Curunír = Sindarin name for Saruman

Weddings: Of course there isn’t much canon information about dwarf, elf, and hobbit (or even mannish) wedding customs at the level of detail I would like for this story. Some of my references include Laws and Customs Among the Eldar (although a good portion is Noldor-specific); the dwarrow scholar’s webpage (which attempts to extrapolate from the Tolkien’s Jewish-basis of dwarves, although I am picking and choosing there) and Tolkien’s letter 214 (which reviews some hobbit marriage customs as well as gift-giving). Also drawing on research of British (for the hobbits) wedding tradition. And the Rohirric wedding cup/mead custom in this story is loosely based on drinking references (e.g., the stirrup cup; drinking from cups at Theoden's funeral feast in memory of deceased kings and then in recognition of Eomer as the newest King) with the gathering-ingredients-for-mead portion an add-on.

Dwarves in Faramir's Framsburg quest: An argument could be made, I suppose, that the dwarves of the Company might be "too old" to participate in this quest (or in the War of the Ring, defending Erebor, as I had at minimum Dwalin do in the backstory), but I see them as very hale and robust.....so it seems very possible to me.

Tauriel: Later in this story (in the second prequel) the Elvenqueen is one of the elves who finds elfling Tauriel after her parents are killed by orcs (her movie backstory is that she is around 600 years old, and there are hints that Thranduil may have raised her).
Orthanc

Chapter Summary

Gandalf and Legolas travel to Saruman's previous stronghold, searching for any information that might help unravel the potentially disastrous enchantment they learned about from Thranduil's journal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sunrise sent swaths of yellow-orange light across the valley, shards darting through the remaining canopy of trees set far back from the stone ring that was home to Saruman’s grave havoc and destruction during the War of the Ring. Legolas strode outside the impenetrable fortress, casting his keen eyes around for the wizard. He located his companion in the long shadow cast by Saruman’s prior stronghold, his wizened face seeming to gaze across the valley as Shadowfax and Arod grazed in the remote distance, barely perceptible to far-ranging elven eyesight. Their white bodies gleamed in the early morning light, distinguishable by Shadowfax’s larger frame and Arod’s gray mane.

The Ents had tended the Treetoparth of Orthanc well, and that which had been devastated near the end of Saruman’s tenure was gradually returning to a more balanced state of being, though time may not heal all wounds imparted on the earth by the forces of darkness.

The Prince of Eryn Lasgalen and Gandalf the White had spent a week here already, hoping to find answers to the questions posed by Thranduil’s journal within Saruman's records. Mithrandir certainly knew the previous Head of his Order had traveled with the Blue Wizards in the East for a time, though he knew not at all what transpired aside from rallying of anti-Sauron sentiment. He knew even less about the sorts of spells and enchantments that the East-dwelling Istari might wield, and as a result had negligible knowledge about how to break them. In a repeat of his conversation with Bilbo Baggins almost a century ago, he could not even remember the names the Blue Wizards had been given upon their arrival in Middle-Earth nearly an age before his own docking at the Grey Havens, but he had immediately known that the names in Thranduil’s journal, Morinehtar and Rómestámo, rang true.

The White Wizard had offered to conduct his research alone, well aware of Legolas’ keen need to be near the Elvenking due to his extensive injuries. Gandalf's reading of Thranduil’s journal resulted in his understanding more fully the complex situation Legolas shared with his Adar and the Elvenqueen. At the same time, Gandalf believed nothing untoward was likely to occur if Legolas left Eryn Lasgalen, as the Elvenqueen certainly did not seem to want Thranduil to pass from Arda, and both she and Galion vowed to send word if anything urgent arose.

Fully understanding the entries that Thranduil had scribed seemed far more important to Legolas than maintaining vigil over the Elvenking, and there was little Mithrandir could do without further research, Saruman’s previous stronghold being the most obvious place to begin.

Treebeard had hesitated to let Gandalf and Legolas enter the fortress, as none had done so since Saruman had left, and he had pledged to King Elessar to not let any enter without his leave. Yet the permission was clear when the White Wizard showed him the keys, obtained from Aragorn himself, who had returned to Minas Tirith a mere day before with Arwen and her brothers, Éowyn’s group
having parted from theirs a few days prior to make their return journey to Edoras.

Aragorn had not known the purpose of the elf and wizard's travel south, and the pair simply reiterated to the King what they had conveyed to Gimli via missive, that Orthanc might contain information that would assist Eryn Lasgalen. King Elessar knew there was more beneath the surface of those words, yet he also knew that they would not keep information from him unnecessarily, and thus he sought nothing more.

Elessar had delayed implementation of his plans to restore Saruman’s prior stronghold, given all of the distractions placed in his path by the Second Battle Under the Trees and his own tending to Thranduil. As such the wizard and elf proceeded cautiously out of need, the inner depths of Orthanc being untested and likely housing numerous physical and magical barriers to thwart any efforts of newcomers to delve into the Wizard of Many Color's collected knowledge and secrets. Gandalf knew that Saruman would not have left his stronghold's possessions in any sort of open invitation to the prodding of visitors, for it was not in a true spirit of goodwill that he gave the keys to the Ents, who in turn had passed them to Aragorn after the War of the Ring.

Legolas smiled as he approached the wizard, a distinctive smell wafting in the air. “Ah, Mithrandir, you are making good use of the Longbottom leaf stores that remain. I am surprised the hobbits did not use all of it when we were last here.”

Gandalf turned, mirth in his eyes. “Why yes, yes indeed. It should not be the hobbits who hoard it all to themselves, after all. Perhaps they show their dear manners in this gesture, leaving good pipeweed for us to enjoy. Pity it does not suit elven tastes.”

He turned back to his distant gazing, Legolas searching to see what he was watching. Yet he could see nothing of interest. Gandalf seemed to understand his puzzlement without words being spoken, and sought to assuage it in the same manner, his expression noting that he was simply lost in thought. The wizard wondered of his brethren, pondering what had come to pass for them that resulted in the limited entries in Thranduil’s journal.

Thus far their cautious search of Saruman’s stronghold had produced some items of remote interest to their Quest, as well as discovery of Rohirric artifacts that had likely been squirreled away by Grima Wormtongue. Yet nothing thus far could be considered central to the questions posed by Thranduil’s entries, and they each knew the search had the potential to continue significantly longer, given the size of the fortress and all of its potential hidden places.

Legolas was a patient ellon, generally speaking, but his patience was dissipating quickly when it came to this task. The elf had begun to fret in his own way, likely not noticeable to the average person but recognizable to his companion, who had grown to know him well and was quite perceptive regardless. Given the elf’s little need for sleep, he had spent the night combing through tomes they had found the previous day.

“Did you find anything of interest during the night?” Gandalf posed the question without looking at him, puffing slowly with his pipe.

Legolas shook his head. “No, nothing remotely related to anything of interest.” He waited for Gandalf’s instructions for the morning, as the wizard had a detailed search plan.

“I imagine that Saruman destroyed some of his journals, or perhaps he hid them quite well. Regardless of that, there are many places we have yet to look. In that, I take heart. He was too detailed to have not kept records of his travels East and his time spent with the Blue Wizards. There will be something of interest here, we just need to discover it.” His words buffered Legolas’ spirits and solidified his resolve to find answers to the difficult question before him.
For he dared not think of what might happen should a suitable answer—nay, solution—not be found. Be forced to stay apart from Gimli, their arrangement akin to what many citizens in both of their kingdoms whispered, not truly avowed, partners in name only?

Or perhaps his love for the dwarf was not true, was not real, was the product of an enchantment.

He could not bear that possibility. And he could not bear the idea of falsity, not to one who deserved more.

His insecurity began to seep back, and he wondered if the same could be true in reverse, that Gimli loved him not truly, but only as the result of some spell facilitated by the Elvenqueen before the dwarf was even born. Perhaps the Elvenqueen had a hand in ensuring that an ensorcelled marriage would come to pass, for whatever selfish purpose she strove towards, both parties in the binding not truly One to each other, but simply the last step in some complex plan that suited her goals.

And in the span of time the dwarf had left in his life, such a short time as compared to an elf, what if a resolution could not be found? The very idea sent tendrils of panic through his heart when he considered it, yet the back of his mind whispered that panic would not assist him in the least when determining answers.

His melancholy musing was cut short, however, when he heard the distinctive rumble of horses galloping in the distance. A quick glance with his keen elven sight indicated that a small party traveled towards Orthanc from the east. And when he recognized the lead rider, his mind traveled back to their first tense meeting when he traveled as one of the Three Hunters.

“Éomer! What brings a horselord and his men to the Treegarth of Orthanc?”

The King of the Riddermark snorted, dismounting easily as he removed his helm, his thick blond hair shining in the early morning light. “I should ask you the same, elf. But where is your dwarf? You have exchanged your most favored companion for a Wizard?”

They laughed at their mutual recollection of their first encounter, of Gimli’s boldness and Legolas’ defense of his friend, while Gandalf stood in an almost-bemused silence, too pensive to participate in word games, but certainly capable of enjoying them.

Éomer beckoned his entourage to dismount and water their horses while he continued his words of welcome. “I hear congratulations are in order. Apologies that I could not attend your betrothal, although some of us must actually work.” Gandalf smiled fully at his words then. “It made me realize that it is no wonder you defended the dwarf so readily upon our first encounter. I should have started a betting pool regarding your relationship amongst my riders at that time, for I think I might have won handily had I known then what I know now. You must outshine Galadriel herself in his eyes.”

Legolas blushed slightly, wondering what led the horselord to this conclusion, as the marriage had been billed of one of convenience, not love. The elf did not yet know that Éowyn had returned to the Riddermark and informed her brother of all that had occurred during the betrothal ceremony, including the confessions of love. And then the darker part of the elf’s mind had thoughts anew of Gimli’s closeness to the royals of Rohan. While his friendship with Éowyn was obviously just that, perhaps Éomer desired more. Or perhaps Gimli truly desired someone else, Éomer’s presence prompting Legolas’ remembrance of the conversation he overheard in Minas Tirith, the one in which Gimli spoke those elegant, seemingly-adoring words regarding the Lady of Lothlórien’s beauty.

But no, Gimli had declared him One, so there was no need for insecurity.

Unless sorcery had led the dwarf to believe Legolas was his One....when he wasn't.
Mithrandir looked at Legolas then, as though the wizard could read the content of the elf’s ping-pong musings and knew the effect Legolas’ knowledge of the spell was having on his confidence. Something in the White Wizard's gaze told him to stop his train of thought, and he did, suddenly recalling words of dwarven resistance to sorcery, evil, and other untoward things.

Éomer-King pulled out a flask from his saddlebag. “Have you some tankards? I would toast to your good fortune with the ale I carry, which is not our best, but it will do. I recall your penchant for drinking games, however, and do not wish to engage in one here!”

Gandalf was amused and Legolas laughed, his dim mood lifting. “I appreciate your words of welcome, but surely you did not travel simply for this. Though if you did, it is most flattering.”

“My sister would not be pleased if she knew I did not warmly welcome you to these parts, especially given your impending marriage to her dear dwarven friend. But no, I actually did not know of your southerly travel. We simply saw the Mearh and Arod and surmised you were in the vicinity. So what brings you here?”

“We are searching the records of Saruman for information that may aid Eryn Lasgalen.” Gandalf’s response was warm yet firm, and reminded Éomer that he had forgotten to offer condolences on the wounding of the Elvenking.

“Ah! I am sorry, Legolas, I was distressed to hear of the ill that befell your father, and I hope he recovers.” Éomer clasped the elf on the shoulder, both captured by the gravity of loss, both potential and real, of their fathers.

“I thank you.”

“And to answer your question, elven prince, I am on an errand. My sister is to wed Faramir, as you well know, and in the stead of our father and uncle, I travel to the Wold and Helm’s Deep to collect items for our wedding mead. A strong tradition in our realm, written into that contract your dwarf created for my sister, which you reviewed yourself, correct? And, as you may be aware, which your dwarf assists as we speak?”

The elf looked surprised, as he knew of the ingredient-collection quests but was unaware of Gimli’s accompaniment, of which Éomer learned of from his sister. So Éomer told him more of the Framsburg quest, and Legolas was almost envious that he wasn't able to go as well. But he unfortunately had an important quest of his own before him. Then he turned his attention to other matters. “Well, I should say this is fortuitous, Éomer-King, for we have come across treasures of your lands within this fortress.”

He was startled. “Of what do you speak?”

They took the Riddermark’s King into Orthanc and showed him the heirlooms that Saruman had sundered from Théoden-King with Grima’s assistance. Wormtongue compelled Théoden to hand over some of the items, others were simply taken. Éomer had not realized some of the items of the House of Eorl set before him were missing. Others he had assumed were destroyed by Wormtongue or somehow lost by Théoden in his fugue state.

As he sorted through the treasures, weapons, heirlooms, and more, he realized some did not come directly from the halls of Meduseld; some, he realized, may have come from the barrows holding the bodies of deceased Kings of the Mark.

“This by its insignia would be the bow used by Goldwine-King in that prosperous time in my realm's history. And this, the spear of Gram-King that saw glory in protracted war and too-frequent battle.”
Éomer’s anger came to the fore, wishing in that moment he could crush Grima with his bare hands, or smote Saruman in the manner of Helm Hammerhand. “These arms would have been buried with them, entombed! It is enough to ensorcell my Uncle and steal heirlooms of our kingdom from him; but to defile sacred places of burial?! How was this even possible? If Wormtongue had my Uncle enter those burial barrows…pity the hobbits killed him in the Scouring so recently, I should track him there myself and destroy him with my bare hands for all that he wrought! And Saruman, I should have cut his throat myself!”

His rage grew, his knuckles white around the spear he now held. “Gandalf, what evil purpose was this intended for? Surely it is not simply the coveting of treasures.”

“It could be, as I know not exactly, Éomer. But I fear, as I think you do as well, that Saruman may have had untoward plans for the use of these objects. Something drawn from the dark arts he dabbled in, designed to further his ends in obtaining the Ring and supplanting Sauron. A person could say it may have involved ensorcelling your people, or raising spectres, or something else, but that does not seem like Saruman. He was drawn to crafting, be it crafting a blizzard or the creation of Uruk-Hai. There are artifacts belonging to the horses of the Rohorrim as well. He had some purpose but his general design, I know not. Let us be gladdened that it was thwarted by his downfall.”

Éomer’s face paled as Gandalf spoke, and then he drew a deep breath. “Whatever his purpose may have been, I am now especially glad it did not come to pass.”

He stood, gazing at the artifacts once more. “You will be here when I return from my current task? For I must retrieve these with the reverence that they well deserve.”

“If not, Éomer, Aragorn will return to clear this tower soon, and, may I say, there may be more yet to be found.”

He nodded. “I will wait until then, I think, to return, such that I may assist him in thorough searching, for he may not always know what is of import, even if he did serve my House when he was younger. And even if so, at least my presence will accord these items the respect they are due.”

Gandalf nodded, as he agreed with that plan.

“I thank you then, for your stewardship of treasures of my realm. Once again you have proven yourself to be more than an ally of the Riddermark.” Éomer clasped Legolas on the shoulder, and bowed his head deferentially to Gandalf. “May Shadowfax live long and run faster than the wind itself, and may Arod follow close behind. And Legolas, may you prosper in your marriage with Gimli.”

Éomer moved to return the spear of Gram-King that he had been holding to a cleared table nearby, gently lowering it and speaking soft words of prayer, first looking downward with his eyes closed, and then upward to the tall ceiling, as though seeking Eru’s grace to shine through the slim windows carved high above, as far away as the height of three men and then three yet again thrice more. At that moment his gaze was caught by a strange glint, and he tilted his head, studying it.

“Gandalf, what is that?”

“Hmm?” The White Wizard looked up from when he had been arranging the Rohirric artifacts into tidy rows, walking beside Éomer to study what he saw. “Well, that is interesting indeed. Crafty, that one, how could I have missed that? Legolas, please target that spot with your bow.”

Gandalf lit his staff with a brief utterance of incantation, the glow multiplying quickly until it was blinding. Legolas hit his mark with ease, yet the arrow bounced off and clattered on the floor as it
landed. “Try again, Legolas.” And Legolas did, hitting the mark exactly, with the same result, Éomer inwardly marveling at his elven speed and accuracy even amidst the strong light blocking much of their vision.

This was but one method they used to test for traps, Gandalf setting a protective barrier around them while Legolas tested an area with his arrows, for he knew not what sorts of trickery Saruman might have laid and he wasn't always able to detect it within his mind. They had dispelled sixteen traps thus far with this method, and over thirty simply through Gandalf’s detection, and had not come to harm yet.

“Are there others?” Gandalf muttered, walking around the room looking for counterparts on other walls. He saw none. “Legolas, do you see others that correspond to that one, whatever is on the wall up there?”

Legolas saw nothing after he searched with his keen eyes.

Gandalf shrugged, muttering as he returned to his previous task, sorting the Rohirric artifacts into tidy rows, and then he would return to his study of the books they had found. Orthanc held many mysteries, and they simply did not have time to uncover each and every one.

Éomer had his errand to complete and thus sought his leave, reiterating his vow to return later to collect the Rhohirric items of import and search further with Elessar. “Stop at Edoras before you go, I would host you there for a night or two if I have returned, or however long you wish to stay, but if not, Éowyn would dearly like to see you.”

Legolas indicated his agreement with a gracefully slight nod of his head, Gandalf with a smile and similar nod, and the elf and the wizard were left to their tasks.

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That evening, as moonlight filtered through the limited windows of the Númenórean structure, Legolas sifted through yet another set of journals they had located, much that he saw to his eye meaningless with regard to the mission that sent them here, as had been the case for the days gone past.

He rose, intending to go outside to gaze at the stars, telling Gandalf of his plan.

The wizard looked at him, startling the elf with his emphatic statement of “Aha! Of course!”

Gandalf stood up quickly from where he had been reading Saruman’s journals, and returned to the spot from earlier in the day, when Éomer had seen the glint far up on the wall, now faded and undetectable.

“Gimil.” The light far up on the ceiling lit again, much brighter this time.

“Gimil, Legolas, sounds very much Gimil, in Adûnaic, the tongue of Númenor, meaning stars, or starry sky, as Gimil’s name can be derived somewhat similarly. I think Éomer wishing you well in your marriage with the dwarf lit the initial one, but see how much brighter it is when pronounced correctly?”

“Gimilzagar.” Nothing.

“Gimilnitîr.” And high up the walls and ceiling of the immense room was lit an abundance of stars, resembling the night sky of Middle-Earth when Elendil and the other Faithful Númenóreans-in-exile had built the tower they stood in. Gandalf turned to Legolas. “That was the Adûnaic name for Star-
Legolas looked up in wonderment, readily able to gaze upon the night sky that he knew so well. “It is an exact replica,” he marveled. “There is the Sickle of the Valar, and there is Wilwarin. And there, Telumehtar. All exactly as Elbereth set them in the sky.”

Gandalf nodded, for he knew those constellations well himself. The Wizard gazed upward as he spoke. “There are many kinds of magic, not just those practiced by my order or elves.” He looked toward Legolas with a keen gaze. “What is your first thought?”

“Enjoyment; it is a beautiful sight, I would love to have such a replica indoors.” He smiled. “I wonder if dwarves could craft this. But back to the question; the Númenóreans were also mariners, were they not? Or had that history, and that of travelers of the land also.” said the elf. “I wonder if this sky is marked further, perhaps as a master map in finding the way to their key places? Perhaps hidden places?”

“I agree, this would not be here purely for show, that I am certain, particularly not in a tower such as this. Though I doubt the purpose relates to what we set out to do here. I cannot see that it how it would link to finding Saruman’s journals. But let me think…”

“Eärendil.” Gandalf spoke. And the path of the mariner moved across the replica of the sky shining above them.

They stood for many moments, marveling at what had been created by the Númenóreans.

Legolas, having seen the night sky so many times over his centuries of life, was awed by the replica, although he began to be struck by some discrepancies. It was not the exact replica he initially thought it to be. “Gandalf, Eärendil’s path is strange. It looks slightly off course.”

“Hmmm? It looks correct to me, although you study the sky much more than I, so I will take your assessment as the right one. Does anything else look strange to you?”

“Menelvagor looks altered, both in shape and orientation. And Helluin is a very odd shade.”

They stood for awhile, Legolas noting other discretely distinct errors that both agreed formed some pattern or message inherent within.

“Strange,” the elf noted, “That their night sky is crafted so perfectly, yet not, with certain specific things slightly wrong. Gandalf, I grow more convinced that it is purposeful and not mere error.”

“Indeed, yet the solution to this riddle surely goes beyond our purpose here.”

Legolas nodded in agreement. “Still, it is a wonder to gaze upon it. Even my betrothed dwarf would be impressed, especially to look upon Circh i-Mbelain, crafted by Aulë and Varda, as he would so proudly say.”

Gandalf looked at him with a smile. “Ah, indeed, the Sickle of the Valar, Durin’s Crown. Hope represented therein for all races. I am certain your dwarf would be most appreciative. And that gives me an idea.” He stood straight, looking up at the stars above them. “Avradî.” He turned to Legolas. “Their corresponding translation of Varda.”

And a spiral staircase appeared from above, drawing itself out of the wall near where Eomer had stood earlier in the day.

“Well, I was not expecting that as the result. Shall we?” Gandalf looked to Legolas.
“We shall.” the elf replied with a warm smile.

They tested for traps as they always did before they ascended, but found none. And soon they were at the top, in a room below the very top of Orthanc.

Gandalf studied the ceiling intently. “There is a command, I think, to open the ceiling above us, which, I believe, forms part of the roof of the tower. Permitting one to star-gaze upon the real thing, should the replica below us not suffice. And that is likely just a secondary benefit, I wonder what the other intended purposes might have been.” He looked around him. “Ah, but that is not our purpose. Not indeed.”

The room had obviously been used by Saruman for storage, and there were many tomes here, as well as maps and bound pieces of parchment. “I believe he did not think anyone would determine a means of entrance, and thus decided not to guard it. And had Éomer not been here, I doubt we would have found it, for standing where he was may have been a requirement. And this room is too small to traverse the entire width of the fortress, there must be other, more common ways to reach the top, such as the stairs we found earlier.”

The wizard turned to Legolas, his eyes dancing. “Let’s get to work, elf. I think we may find something of use here.”

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For an entire day they sifted through the tomes and parchment, until they found the large set of journals that chronicled the key events of Saruman’s travel East. Some books seemed to be missing, as events were spotty at times, but the basic timeline was clear. The previous Head of his Order had found the Blue Wizards after he crossed into Rhûn, aided by several men who had seen the Wizards in years past and knew of their general locale.

The then-White Wizard wrote of spending centuries with his blue-clad brethren, assisting them in thwarting the efforts of Darkness in the East with which they had been tasked, including attempts to raise rebellion amongst those who would resist the Dark Lord and his servants. He also studied arts of spells and sorcery with the Blue Wizards. They had much knowledge, for by the time Saruman arrived in Middle Earth, they had many centuries of learning behind them. Towards the end of his stay East he began deep study of the Dark Arts with good intent, later corrupted by power and the desire for the One Ring.

On the third morning after their fortuitous discovery, Gandalf came across an entry of particular interest. “This looks promising, Legolas. Saruman speaks of breaking one of Rómestámo’s enchantments, although it is not the same type as yours.”

“Oh? What does it say?”

“That the enchantment was reversed by repeating the words and deeds of its initiation, replacing affirmations with nullifications, using opposing ingredients.”

Legolas raised a brow, not quite understanding what the wizard meant.

“Basically, the spell is repeated, using will not instead of will, for example, and any ingredients must be opposite alternatives; in this one, ice is used instead of fire. A very basic procedure, and one that I had suspected.”

That seemed promising, and easy enough.

“The problem, Legolas, is that we know naught of the details of your enchantment, not its full intent,
not its incantation; we know nothing of the sort. We need to know more, and your father may not accurately recall it, for while his memory for distant events seems intact it has not been thoroughly tested. But more importantly, the stress of thinking upon it would precipitate worsening of his condition. And your mother had her memory erased. No others survived that could tell us, no one that lives in the West, unless Galion was told all of the significant details, but that would be impossible based on what your father wrote.” His face grew grim. “Saruman might have known, but none of his journals reference it.”

Legolas stared unseeingly into the distance, realization growing. “So to undo it, I will need to find someone who does know, likely one of the Blue Wizards. And to do that I would travel East.”

Gandalf nodded. "I see no point in continuing to search here, for even if Saruman recorded the exact incantation, undoing it would likely require being in the same location, at least according to what he has detailed here. And I do not think there are additional journals for us to find. I know him well, and I believe he destroyed the most important ones. Or took them."

“So they might be found somewhere between here and the Shire?”

"That would be akin to finding the proverbial needle in the haystack, Legolas. We have no leads with regard to that, and I fear it would be a fruitless mission. No, the next step is journeying Eastward, to find the Blue Wizards. That is the most logical choice."

Legolas felt a bit overwhelmed when he first pondered it, thinking of traveling to the immense East and searching for two wizards, but he quickly realized that part of the task was not impossible. Just as Gandalf was well-known in these parts of Arda, the Blue Wizards were in theirs per Saruman's records, and unlike Gandalf they tended to settle in one place for long periods of time. Gandalf was the only one of his order who had no home. Breaking the enchantment itself might be a greater challenge, but it seemed that Morimehtar would be an ally in this task, at least according to all they had read thus far. "I know this reaches beyond your tasks here, Gandalf, and that you would travel to the more westerly parts of Middle-Earth, to Tom Bombadil and your search for Radagast, from whence you came. Yet I must know your counsel, do you think it is necessary that I break this enchantment?"

“Yes, Legolas, of course I do, should you desire to bind with him. This is not something to be taken lightly, it is most serious. I do not believe for a second that Thranduil’s records were inaccurate. Something dire could occur if you bind with this dwarf. I know you well, and duty to your kingdom obviously outweighs your personal desires, for if you must choose, the choice would be your realm.”

He paused, looking at Legolas out of the corner of his eye. “You do have other options, however. You could choose to break the betrothal. Remain the dearest of friends, your love for one another greater than any that has ever been seen between elf and dwarf. Spend the remainder of his mortal days traveling together and managing your realms side-by-side, fostering a rebirth of elvish-dwarven relations. He may even be able to travel with you to Valinor when the time comes; marriage is not required for that."

Legolas smirked. "Do you realize, Mithrandir, that if my Elvenking had not been injured, this entire betrothal probably would not have come to pass? We would have held dear friendship and love, but based on his reaction, I am certain my Adar would not have supported a marriage between us. Yet I doubt it would have even come to that, neither of us able to speak our true feelings. And I doubt the hobbits would have facilitated disclosure of my love for Gimli, ensorcelled or not, out of respect for my pride. Merry and Pippin would have deemed my love unrequited and kept their knowledge to themselves." He sighed, feeling horrific guilt when he thought of how things were different as a result of his Adar's injuries.
Gandalf looked at him sympathetically. "Do not fret, for there is value in unintended good being a possibility in a grave situation. I do not disagree with your alternative scenario, based on what I have heard of your antics. If it were not for the hobbits, and your Queen and Gimli's King, that very well would have been the case. But it is neither here nor there. Back to the situation as it has unfolded, my morose elf, not as it could have. I think there remain other additional options before you. Perhaps you could have a marital arrangement in name only, but I am not entirely certain of the import of that. And I know that you are concerned that Gimli loves you simply as a result of this spell, and you cannot bear that guilt either. Though I do not think that is the case, I cannot know for certain."

Legolas took some comfort in his last comment. "Or I could travel East and attempt to break the spell, with no specific destination or clear path, but it could be deciphered with adequate research and some small to moderate amount of good fortune."

Gandalf nodded, most serious and grave. "Yes, indeed, those are the choices before you. But remember that determining the path should not be that difficult. I will assist you in whatever you choose, for these wizards are of my order, of which I am Head. While I cannot guarantee an outcome if we do so travel, I will stay as long as you need…." And he placed a hand on Legolas’ shoulder, "but, I warn you, the journey and the finding could take time. And I cannot guarantee breaking of the spell. There is always the chance that they may not be found at all. I cannot guarantee success, but I do think it is very possible."

Legolas understood everything all too well, his dismay rising to the surface of his being and threatening to drown him. What had seemed hopeful those moments ago suddenly did not seem such.

"Do not fret, elf. I did not say it was impossible, I only desire that you have accurate expectations. Let me study these journals some more, and perhaps we can glean some ideas about destinations. For then we may be able to make a more well-informed decision. There is much here that might provide ideas."

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After three more days they were ready to depart Orthanc, Gandalf having gathered enough information to buttress their journey eastward. He developed an inventory of places to check for the Blue Wizards, as the additional research buttressed the conclusion that they did not roam in an essentially nomadic manner as Gandalf did. The elf and wizard took key journals, maps and books of incantation with them. As they left Orthanc, they wondered once more of the starry sky replicated within the impenetrable tower. Surely, Gandalf again noted, it must have some additional purpose that they had not detected.

Yet there was not time to solve a side-mystery that seemed irrelevant to their current mission, and so they departed for Edoras to make good on their pledge to visit Éowyn. From there they would proceed to Minas Tirith, for both knew Aragorn had traveled East for a time and might be a source of counsel, as could select others in his kingdom.

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Éowyn sat at a long table in the Golden Hall, tapping her fingers restlessly. Gandalf and Legolas had arrived earlier in the day, and they had told her in a vague manner of their travel plans. She looked curiously at Legolas, seated directly across from her. “But why do you travel East? I see no such need. You have so much to plan with the wedding. And your father, what of him?”

Legolas could take it no longer, for she had been peppering him with the same question in different ways for the last hour. He explained what he had learned, vowing her to secrecy.

Éowyn’s eyes were wide, her fair face growing more pale as the tale was told.

“So you see, Éowyn, I have no choice. Gimli may very well love me not. So I may stay here, have his love falsely and set off some sort of potential disaster, or choose to simply be his friend, or perhaps partners in name only. Or I can travel East and try to break this enchantment. There I face the possibility of losing his love should it have been the product of enchantment.” Tears grew in his eyes, and Éowyn’s own heart ached for him.

Legolas remained uncertain whether Gimli’s love was the result of an enchantment or not, but it did not matter. “And yet, even so, binding with him could portend the downfall of my kingdom.”

“How long will you go?”

He was not sure, but he could not be gone longer than betrothal contract specified, for then it would be considered null and void if he was not present on the date they were to be wed. “Certainly less than a year. We must return before then.”

She drew a deep breath. “Legolas, this is folly. I say again, you are mistaken, his love is true.”

“You misunderstand the change in my heart, Legolas. Firstly, such strife is not the cause for your quest, it is not as though we ride into war. And healing is not just of the body. Should you not go, your spirit will suffer a festering wound that shall not heal. So it is entirely consistent with my pledge. And Gimli is dear to me, as are you. Others join quests to assist their friends, such as Gimli helping Faramir, how is this any different? And I know my brother and Elessar have spoken of subduing any remaining factions in the East at some point in the next few years. I can assist by gathering information along our way.”

“You know that Aragorn has ambassadors as well as Easterlings who surrendered service to him
who can serve that purpose. I do not deny that your personal argument is the most compelling, and please understand that my reluctance is not driven by what I would personally decide. Eomer is your King, and he has not given you leave to go. I have seen evidence of your customs in this, Éowyn."

"This is a personal mission of yours, and you would decide to take me with you, so that is all that is required to make my decision."

Legolas laughed, appreciating her determination in developing her argument. "Very well. Far be it from me to block you. You are correct; I alone would not do so, and I do not see a compelling reason on a personal level to bid you stay. So if Gandalf agrees, I will not refuse you. Let us discuss it with him."

Gandalf shared Legolas' concerns about her decision in light of mannish customs and viewpoints regarding female roles, yet similar to the elf he certainly did not share them. Further, the White Wizard did not think that Éomer would be entirely against her joining them, as long as it was not a foolhardy mission that would put her life in danger, which it did not seem to be. An argument could be made that it might be no more dangerous than the Framsburg Quest the Riddermark's King had sent Faramir on, although the discussion of fleeing and death in Thranduil's journal entries would seem to stay that conclusion. While the full context of the loss of life was unclear, Gandalf had traveled enough that he was keenly aware of strategies to reduce the necessity of physical violence. Most importantly, the White Wizard anticipated that this mission would be one more akin to solving riddles than demonstrating physical prowess. He would simply smote the Blue Wizards' power should they prove to be a threat, an option which had not been at Thranduil's disposal. While not free of potential danger, this mission simply did not seem comparable to the level of risk Ówyn faced when she disguised herself as Dernhelm and battled the Witch-King. It paled in comparison to Frodo's quest to destroy the One Ring. And there were others to manage Edoras in her stead, so that was not an issue. Gandalf thought there might even be benefit to having Ówyn accompany them, for it was often unexpected persons who tipped the balance in various situations and created favorable outcomes.

So Gandalf decided to leave the choice to her, making it clear there were no guarantees regarding what might happen, for there could come points in which her life might be in danger that he did not foresee.

For Ówyn the decision was simple. And so it was that Gandalf, Legolas and Ówyn left the following dawn on horseback, their journey eastward begun, planning to stop in Minas Tirith first, to see what Aragorn or any of the select trusted Easterlings in his service could tell them about the land the Blue Wizards called home.

Chapter End Notes

Mearh = Singular for Mearas (at least I think so)
Adûnaic = Language of Númenor
Gimil = stars or starry sky
Gimilníthr = Star-kindler = Elbereth
Gimilzagar = Star-sword
Avradî = Varda
(Constellation translations are at the end of this note)

Review of Timeline Events are jumping around slightly & potentially confusing, so to
review in order: Legolas returns to Eryn Lasgalen when Thranduil wakes. Gimli/etc decide to go on Faramir's Framsburg Quest and begin preparations to leave. The next day, Aragorn, Arwen, Elladan, Elrohir & Eowyn depart Erebor for Gondor/Rohan. The day after that, Gimli, Faramir, etc leave Erebor for Framsburg. Pippin spends several days thereafter in Erebor; during this time, Legolas shows Gandalf Thranduil's journal in Eryn Lasgalen. The elf & Wizard leave for Orthanc, stopping first in Minas Tirith to get the keys from Aragorn (he's arrived a day before they do, as his retinue was slower than Arod/Shadowfax). Pippin goes to Eryn Lasgalen with Dori. The Elvenqueen gives Dori Legolas' message for Gimli re: he's gone to Orthanc (of course, Gimli is on the Framsburg quest so he won't get it for awhile).

Gandalf & The Blue Wizards Regardless of when the Blue Wizards came from Valinor, Gandalf probably didn't know them in Istari form, as they (in this story and most of Tolkien's writing) have traveled East before Gandalf arrives in the Grey Havens. Tolkien also notes that memory of Valinor was dream-like for the Istari, so Gandalf probably wouldn’t have clear memories of the Blue Wizards as Maiar either.

Éomer's Ingredient-Gathering I thought the Wold as well as Helm’s Deep might be locations of interest simply because of historical background. The Hornburg also has its own “courtsip”-related story (well, anti-courtship: Dundelings tried to forcefully take Helm Hammerhand's daughter for marriage. Helm killed their leader Freca with his fist; Freca's son Wulf returned 4 years later with a large force and eventually Helm ended up retreating to the then-Suthburg; the Rohirrim eventually won the battle but Helm died).

Constellations
Varda set constellations in the heavens before the elves awakened. Name in Quenya is given first (guesses given re: our equivalents are credited to Christopher Tolkien and astronomy buffs)
Valacirca = Sickle of the Valar (aka Circh i-Mbelain in Sindarin, Great Bear, Durin’s Crown, Burning Briar, Wain, or Sickle, Timbridhil). It was mentioned being seen by both Bilbo in 2941 (near the River Running) and Frodo in 3018 (Bree). We call it the Plough/Big Dipper. It was created through the joint efforts of Aule and Varda. Set in the northern sky as a challenge and a warning to Morgoth of his eventual downfall and a sign of hope for others.
Telumehtar or Menelmacar = Menelvagor in Sindarin; Swordsman of the Sky. Probably Orion. Said to represent Turin Turambar and his eventual return in Dagor Dagorath (although it could be argued it refers to Tulkas using Turin's sword, I'm choosing to reference Turin). Remmirath = The “Netted Stars”, this constellation is today known as the Pleiades. Wilwarin = Butterfly. Might be Cassiopeia
Telumendil = Lover of the heavens. Possibly Boötes
Soronúmë = Eagle of The West. Might be Aquila or Lyra
Anaríma = Sun-border = Could refer to Corona Borealis (northern crown) or the Great Square of Pegasus; others think it's Gemini

Helluin is a star. It translates to "blue;" we call it Sirius (the dog star; the brightest star in the sky and part of Canis Major)
Chapter Summary

In the ruins of Framsburg, a post-Ring War fellowship assists Faramir with his quest to find a suitable ingredient for his wedding mead. And in Eryn Lasgalen, Pippin continues with his thoroughly diligent wedding planning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The problem,” Dwalin said fiercely, "is that there is no solution!"

Four dwarves, a hobbit, an elf, and a man searched the ruins of Framsburg, historic seat of the Éothéod, ancestral home of the Rohirrim. Rotting wooden structures arranged inside a crumbling stone wall, the hamlet was the namesake of Fram, slayer of Scatha the Worm and himself slain by dwarven hands a millenium ago. Vengeance was taken by the Longbeards when they received Scatha’s incisors instead of their treasure's return, provoked even further by Fram’s accompanying missive Jewels such as these you will not match in your treasuries, for they are hard to come by. No love had been lost between the Longbeards and northern horsemen, and certainly hatred brewed for a time thereafter, Durin’s folk taunted by the son of Frumgar who denied them their due share of the dragon’s hoard, nearly the entire sum of their ancestors’ treasured crafts as well as their own dedicated excavation of the riches within the Grey Mountains following their relocation after the horrors of Khazad-Dûm. Not all of Durin’s folk followed Thráin I to the Lonely Mountain after the Balrog was awakened in Moria, and while there was no Arkenstone to be uncovered in the vast reach of granite and stone that marked the horizontal boundary between the settled lands of Rhovanion and the Northern Waste, there were an equal number of stories to be woven and told.

And in the Grey Mountains a number of those tales involved dragons. Worms inciting dwarves and other races of good to battle one another over hard-earned gold wasn’t simply a one-time occurrence as a prelude to the Battle of Five Armies.

Yet gold didn’t bring the current questors hence, nor did any other cause for strife or mission of historic valor. This quest was of a more light-hearted sort, the Steward of Gondor searching for an ingredient for mead as part of his betrothal obligations to his would-be Lady. An obligation per a premarital contract for the Lady of the Mark written by a descendant of Durin, a task assisted in its completion by dwarves. No small change that portended for the future, for while relations between the ancestors of the Rohirrim and the Longbeards of yore had improved from the time of their animosity and strife, they were cool towards one another, united in defense of a common foe, but not more than that. Now, a millennium later, Durin’s folk assisted in the matrimonial capture of a Rohirric maiden’s heart, and light sparkled through the cloying darkness of times past.

It was dwarves who talked of halves of souls, meeting One as a matter of arithmetic, almost. A puzzle completed, nay, a soul made whole. So few amongst them had the fortune to do so, for Mahal’s rare blessing it was. It certainly was not an undue burden when One was not found, as craft or occupation could fully take love’s place. Few amongst the second-born would even think to question Mahal’s plans. And at the same time, the only blessing that compared to meeting One or welcoming dwarrowlings was this, assisting another whose soul immediately recognized its other
half. Faramir’s had done that the instant he had seen Éowyn, his soul recognizing its counterpart and mate when she was burdened by loss, sorrow and injury.

Dwalin turned when he heard no response to his statement, his hale voice booming through the hamlet once more. This time Glorfindel heard the esteemed dwarven warrior’s words on the opposite side of the ruined fortification, outside of view and the bounds of non-elven earshot. “I say once more, the problem is that there is no solution!”

“Nay, I tell you, my Captain, that I know these parts as well as the handle of my axe, and we may yet find what Master Faramir needs.” Gimli’s childhood friend Adlia, their guide, stood with her hands on her hips, eyes glittering just as fiercely as Dwalin’s.

“Harumph. You are impetuous, laddie, and might benefit from learning more respect for the opinion of your elders. It is not a matter of looking harder when there is nothing to be found! There are no suitable mead ingredients within the borders of this forsaken town. We have searched for days, and even the Balrog-Slayer has not had luck procuring anything of use!”

*Odd habit,* Merry thought as he stood nearby, referring to dwarrowdams as dwarrows in public, even *here,* with no others in range of the abandoned hamlet.

They had searched during daylight hours in the near-week since their arrival. Their travel to Framsburg from Erebor had been leisurely and enjoyable, providing a stark contrast to many previous journeys, most certainly a counterpoint to the Ring Quest and the Quest to reclaim the Lonely Mountain. It was decided they would ride to ease the journey, and Merry requested to travel with Glorfindel astride Asfaloth, for the horse was exceptionally majestic, almost as grand as Shadowfax. And the hobbit, if he was honest, wanted to be able to tell Pippin that he had journeyed beside the Balrog-Slayer. It would make a wonderful story in the Shire, he imagined, and Glorfindel was only too happy to oblige. Gimli was the only one who preferred to travel by foot, mumbling about the jealousy of Arod should he take a pony as a steed. But he was outvoted by all of the others, including his childhood friend Adlia, who served as their guide. Their spirits dimmed somewhat when they first laid eyes upon their destination, for the ruins were barren, more desolate now than they had ever been before. The ancestral home of the Rohirrim had eroded for multiple reasons: War, the sheer passage of time, and the hard use of orcs and goblins, particularly those goblins who called Mount Gundabad home under Bolg’s command prior to the Battle of Five Armies. But it was also clear that the sum of these would not be enough to cause the desolation they saw, for the last dwarven scouts to travel here had not reported an utter absence of flora and fauna within the borders of the crumbling town. No, *something* must have occurred to cause further destruction of the hamlet right before or during the War of the Ring, but *what* was not exactly clear.

Nestled on the banks of the Langwell River on its southwest side and flanked on its southeasterly side by the Greylin River, just north of the point where both rivers joined to create the mighty Anduin, Framsburg saw various uses after Eorl moved his people southward five centuries ago. He settled his people in Calenardhonas, the *Green Province of Gondor* granted to the horsemen of the North by the kingdom’s then-Steward, Cirion. The land was but a small token for Eorl’s valiant efforts in defeating the Easterlings that had ravaged Cirion’s army under orders from Dol Goldur. Hence Rohan and the Rohirrim came into being, the Rohirrim swore their oath of fealty to Gondor, and the Éothéod passed into history as Framsburg fell to other purposes, some good, others evil.

The most strategic dwarven usage for Framsburg had been as a fortified location in the War of the Dwarves and Orcs after Smaug attacked the Lonely Mountain. The Erebor-exiled dwarves used Framsburg as a staging point for the deployment of the force that assailed Mount Gundabad in the initial stage of their hunt for Azog, the culminating battle in the sequential search being the one near Moria in which a young Thorin Oakenshield earned his name. The cost of that war was extreme, and
added to the devastation of the earlier War of Dwarves and Dragons and the growing infestation of orcs, goblins and Worms in Ered Mithrin, Durin’s Folk had no choice but to relocate to the Blue Mountains, leaving Framsburg and the Grey Mountains to the annals of time.

Adlia pursed her lips and tugged on her beard. “Aye, I will grant that it is decimated, much more so than the last time I was here. Nothing seems to grow here to the visible eye, no wild spice for mead, no wild grain, nothing that had been here before.” She grudgingly admitted that the hamlet had never looked as desolate as it did now, even after Bolg and his goblin minions decimated it as a training and staging station of their own prior to marching to the Lonely Mountain in the battle that saw Thorin Oakenshield pass to the Halls of his Ancestors.

Dwarin nodded, now satisfied with her answer, for this dwarrowdam had a fierce streak of pride that sometimes clouded her logical view of situations. “In light of that, what is your counsel now?” She knew these parts better than any, and he left it up to her to make an alternative plan. “I do not want to leave empty-handed.”

“Glorfindel said he would search as best he could. The elf is best suited for this type of task. Do not forget that we have seen birds here, and birds would not be in an area that was completely devoid of life. And we have yet to search within all of the buildings.”

“Harumph, laddie, a bird can easily fly into a forsaken area and then leave it! And what would grow inside a building when nothing grows without? And surely we cannot hope to find hives filled with honey when there is nothing for bees to pollinate. Do you not have a back-up plan? The Balrog-Slayer himself said that he is no Wood-elf and cannot guarantee finding something suitable.”

Adlia refrained from rolling her eyes at the famed warrior’s lecture. She indeed had an alternative, but was not certain if it would suffice. “Gimli!” She bellowed. “Would water from the Langwell or Greylin suit the terms of the betrothal contract? Perhaps at the heart of Anduin’s split, the Langflood?”

A few ruined houses away, the ginger-hair dwarf looked up from where he was digging absentmindedly with the handle of his axe, himself trying to consider a substitute that would satisfy the contract he had brokered between the Steward and the Lady of the Mark. “Perhaps the Langwell, as we are so close to its north bank, although I would prefer to find something within the actual borders of this hamlet.” He sighed. “I think we have searched enough for today. It is time for our evening meal and the sun will set soon. Perhaps the Balrog-Slayer and Steward have been successful. And where has Bofur gone?”

Gimli moved to help Adlia build a fire, readying provisions to cook. The Balrog-Slayer returned as if on cue, Faramir trailing behind him, Bofur bringing up the rear.

“Master Elf, Master Steward! And my laggard friend! Any luck?” Dwarin strode over to them, drinking from his waterskin.

Glorfindel shook his head, but he was undaunted. “Unfortunately not, but we shall find something growing here. As Adlia has said, it cannot be completely barren. Nothing is ever completely devoid of plant life.” He paused, almost grimacing. “Although what we find may not be suitable for mead.”

Dwarin snorted. “Harumph! Surely one as long-lived as yourself has seen places where naught grows. What of the barren North? There cannot be any flora living there.”

“No, Master Dwarin, even there flora can be found, one simply needs to know what to look for. As I have said before, I am not a Wood-elf with knowledge of plants; one like Legolas would know what is to be found here and how to look. And if he did not, he would listen to the stones or the nearby
trees to learn in which direction to search.” Gimli smiled at the mention of his beloved’s name, wishing Legolas was here for that reason and so many more. “Nor have I studied plant lore to the extent Elrond has in his efforts to deepen his healing skills, or in a scholarly way like my friend Erestor. I hazard to say I could not make a basic mead, let alone an exotic one, as it is not something we partake of often. Nor have I ever considered the making of a betrothal mead, for it is not our custom nor have I had need.”

Merry and Gimli exchanged side glances to one another at his words, for what the elf said was ambiguous enough with regard to the mission the two had not yet had an opportunity to complete. Gimli certainly had not forgotten the pledge he and Legolas had made to Erestor in Rohan, seemingly ages ago now, to covertly determine Glorfindel's status with regard to love of another. Erestor had loved the Balrog-Slayer for centuries, and thought his love unrequited. Glorfindel certainly mentioned the name of the Imladrian scholar often enough, leading Gimli to initially think that Erestor’s assumptions were false. But then the dwarf quickly realized Glorfindel spoke of many people often.

For his part, Merry had not forgotten the mission with which Gimli had tasked him, the mission that Pippin had volunteered to assist with. They knew nothing of Erestor's heart, but they were clear about their own primary objective: To determine if the Balrog-Slayer held anyone in his heart. Yet Merry discarded those thoughts for now, for he more pressing things to explore. “We could search for the rest of Scatha’s hoard. My Horn came from what Eorl took south. Éowyn told me that Eorl didn’t take all of the treasure when he left Framsburg. I bet there are tankards or cups that would be wonderful to use at the wedding. Beautiful ones, crafted by dwarves, glittering with jewels…”

Gimli interrupted, shaking his head, his braids swaying with the movement. “Nay, Master Hobbit. That is a grand idea, but Faramir must bring back an ingredient, not a vessel. And the remainder of the dragon’s hoard was pillaged after the Battle of the Field of Celebrant. I know not why Éowyn was unaware of that.”

“Oh, maybe she just didn’t think to mention it, Gimli.”

“Harumph, well, let us plan for tomorrow before the sun completes its setting.” Dwalin interrupted their banter. While dwarven eyesight was well-suited to see in darkness, it was of little help if they did not know what to seek, and they had certainly searched the cool dust of Framsburg enough for one day. “And afterwards, Master Meriadoc, you shall tell us a tale of the Shire. Perhaps another of Bilbo Baggins.” He smiled in fond memory.

Merry returned his sentiment with his own grin. “I am at your service, Master Dwalin. Perhaps I shall tell you of his eleventy-first birthday party again. It was grand.” His eyes drifted as his thoughts turned to ones of feasting and dancing and merriment in the rolling hills of his homeland, and then his gaze grew keen and serious, “And pivotal, too, for it truly set events of the Ring Quest in motion, as you well know. But did I tell you of the fireworks we set off that night? The dragon that flew in the sky, oh it was marvelous….”

As Merry continued, Dwalin and the others listened intently, letting the hobbit distract them from their task, as listening to him was almost a balm to the heart.

When Merry finished, they began eating the dinner prepared by Gimli and Adlia. Dwalin took his plate, his thoughts remaining with Bilbo. “Master Glorfindel, I should like to see Master Baggins one more time, as I know he has not many years left. Perhaps I may travel to Rivendell with you when you return?”

Glorfindel smiled. “Of course, that is a welcome idea. Between the tales he has told me as well as the exploits you have detailed, I think it would be a most welcome reunion.”
Bofur jumped in as if on cue. “Well, I’m in for that trip also. Certainly you don’t plan to leave me out, do you my Captain?”

Dwalin laughed. “Never.”

Faramir paid compliments to the chefs. Dinner was a dwarven campfire pancake, drizzled with some sort of ale. “These are delicious. Did you make these when you traveled on the Quest, Gimli?”

“Nay, Master Steward. We had not the provisions, nor the time or means.” He cleared his throat. “Hmph. My memories of the Quest are primarily of Lembas bread. As you might agree, Merry?”

Merry nodded, swallowing his own bites of pancake. “And military rations. Which were generally not very good. But I doubt I could cook anything better for that many people. Military cook is a thankless job, I’m sure.” He turned his attention to Dwalin and Bofur. “Will you tell us another story of the Company’s Quest? Perhaps when Bombur fell into the Enchanted River? Or the time you met the Great Goblin? Ooh, tell me again about the trolls and how they almost cooked you!”

Bofur and Dwalin were happy to oblige, and as they talked, the others settled around the campfire and drew out their pipes, except for Adlia, who left to take the initial watch on the outskirts of the hamlet. They had seen nothing threatening on the way here or since they had arrived, yet the vicious attack on Thranduil served as a reminder that post-war peace did not guarantee safety.

After several rounds of tales, everyone began to settle for the night in Framsburg’s abandoned main hall. The structure was in the best shape of all the buildings, some of which were too ruined to even enter. Glorfindel went to relieve Adlia on watch, as he had slept the night before and had little need this eve.

She was startled when the elf placed his hand on her shoulder, embarrassed to have been caught unawares. “Hmph! Do you make it a practice to sneak up on others thus?”

He bowed his head slightly, settling gracefully beside her on the remnants of the large gray stones of varying shades that formed the disintegrating wall surrounding the hamlet. “Apologies, Master Dwarf, it was not my intent.”

The brown-haired dwarrowdam drew out her pipe, recovering from her surprise. “Aye. Shall you partake with me this time?” She enjoyed the distinct aroma of the pipeweed Merry shared with her, and this cool, starry night seemed perfect for savoring it. At the elf’s no, she shrugged and lit it, puffing contentedly.

He stared silently at the smoke she exhaled, and then was driven to comment. “Those rings you craft may even put Mithrandir to shame.”

She looked at him quizzically, not certain of whom he spoke. “Tharkûn, you call him. Gandalf.”

“Ah. Perhaps I do need to become more of a world-traveler, like Gimli, and learn these things for myself. Tell me, is it true that elves rename everyone and everything?”

He laughed. “No more than dwarves do, as I am sure you have names for all of this,” and he swept his arm in a vast gesture that included Framsburg and the lands beyond, “in Khudzul.”

“Aye, but you will not trick me into revealing those words, Master Elf! You cannot even pronounce Khudzul correctly! Here, let me assist you.” She spoke slowly, beckoning him to repeat, but he simply could not form the tones to her satisfaction. “I do not like to give up on a task, Master Elf, and I shall make it my goal to ensure you learn to pronounce it correctly.”
"I hesitate to say, but that sounds like an honor you bestow on me."

She shrugged, feeling a bit embarrassed again. "Aye, I would not make too much of it, Master Elf."

She stared off into the moonlit distance for a time, as did he.

"So, elf, did you know other dwarves? Before my time? And the Company’s, of course?" This was a topic that interested her, one that she had not yet posed to him.

"Not many, Master Dwarf, aside from those who visited Imladris. Rivendell, as you would call it. I arrived in Middle-Earth after Hollin was sacked, and that surely was the time of greatest harmony between our realms, when Celebrimbor and Narvi worked with one another, as did many others."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, speaking what had been on his own mind during his time Under the Mountain. "And I am glad to be able to say that I was not present for any armed strife between elf and dwarf, as Gondolin had no trade with your ancestors and did not commit any deeds similar to those seen in Doriath."

"Aye, there were no innocents on either side of that, in Doriath at least. And especially amongst dwarven kind." For that kingdom of Beleriand was home to the one of the worst times in their shared history, Thingol being killed by dwarves in a fight over the Nauglamir, many dwarves and elves losing their lives as a result.

"Hmph, this is much too stark a conversation for my taste, Master Elf." She pondered as they sat and stared at the mountain range less than two leagues to the North, everpresent on the horizon, her eyesight better than his in the dim light, though not as well-suited for far distances. Talk of death in the vicinity of the home of her Grand-Adad reminded her of his own ill-timed loss of life. "And while I will admit I am ashamed of my dwarven ancestors and those ill events they wrought, I bear only anger over the slaughter of my kith and kin in the mountains when the dragons came."

Glorfindel nodded. He was well aware of the War of Dwarves and Dragons. And he knew first hand the horror of a dragon attack, having borne the terror of and the loss of so many Gondothlim during the Hidden City’s fall due to dragon fire and trampling before Tuor hewed the huge beast’s foot, although his own loss of life had been caused by his battle with the Balrog. "And do any dwell in Ered Mithrin now?"

She turned to look at him, a glint in her eye. "Dwarves? Or Dragons?"

He met her glint with one of his own. "Either. Or both?"

"The mountains have been empty of Longbeards for some time. A few remained after we fled back to the Lonely Mountain. But those few were driven out when the Worms continued their intrusion from the Withered Heath and the orcs and goblins grew in number, spawning from the pits of the void itself."

He nodded again, for that was what he had thought.

"After Smaug was driven from the Lonely Mountain, my father and brothers led a party that came here, to Framsburg, to evaluate our chances of resettling here. Even more so they wanted to avenge my Grand-Adad’s death."

"And they did not find what they sought, I take it?"

"Nay," and she puffed small circles into the air, watching as the wisps of smoke dissipated. "They never returned. They were slaughtered in this very town as they prepared to scout the mountains themselves."
Glorfindel nodded, understanding growing. “That is why you lead the scout patrols here. Framsburg holds special meaning for you.”

“Aye, as do the Grey Mountains.” She studied her smoke rings, wishing for a moment she could turn them into an array of different colors as Tharkûn sometimes did. “And someday, I plan to reclaim them.”

Others might have been startled by her statement, but Glorfindel was not. He knew what it was like to lose his home, and he understood the drive to regain it. For him, reclaiming Gondolin was completely impossible, but not so for her.

And then just as suddenly, she changed the subject. “Tell me, is your ability to blow smoke rings as strong as your Khudzul?”

“Likely so, Master Dwarf.” He smiled at her good-natured slight, refusing once more to try her pipe, and his melodious laughter filled the air.

But it was not enough of a distraction, and soon both of their minds drifted back to thoughtful contemplation of times of sorrow long past.

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The next day, the Framsburg Fellowship, as Merry liked to call them, searched the hamlet once more. They combed the ruins for herbs or spices, wild grains, anything that might be suitable, concentrating on the remaining inside portions of the decaying structures. Adlia stood in one such building, having just exited a crawl space that she thought might have held an environment for the growth of brew-suitable yeast, but came out empty handed.

She turned, startled when she saw the hobbit before her, dirt all over his clothes and face. “Merry! What in Mahal’s name has happened to you?!”

He dusted off his vest with his hands, shrugging. “Oh, it’s nothing, Master Dwarf. I was in the room over there, and it was dusty.”

She nodded. “Well, let’s move on to the next building.”

“And perhaps we should just lay down some potatoes like Faramir suggested? To collect yeast?”

She nodded again. “Aye, I do not think that will hurt to do so, as we cannot stay here indefinitely and that would require time to collect, and soon enough the weather will turn against us. Though I think Gimli still prefers to find something entirely contained within this old settlement.” She looked at him grimly. “The chances of that are slim. I daresay this place has grown almost as desolate as Mordor. But he is quite a stubborn dwarf.”

Merry did not disagree with any of it. Nor did he dare say that she seemed to be just as stubborn.

He brushed the dirt off his sleeves, walking beside her. Like the others, he had begun to feel slightly glum in the ruins of this town, for who enjoyed setting off on a quest that they could not wholly fulfill?

He was lost in thought as they walked into the next structure that stood sufficiently intact to be safe to enter, musing about how Pippin might be faring in his wedding planning when he heard Adlia yell at him. “Merry!” She shouted, “Watch your step, those boards look rotted through!” The dwarrowdam certainly did not want the hobbit twisting his ankle or falling.
But she was too late. The floorboard cracked, and he tumbled down to the floor. “Oomph!” he uttered as he landed.

“Are you all right, Master Hobbit?”

He sat on his knees, beginning to stand up. “Yes, only bumps and bruises.” He stood, and before she could warn him to stop moving, he walked a step forward, breaking the floorboards further, tumbling through the now-gaping opening into the space below.

She peered into the darkness through the hole he had made, her eyesight quickly adjusting to the lack of light. He sat on the cellar floor, looking bit dazed. “Master Hobbit, are you hurt?”

He sighed. “No, I'm fine, but I don’t know how to get out. Although I can’t really see anything down here anyway.”

“Aye, and you are too far down for even the elf to reach. *Stay there and do not wander about,*” she said firmly. To her eyes the cellar seemed safe but she did not want to take any risks, especially with this one, whose curiosity was far too keen. “I will be right back with some rope to get you out.”

She first looked for the actual entrance to the cellar, finding it no longer had an access ladder, and then cursed under her breath as she ran to their main camp near Framsburg’s Main Hall, ruing her complacency, wishing she had been paying closer attention to the hobbit’s safety. When she saw Gimli and Bofur eating some of the remainders of dinner from the night before, she paid them little heed, and they immediately knew something was wrong.

“Merry,” she said. “He fell through the floor in one of the houses, into a cellar that has no exit ladder.” She dug through their supplies for the rope she sought, and beckoned them to follow her. She assured them he was safe, but then spoke of what she had not wanted to tell Merry, not wanting to scare him unnecessarily.

“The cellar is wide and deep, and it has faint wafts of strange air, but I did not have time to look closely.”

Gimli shrugged. They knew it would not be so strange for worms to have tunneled below this town, given how close it was to the orc- and worm-infested mountain range that loomed nearby. In fact, they had been somewhat surprised they had not encountered said tunnels already.

Soon they were beside the hole Merry had fallen into, trying to determine the easiest way to pull him out without further breaking the floorboards. Glorfindel, Dwalin and Faramir joined them moments thereafter, the elf having heard the commotion from where they searched in another part of the town.

They quickly pulled the hobbit to safety, yet the other dwarves agreed with Adlia that the there was a strange yet faint odor emanating from the cellar, so Gimli traveled down with her to investigate further. Certainly it seemed likely that there was some sort of tunnel adjoining the large cellar, and it would be prudent to ensure their safety in the ruins would not now be threatened by stray orcs or goblins that might be using the tunnels. The others sat and waited while they were gone, idly chatting. Thirty minutes later, Gimli yelled up to them that they had found something.

“I hope it’s not orcs, I’ve seen enough of those, I think.” Merry muttered to himself, and Dwalin overheard.

“Harumph! Does that mean you choose goblins?” He snickered a bit at the hobbit’s expression. “Do not worry, Master Hobbit, if there were signs of either, Gimli and Adlia would have said so.”

“Oh, do you think they found something of use to Faramir’s quest then? Perhaps a beehive, that’s the
only thing I can think of that could be useful to us down there.” Merry grew excited now, hastening over to the actual entrance to the cellar and the rickety-yet-usable ladder that Glorfindel had remembered seeing in another building he had searched the previous day.

“Does it have honey in it?” Merry pinched his nose as he looked to the spot Bofur said Gimli stood, unsuccessfully attempting to pinpoint his friend in the lack of light. “Whatever you have there, it certainly doesn’t smell like honey, Gimli.” Merry peered into the darkness, unable to see Gimli or Adlia until Faramir raised his torch over the space. The odor that came wafting towards them was faint yet atrocious, but both dwarves seemed unfazed by it.

“Nay, Master Hobbit, there is no beehive down here. We have found some type of plant growth.” Had it not smelled so poorly, all would have eagerly anticipated Gimli and Adlia’s finding of the apparently rare prize they needed to locate.

“What, Gimli? How can something grow down there?” While he did not have Sam’s gardening expertise, Merry certainly knew that most plants wouldn’t grow without light. “Is it a mushroom of some sort?”

“Aye, what have you found, lads?” Dwalin now stood by Merry’s side, not recognizing the plant in Gimli’s hand.

Glorfindel jumped effortlessly into the large cellar, striding over to Gimli, and they moved out of Merry’s view. “Come, no need to delay, Master Hobbit.” Dwalin patted him on the shoulder and clambered downward after Bofur had reached the bottom.

Merry had no desire to be closer to the smell, but he did want to see what Gimli had found, and that curiosity outweighed any potential urge to stay put and avoid the cellar he had fallen into an hour ago. He climbed down the ladder, calling up to Faramir as he descended. “Why, there’s a tunnel here.” He hadn’t seen that before, primarily since he hadn’t seen much of anything before, having been enveloped by darkness when he had tumbled down here.

Faramir nodded, moving his torch slowly around the space so that the two of them could see their surroundings. It was a typical, if huge, cellar with stone and wooden supports. The tunnel was the only oddity, and quite an oddity it was.

“Harumph! Not crafted by hands of men, dwarves or orc, that is certain.” Dwalin ran his hand along the beginning of the dirt-walled tunnel, knowing it resembled one carved by the mouths of worms. “And it is a young tunnel. Adlia, tell me what you know of this?”

She shook her head. “Nay, nothing beside what I have just seen myself. I am certain they were not here when we last scouted, but that was some time ago.” She felt the dirt wall herself and studied it. “I would judge it was created a year or so ago.”

Gimli studied it more closely, running his hands lightly across the wall as he walked into the tunnel. “Aye, I would say it was carved by teeth.”

Merry and Faramir exchanged glances. That certainly didn’t sound promising. “What do you mean, Master Dwarf? By the mouth of a creature? Such as the Were-worms who tunneled during the Battle of Five Armies?” The Steward of Gondor was pensive, and slightly apprehensive, though he did not show it.

“Aye, Master Steward, though this is smaller than what they had carved. No need to worry yet, however, as we found no evidence of anything in the vicinity.” He turned to Adlia, beckoning with his eyes for her hypothesis, as they had discussed while they scouted.
She nodded. “I would hazard to say that it was carved by the mouth of a Long-worm, not a Were-worm. Perhaps more than one, but that is difficult to tell. Strange that they would have traveled outside the mountain range or the Withered Heath, they have not done so for several decades, though perhaps this was the path of a planned sneak assault during the Ring-War.” She turned to look at the dirt wall of the tunnel again, studying it carefully. “As Gimli said, it seems to be empty, and we encountered no fell creatures when we scouted. I do not sense any Worms within the walls nearby.” The other dwarves concurred, and Glorfindel could sense nothing untoward either. “We would like to show you the place where Gimli found this plant, there may be something of use to us there.”

Dwalin nodded his assent. “Aye, laddie. As long as it does not appear to threaten our safety, and may conclude our mission, I agree. First, however, we should….”

“Um, I think you should look at this.” Dwalin was interrupted by Merry, whose curiosity had gotten the better of him. Taking the torch from Faramir, he had scouted ahead as the others considered next steps, and called from where he was out of sight around a bend in the tunnel.

“Merry!” Adlia hissed when she caught up to him. “Do you understand how dangerous that was? A cave-in, lurking enemies…”

“It wasn’t that far, I just peeked around the corner! Besides, you’d already scouted it and said it was safe.” Part of him appreciated her concern, and part of him grew more annoyed by her occasional admonishments.

She furrowed her brow, and waited for the others to catch up to them in the tunnel that was wide enough to potentially allow all of them to walk side-by-side, and tall enough that Glorfindel and Faramir had no need to duck their heads.

Merry stood by a large urn, half the height of a dwarf and similarly wide, made of a faint green material that none of them immediately recognized. The outside bore detailed depictions of dragons accompanied by runes that were not understood by any who stood there.

Merry peered inside the urn, covering his nose once more. “Whatever that mixture is in there, it certainly smells, and it smells worse when you walk by it.” He demonstrated, much to the others’ chagrin.

“Aye,” said Gimli. “And there are more down the tunnel, along the entire length that we scouted before.”

“A tunnel carved by the teeth of Long-worms, who then laid urns at regular intervals? Urns that emit a mild yet most unappetizing stench when someone passes by them? Did they plant whatever you found as well?” Faramir drew a hand through his hair, suddenly feeling a good deal of discomfort. “I was about to say in jest that we should not harvest this mixture for my mead, but perhaps instead my words should be we should leave.”

The discomfort had spread to the others, and they agreed. The situation was strange, and none were feeling as adventurous as Gimli and Adlia. “Aye, perhaps you are correct, Master Steward.” Dwalin beckoned them to withdraw, and they began to comply until Glorfindel held up a hand and motioned them to stop.

“On second thought,” the Balrog-Slayer whispered, “move against the wall, and hold still! Do not move!”

Scant heartbeats after they had complied, a Worm that was as twice as wide as Gimli was tall and at least twenty times longer had slithered into their section of the tunnel, moving past them, ignoring
them as though it was only be able to detect them by movement or sound, not smell or sight. It began
gnawing into the floor three yards past Merry’s feet, and it was all the hobbit could do not to panic.
Its mouth was enormous, somehow expanding beyond reason, and its speed was greater still. The
hole it created in the bottom of the tunnel was essentially as wide as the tunnel and three times
longer. In less than a few minutes the Worm had devoured its target, tunneling into the deeps below.

When they had deemed it safe to talk, Glorfindel was first. “I can jump across that hole, but I fear the
rest of you may not be able to.”

“Aye.” Dwalin nodded in agreement and then shook his head, not understanding how this could
have happened. None of them had sensed anything in the tunnel until Glorfindel did, and that was
such a scant warming. “But I suppose it has enormous speed.” He spoke his tangential thoughts out
loud, trying to make sense of the situation.

Glorfindel nodded. “I have never seen anything like it, only heard of them.” It had been sheer instinct
that had told him to be still, nothing more or less. He was certain that they would have been
devoured otherwise.

The confusion in the group was palpable, but that wasn’t the primary problem. No, the bigger
concern was what Bofur then voiced. “We’re trapped.” The hole blocked their way out.

Glorfindel would be able to easily exit, for there was enough of a slight lip around the side of the
hole for him to delicately cross if he decided not to jump, but no others were as limber and well-
balanced as he.

“Nay,” said Adlia firmly. “There will be another way out, we simply must find it. The tunnel
structure seemed to have different routes.”

“Or,” noted Merry, “Glorfindel could cross, and build a bridge of sorts.”

“Aye, Master Hobbit.” Dwalin said gravely, “but there are few materials left in the ruins that would
support dwarven weight in that manner. The best we might find is similar to that rickety ladder we
used to descend into the cellar, and it would break the instant I stepped upon it.” He turned to Adlia
and Glorfindel, the best-suited amongst them to lead. “After you.”

And so the dwarf drew them into the tunnels, Glorfindel walking beside her and keeping his
awareness focused on Long-worms that might cross their path, knowing that he would sense them
sooner if he kept part of his mind attuned to the possibility.

They talked of strategies to kill the Long-worm should it cross their paths again, and wondered if it
had powers of the mind that could hold them paralyzed, as they knew Greater Dragons could do so
easily.

“It would be better to kill it before it holds us in such a state.” While Adlia had never killed a Long-
worm nor even encountered one, her frequent-enough scouting of the Grey Mountains had led her to
study such methods. She had several suggestions for Glorfindel, in particular, to consider, as he was
the swiftest fighter amongst them and most likely able to deal a killing blow atop the Long-worm’s
vulnerable spinal column, or even underneath it near its heart, with his sword.

“Harumph! I am too old for this.” Dwalin muttered under his breath to himself, and Gimli smirked.
“As if that was possible,” the ginger-haired dwarf said in turn.

“Aye, it certainly is! Well, it’s been some time since I have explored a new tunnel, so lead on. At
least the desolation of this town makes a bit more sense now, although it raises more questions.” The
pair brought up the rear of the group, walking side by side.

Bofur looked back from where he walked alongside Faramir. “Dwalin, think of it this way: At least you will have another dragon story to tell the dwarrowlings! Perhaps of a Worm meeting your axe!”

“Aye, that I will. But I hope that encounter we just had will be the extent of it.”

As everyone did, although no one said it out loud.

Over 75 leagues away, Pippin sat on a talan’s floor in Eryn Lasgalen. He was still struck by how different the structure was from the ones in Lothlórien. In Galadriel’s realm, platforms in the mallorns were open and spacious, with comfortable furniture much like that in Rivendell and intricately decorated fabric screens for privacy, as Galadriel’s ring kept the realm protected from untoward weather. In Eryn Lasgalen, the talans were smaller and much more rustic, with floors literally shaped of living wood in the similarly massive trees, branches and leaves coaxed by wood-elves to form barriers against the elements. There were no clear ways to ascend or descend, no winding staircases or pathways. Instead, rope ladders were given to those who needed assistance to climb, but most of the elves here climbed with their own hands and feet. Even the usage of the talans was somewhat different, for in Lothlórien there was no need to consider enemy attack or safety, while many of the elves here had abandoned their talans when spider infestations had worsened. But they were full of life now, Thranduil’s wood-elves happily returning to their homes in the trees.

Pippin’s secondary goal in Eryn Lasgalen, after his primary goal of wedding planning, was to learn how to scale these trees just as quickly as a wood-elf. Even the Elvenqueen was mildly impressed with how well he had done thus far.

But the primary goal must come first, so here the hobbit sat, working on the task at hand. Peregrin Took wasn’t known for his organizational skills, as those had been bequeathed to Merry and Frodo within their generation of the family tree. Hence the scattering of parchment across the beech floor that stopped Galion in his tracks when he alighted into the talan and gazed upon the hobbit’s progress. In fact, when Galion climbed into the tree, he initially wondered to himself where the floor might be.

“Young hobbit, may I assume your planning goes well?”

Pippin looked up at his visitor, sighing. “Galion, it’s more difficult than I expected. There are so many contrary customs to match together. And…” he sighed again, “I have begun to realize that many of your elves aren’t exactly… excited… for this wedding to take place.” In the days he had spent here thus far, the wood-elves near the Elvenking’s halls had become aware of his purpose, and he heard the whispers that many did not realize his ears could track. Of course, many were in Sindarin, and he would only place Naugrim then, but he knew Legolas thought it was a derogatory term. But a few spoke in Westron, perhaps so he would understand, he wasn’t certain. Our King would never stand for this. Marrying a dwarf is an abomination. The Prince called him a mutant! Dwarves cannot be trusted, especially dwarves from Erebor.

Of course there were arguments, as the sentiment appeared to be mixed, but the situation seemed much less amiable than it did Under the Mountain.
Galion moved some parchment to the side in order to create a place to sit. “Ah, I know there is dissension, Peregrin. It is to be expected. And we must do as duty demands, and as Legolas would want, by forging forward and attempting to convince the majority of the populace that this alliance is to be celebrated.” He looked at the hobbit with a gentle expression. “That is not your duty, I speak of we as those who serve the royal family. You have already done far more than is required of you.”

Pippin smiled, but then frowned. “At least in Erebor, the dwarves pretended to be accepting even if they weren’t.”

“Ah, but therein lies the difference between the two realms. Firstly, dwarves tend to celebrate their heroes soundly, even moreso than men might. Dwarven heroes back this marriage, as well as their King. Here in Eryn Lasgalen, our Elvenking is waylaid, although his fight is more valiant than any I have ever seen. Add in our greater reservedness and the estrangement of our Queen from our King and our elves in general, and…”

“This is what happens.” Pippin nodded, understanding what Galion meant. He certainly did not encounter much difficulty with the less enamored wood-elves with regard to the arrangements he was making. Rather, he was simply struck by the removed disinterest of so many of the wood-elves, as well as the prejudicial comments he heard about Gimli and dwarves in general.

Then he spoke of the one thing he still did not understand, changing the subject while building upon Galion’s comment regarding the Queen’s estrangement. “Why is the Elvenqueen as she is? She seems like a shell of a person…frozen.”

Galion smiled gently, impressed that this hobbit continued to express care for the Queen, something that so few did. When Thranduil had withdrawn from her, the populace had gradually followed, laying their loyalty at his feet, although he did nothing to encourage it. The rumors about the Elvenqueen, some true, many false, did not help. But they never reached a critical tipping point, and until now, everyone had tended to ignore her for the most part, seeming to follow Thranduil’s lead. “It is a very long story, Peregrin, and one that is not for my sharing. Even I do not know all of the details. Suffice it to say, however, that I think she is enjoying planning this wedding with you, even if it does not seem so.

“Now, what can I assist you with on your list?” Galion looked at the tornado of parchment that seemed like a blanket of snow across the talan. “If we can find your list, that is?”

Pippin, for all of his inclination towards seeming disorganization, found it almost immediately. He spoke so rapidly that Galion was having trouble following him. “Well, the Elvenqueen and I have come up with some good ideas, I think. We’ll create the dwarvish wedding canopy out of white blooms and branches of white birch. And she volunteered heirloom wineglasses that would be acceptable to break in the dwarvish manner after they say their vows. They are beautiful, Galion, with tiny flowers all over, and the whole glass looks like a flower with wide petals holding the liquid inside.” He sighed, for he greatly appreciated the crafting of wondrous things.

“But there are some things I’m having trouble with. Thorin said that Legolas and Gimli need to be kept completely apart for the entire week before the wedding, and the Elvenqueen told me about the woodland ceremony required three days prior to the wedding, where they plant three trees together, one representing each of their individual lives and then another for their joint future. Thorin wants everyone to fast in observation of Mahal the entire day before the ceremony. But the Elvenqueen said there needs to be a feast in honor of the flora and fauna of this wood in the glade where the trees were planted, and Gimli and Legolas need to be seated side by side and eat the meal that represents the blessings of the forest and blesses it in turn.

“Thorin wants to officiate the rites of Mahal, but he wants to do it in Khudzul, and said only dwarves
can listen, with Legolas being the only exception, of course. The Elvenqueen isn’t keen on elves being left out of any part of the public ceremony. And she isn’t very happy that Legolas will need to circle the dwarven marriage canopy seven times before entering it to join Gimli, she thinks it ignores recognize his status as a Prince and makes him seem submissive. And she’s not sure if she’s ok with him speaking the seven blessings to Mahal.”

Galion listed intently, capturing the gist of the hobbit’s words despite the slew of words forthcoming from his mouth. But how did he manage to not stop and come up for air? “Peregrin, I am certain we can come to a resolution about these items, it should be simple enough. Let us make a list of all of the situations that may require further compromise, and then we can set up a meeting between my Queen and King Thorin. Or more than one meeting, if needed. I still do not quite understand why these did not come to light when they first detailed the contract, but I am certain that they will come to an amicable agreement.”

Pippin nodded, trusting it would be so, and then moved on to the next order of business, a blush covering his face. “Then there is the matter of the…consummation of the relationship.”

“Of course. After the exchange of vows and the initial feast, the couple will leave for their talan to complete the binding.”

“Well, there's a slight misunderstanding there.” He blushed a bit further, feeling a bit like Samwise might in this sort of moment, pulling out the contract. “It specifically states here that ‘dwarven conjugal activities’ will take place in the couple’s home that is built by Gimli. The Elvenqueen wants the ceremony—all of it—to be held in the woods. She doesn’t want Legolas to conduct his elvish binding ceremony in a dwarven realm. She feels it’s inappropriate.”

“Ah, but how is that a problem? We can simply build them their own talan here. Or Gimli can build it, we can have builders show him how, to satisfy the terms of the contract. That would be of use regardless, so that they will have a home in Eryn Lasgalen. It would certainly please Legolas.”

Pippin’s face brightened at the suggestion--what an obvious answer to the problem, why didn't he think of that!--and then fell again. “But that doesn’t get around the part of the waiting period.”

“Waiting period?”

“Thorin's particular dwarven tradition requires that the seven days of feasting be completed before the couple returns to their home and completes any…conjugal activities. Such activities must be completed for seven nights thereafter.”

Galion raised his eyebrows, not quite understanding the preoccupation these dwarves had with the number seven. But who was he to question dwarven tradition? “So they would not be married, in our manner, for a week. Assuming Gimli built a talan here as their home, which we would need to have Thorin accept. Which he may not, because in that case all of the marital activities would take place here in our woods.”

Pippin nodded. “I think the Elvenqueen assumed that the 'conjugal activities' were a week-long dwarvish "honeymoon," not realizing it referred to the initial marital consummation.”

Galion was still struck by the length of time these particular dwarves waited to complete the binding. "Hmm, this is a bit of a...what is your saying? A pickle?" Pippin nodded again. “Why did Legolas not catch this? Or Gimli? Surely they understood?”

“I think neither he or Gimli paid much attention to what was in the contract, they were both happy enough that it existed and didn’t feel a need to consider the fine details.”
“But what about when it was reviewed during the betrothal ceremony? I was told that the dwarves require a line-by-line review? Why didn’t either of them catch it then?”

Pippin shrugged. “I think they were too caught up in each other to pay attention. To be honest, I think most people were too caught up in everything, and those who were paying attention were making assumptions that they didn’t think to question.”

“Well, Peregrin, apparently they should have had you at the bargaining table, to catch these potential problems. Are there any others?”

He shook his head. “Not so far. And I must say that I was there as well, I wasn’t paying attention either,” he said a bit shamefully.

“Ah Peregrin, it is better to have caught it now, to iron out these details as you would say, and besides, it was not your responsibility. This is the first such contract of its kind, surely things like this will slip through the cracks. Thorin is reasonable, and the Queen wants this to occur, they will find an agreeable compromise. Why, without you, think of the diplomatic impasse that may have happened!” He chuckled at the thought. “You are acting as a bit of an ambassador, in your way.”

“Hmm, perhaps I am.” he said somewhat proudly.

*If this marriage happens at all,* Galion thought for a moment. The Elvenking had not reacted well when Legolas had told him the news, and Galion was not quite sure why. It seemed similar to the reaction Thranduil had when the Prince was attracted to Tauriel, but he had never understood that either, and the Elvenking refused to discuss it at the time. Lord Elrond had ordered no further talk of the wedding until Thranduil had recovered further. And then the Elvenking had quickly forgotten what Legolas has said, troubled as he still was by memory loss.

Galion also knew the Elvenqueen would not defy the Elvenking, and some resolution would need to be found.

But there would be time for that, he told himself, as the ceremony was still a year away. Ultimately Legolas *wanted* this marriage to happen, and Galion knew he would do all he could to ensure the Prince’s happiness.

The royal family certainly deserved some unfettered joy, as it had been absent from their lives for so long.

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While Galion and Pippin met in the talan, the Elvenqueen sat by Thranduil’s side. She tended to visit him when he was asleep, to avoid the agitation and ill feelings that tended to arise between them when he was awake.

He looked peaceful as he slept, she mused. She occasionally dared to stroke his face or hold his hand, but today she simply sat, pondering all that had been and that which would never be again between them.

She never truly understood why he had not cast her to the side, for he would have had adequate reason with the deceit she had borne into their marriage. Galion had said it was both for the sake of their kingdom but more so perhaps because he still loved her. But the latter was impossible. It was clear he felt only contempt for her.

Time passed, and soon a hand on her shoulder told her that it was time for Lord Elrond to examine the Elvenking once more. She nodded to him, taking her leave, lost in her thoughts. It was time to
meet with Pippin, she recalled, and she headed to the talan she had provided to him.

The cool autumn air was refreshing against her skin, and the crimson and yellow leaves that hung on the beech trees, indeed would remain there through the winter as they turned brown, were a glorious sight to her, the only thing she still found any amount of pleasure in.

Seasons changed in the mild climate of Eryn Lasgalen, but the winter that had settled in her hröa seemed everlasting.

She continued to be lost in her thoughts as her light footsteps took her along winding forest paths to Pippin’s talan, and as a result she did not notice the elf who waited for her approach.

“My Queen, Galion told me that I might await you here.” A copper-haired ellon with piercing emerald eyes stood to the side of the path she walked along, bidding her to stop.

She nodded briskly as the ellon bowed, never one to give away being startled, as she was never one to give away much of anything, after all. “Celdir, I had not expected to see you in this part of the wood. Is there a problem in our region?”

He shook his head slightly. “No, my Queen. I simply wanted to see for myself how you fare. And to bring you this in person. It is a message from my daughter.” He held out a piece of green parchment sealed with a wax wildflower.

She took the proffered missive from him. “I shall read it later this evening, if that suits you? I am late for a meeting.”

“Ah. With the hobbit?” He smiled, but whether it was welcoming or sarcastic was unclear.

Her stone-faced expression said nothing. “So you have heard of him even so far out?”

“Of course. Such news travels fast in this wood. And how fares Thranduil?”

She nearly sighed, her eyes almost showing her grief, but she held it entirely within, as she always did. “Better than we had expected at first. And your daughter? Does this note hold words of sorrow, that she will not marry Legolas?”

“At least she will not right now, as you said, my Queen. It is of no matter, as you said when the dwarf dies, he will be free to remarry. She is able to wait patiently until then. The note’s contents, that I am not certain of, she simply thought it was important that I deliver it to you.”

The Elvenqueen nodded. “Have Galion find you a talan to settle in. I will call for you tomorrow. Ask the guards at the doors to the Halls to escort you, and tell them it is upon my order.”

She stood still as a statue as he bowed once more and strode off to the Elvenking’s Halls, pondering what could be important enough—or secret enough, perhaps, that it should not be intercepted—that he would see the need to deliver such a note himself. But surely it could wait, as she rarely felt urgency over anything, this item included. So she resumed her walk to the talan where Pippin was staying, the hobbit having requested the abode, and she placed him in the vicinity of the one she was using in this well-inhabited area close to the Elvenking’s Halls.

“I am glad you are here!” Pippin was flushed from his efforts tidying his talan and quickly moved to grab a tray he had sat on the floor beside a living bench woven out of the tree’s branches. “Thorin’s assortment arrived today! We shall taste wines and ales and more, and decide what to serve at the feasts.” He drew out the grid he had created for each of the meals, an absolute necessity in his mind given the complexity of the menus and the planned festivities. He’d seen Bilbo do the same thing
many times, but never would have thought he’d have need to do so himself.

How things had changed since the Quest, and it certainly was exciting!

The Elvenqueen was unsure what to say, dwarven wine, ale, and spirit-tasting not being quite what she had expected during her daily meeting with the hobbit, as he tended to use the time to pepper her with questions in his striving to understand her realm’s customs, or ask her about wood-elf preferences with regard to various aspects of the upcoming matrimonial event. “Master Hobbit, I must say I am not really one for the partaking of spirits.”

He looked at her, sighing once more at all she seemed to be missing out on. “Perhaps that’s because you haven’t tried the good ones yet.” He rummaged through the bottles and flasks he had organized, pulling out one of interest. “Look! It’s the Gaffer’s Home Brew. I brought it with me from the Green Dragon for a special occasion, and I daresay this should suffice.” His eyes twinkled as he spoke, and she couldn’t help but be drawn in. His Tookishness was almost contagious. Almost.

“What is the special occasion, exactly, Peregrin? The wedding?”

“Does there need to be something in particular?” At her cold expression, he had an idea. ‘Your birthday, let’s celebrate your birthday. After all, I never celebrated it with you before, nor you with me. So neither of us have with either, and that certainly deserves celebrating!”

She thought, not for the first time, that his tongue was a bit of a whirlwind. Were all hobbits like this?

He took her silence for consent, and raised his glass to her. “Imagine this. The Gaffer’s Home Brew, in this beautiful crystal glass. An elvish glass at that. In a talan in Eryn Lasgalen. Who would have thought? Happy Birthday, those that have come and those that will come to pass.”

She took the glass he shoved in her hand, and began to raise it. “Well technically Peregrin, we celebrate begetting days, not days of birth.”

“Of course, I forgot! Happy begetting day!” He drank, savoring it. “So when is yours? And is it rude to ask how many you have had? Glorfindel, I think, has been around since the first age! Though he died, so you’d have to subtract out those years…”

She was taking a light sip as he spoke, uncertain if she liked the flavors or not. Probably not. She took a drink of the water he had also provided her, to try to get the taste out of her mouth, though it wasn’t successful. And then she decided to try to change the subject. “You know Peregrin, Galion is a connoisseur of liquors of all types, and I think he would be saddened to miss out on this. So long as he does not drink too much, as he has been known to become inebriated without realizing his limits.”

“Oh, that’s a grand idea! I’ll run and grab him! He left here not too long ago, I won’t be long!”

“But Pippin, I meant for you to do this with him later…” But he was gone before the Elvenqueen could finish her sentence.

Having nothing else to do but wait, she opened the parchment she had been given just a little while earlier. She saw that the message was completely innocuous, wishing her well and updating her on mundane happenings in the part of the forest she called home, and she wondered once more at the necessity of it being hand-delivered. Her slight frown was visible on her face when the hobbit and butler returned, and they immediately inquired about it.

“My Queen, is everything well?”

“Hmm, why yes, of course. Celdir hand-delivered this note, as though it was of upmost importance,
yet there is nothing within beyond very casual updates and a request to speak with Legolas.”

“Celdir?” Pippin asked. “Who’s that?”

Galion answered for her. “An elf who lives in the part of the woods the Queen calls home. He is the Adar of the elleth that the Queen was brokering to match with Legolas.”

“Oh.” Pippin still did not understand why the Elvenqueen lived so far away from Thranduil most of the time, but he knew finding out an answer to that wouldn’t happen, at least not right now. “And was she upset by what happened?”

The Queen shook her head. “No, I do not think so. The match with the dwarf simply delays their betrothal by two centuries at the very most.”

Pippin still did not understand what she meant by that. He certainly couldn’t see Legolas remarrying after Gimli died. In fact, based on what he had learned from Arwen, Legolas would probably give up his life after Gimli passed away. But he also knew that there was no use in arguing with her. In fact, that could make her change her mind about their marriage, and he certainly didn’t want that to happen. A quick glance at Galion, however, told the hobbit that the butler seemed to share his opinion, though he quickly hid his reaction.

Returning his attention to the note, Pippin thought for a moment. “Perhaps there's a secret message on it.”

“A secret message?” The Elvenqueen looked coldly at the hobbit, but he was used to that by now, so he paid it no heed.

“Why yes. Didn’t you ever put secret messages on things when you were younger?”

From their blank stares, he could tell the answer was no. And yet again he shook his head at what these elves were missing out on.

“So you use something like milk or eggs to write the message, and then use heat to activate it.” He grabbed the parchment out of the Elvenqueen’s hands, completely forgetting about royal protocol, but the Queen didn’t seem to mind. “Hold it up to the light, like this.” He held it near the candles above him, but couldn’t see anything of interest. “Wait, it needs to get warmer.”

“Pippin,” Galion warned, “You are too close to the…” And of course the parchment started on fire, but the Elvenqueen quickly put it out with her glass of water. She almost laughed as it doused his face as well, but held it back.

“Whoops. Now we won’t know whether there was a secret message on there or not.” Pippin’s face was woeful, both because he felt badly and because he truly thought there was something encoded on the parchment. “But at least I got a bit of a wash there! Glad you didn’t use the Gaffer's Home Brew, that would've really caused a flare!” He laughed.

And to Galion’s surprise, the Elvenqueen did not coldly take her leave. Instead, he would have sworn he saw a bit of a smile on her face. The butler could not understand what exactly she would find amusing or pleasant, but did it matter?

And he was even more surprised at what she said next. “Peregrin, start pouring these dwarven spirits for this taste-testing of yours. But do you have more water here to refill my glass, if you will? I am not much for liquor and will only try very small amounts.” She looked at Galion, straightfaced. “But Galion certainly is a connoisseur. Take care that I do not have to carry you back to your talan.”
The butler would have sighed, for he would never live down that incident of drunkenness caused by Dorwinion wine, but he was too taken aback by his Queen. Volunteering for spirit-tasting did not seem like something the Elvenqueen of the Third Age would do. This hobbit was certainly having a strange effect on her. Not that Galion minded, of course.

Not that he minded at all.

Chapter End Notes

Worms = Term used by Tolkien to refer to dragons.

Ered Mithrin = Sindarin for Grey Mountains

hrōa = body

Mallorns = Mellyrn is the plural of mallorn (the trees in Lothlorien), but hobbits called them Mallorns.

Doriath. A kingdom of Beleriand ruled by Thingol and Melian (a Maia). There were strong ties between elves and dwarves e.g., dwarves built the capital city and palace of Doriath. Things went south when the dwarves of Belegost set the silmaril in the Nauglamir for Thingol. Thingol was killed because the dwarves wanted the Nauglamir; many dwarves were then killed, and then their kin sacked Doriath. Dior (Thingol’s grandson, Beren and Lúthien's son) assumed rule and then the sons of Feanor sacked Doriath again when they came for the silmaril.

The great dwarven cities of Nogrod (Firebeards) and Belegost (Broadbeams) were destroyed in the War of Wrath, but the Blue Mountains (the place of awakening of both houses) escaped the destruction of Beleriand. Some of the Frebeards & Broadbeams settled in Khazad-Dum (along with the Longbeards), while others resettled in the Blue Mountains.

Dragons (aka Worms) in the Grey Mountains. Smaug was the last of the Great Dragons, but lesser ones remained after his death, i.e., Cold-drakes and Long-worms that infested the Withered Heath & Northern Waste (their breeding grounds), as well as the Long-worms that infested the Grey Mountains. Scatha, a wingless Long-worm, was the least-well known/discussed of the Great Dragons (Tolkien never detailed exactly what a Long-worm was, but most scholars assume it simply meant the dragon was longer in the body, often serpent-like; here I assume that some are able to burrow). Glaurung, the initial dragon created by Melkor, is a subtype of the urulóki (a wingless fire-drake, although it's unclear whether all urulóki are wingless, as some fire-drakes fly i.e., Smaug).

Grey Mountain History.
TA (Third Age) 1977: Frumgar of the Éothéod leads his people north of Mirkwood, founding Framsburg, namesake of his son Fram. The Éothéod, ancestors of the Rohirrim, are essentially a band of various refugee groups of Northmen who survive the Battle of the Plain (plains being those south of Mirkwood, a battle against Easterlings) in TA 1856
TA 1981: After fleeing Khazad-Dûm, some of Durin’s Folk (and perhaps Broadbeams and Firebeards) settle in the Lonely Mountain with King Thráin I, mining riches and
finding the Arkenstone. The others settle in the Grey Mountains (north of Framsburg and the Éothéod), mining many untapped riches there.

TA 2000: Scatha attacks the Grey Mountain dwarves and takes possession of their treasure (including the dwarven Horn crafted in the First Age that Merry was given in the LOTR by Éowyn). Scatha was one of the greatest remaining dragons in the third age.

TA 2000-2018 (approx.; exact date is unknown): Fram (Lord of the Éothéod) kills Scatha and refuses to return the dwarves’ treasure to them. The dwarves reportedly kill Fram in retaliation, although how isn't detailed.

TA 2210: King Thorin I (son of Thráin I) leaves the Lonely Mountain (taking the Arkenstone with him along with many of his folk), hearing of the greater riches in the Grey Mountains. The Grey Mountains become the new capital of Durin’s Folk and the Lonely Mountain is virtually abandoned.

TA 2250: Eorl (descendant of Fram, and Lord of the Éothéod) takes his people south after assisting Gondor in the Battle of the Field of Celebrant (defeating the Balchoth, a group of Easterlings), swearing the Rohirric oath to assist Gondor in times of need and being granted the Gondorian province of Calenardhon, which they rename the Mark. Eorl is now the first King of Rohan. He takes some of the treasure Fram obtained from killing Scatha; the rest is unaccounted for (in this story the dwarves have evidence that orcs plundered it)

TA 2570: The War of Dwarves and Dragons begins in the Grey Mountains (dragons attacking the dwarves for the riches they have accumulated in the 300 years they have mined the Grey Mountains; the Arkenstone is with them as well, I think). It lasts for 19 years and ends when a Cold-drake kills King Dáin and his second son Frór.

TA 2590: Most Longbeards resettle in the Iron Hills with Náin’s youngest son Grór. The new King Thrór and his uncle Borin take the other Longbeards back to the Lonely Mountain, where a small colony had remained. A few dwarves stay in the Grey Mountains, but they leave at some point as it would have been difficult to hold off the orcs and dragons that continued to multiply there.

TA 2770: Smaug attacks the Lonely Mountain after learning of Thrór’s treasure. The Grey Mountains are uninhabitable (brimming with orcs, goblins, and Worms), so Durin’s folk settle in Dunland and the Blue Mountains. The halls and mines of the Grey Mountains are reclaimed sometime during the 4th age.
Chapter Summary

Legolas, Gandalf and Éowyn reach the White City in search of Aragorn's counsel regarding his own journey Eastward, preparing to depart for Rhûn in search of the Blue Wizards.

(Thank you to Raelien for very welcome help with translations!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Pippin sat with Galion and the Elvenqueen in his guest talan in Eryn Lasgalen, King Elessar stood amidst the spires of his White City, his brow furrowed and his face drawn in exhaustion. Endless streams of paperwork and review of his Council’s proposals were already wearing on his mind, and he had only been back in Gondor for a fortnight. What he might give for a few days to return to the life of the nondescript Strider, spending time in Bree, one of many places where none would have fawned over him.

He turned his gaze from the starlit plains when the firm voice of one of his favored guards interrupted his thoughts. “My King, you have visitors. The Queen has joined them in your study.”

Elessar nodded to the guard, not thinking twice about visitors calling on him at any time of day, and strode into his palace. His palace. It had not sunk in yet, and everything seemed strange at times. Particularly the bureaucracy, which he knew was Faramir’s strength.

He would much-welcome the return of his Steward from the betrothal quest, even if he would soon lose him to his own assumption of rule in Ithilien. Yet he had sufficient time for Faramir to select and train replacements, for there was far too much work for one person alone to do.

The King could smell the Wizard’s pipeweek before he entered his study, and he smiled to himself. He hadn’t thought he would entertain Gandalf again in his city when they parted in Rohan after the fellowship dissolved, and while the circumstances of Thranduil’s injury were certainly not something he would have wished for, he was glad that one consequence was seeing more of those friends he had thought he would never see again.

He was puzzled when he saw who sat with Arwen and Gandalf, however. Legolas, of course, but Éowyn? Strange that she had joined them. The look on Aragorn’s face said everything, for Arwen beckoned him to sit down beside her and poured him some tea, which he politely refused, taking Gandalf up on his offer to share a pipe.

He ran his hand through his hair, almost reluctant to ask his question, nearly fearing what the answer might be. “And what brings the three of you here? Did you find something of interest in Orthanc?”

“Indeed.” Gandalf sat back in his ornate chair, his face calm and peaceful. “We found some of what we sought.” He leaned forward. “Let me cut to the chase, as it were, Aragorn. As we have begun to tell Arwen, we plan to travel East, and we seek your counsel.”
Aragorn had certainly not expected that. What on Arda could bring them to want to travel into Rhûn? “Expanding your father’s trade ties with Dorwinion?”

Legolas shook his head, twisting the betrothal ring on his right index finger, appearing purely calm and relaxed, but those who knew him well understood that he was a bit nervous, and Arwen laid a hand on his arm. “Estel,” she said, “What you will hear is for our ears only, we are not to tell anyone. I have not heard all of it myself.” She glanced at the others. “For Estel’s sake, perhaps we should start again from the beginning.”

Aragorn grew more confused and concerned by the vow of secrecy, yet at the same time he understood. He had thought that the Wizard and Prince weren’t telling him the whole story when they first arrived here to obtain the keys to Saruman’s previous stronghold, and at least this would finally shed light on whatever information they had withheld from him.

By the end of the fully-disclosed tale, Aragorn spoke what was foremost in his heart. “My dear friend, you proved true to me during the Quest and thereafter, and I wish that I could escort you Eastward myself.” He lifted a hand to stay Legolas’ words. “I know that I cannot. But the look on your face is heartbreaking.” His glance at Arwen clearly showed him that she agreed.

“Legolas,” Arwen said, “I am sorry that you seem to have found yourself with another hurdle in front of you, yet I cannot help but worry that you misjudge it, and it is not a hurdle at all, but some sort of trickery foisted upon your Adar.”

Aragorn thought it was an astute point. “Legolas, I also understand your concern in marrying Gimli in light of this, but are you certain what you fear will come to pass actually will? That binding with him is part of some intricate enchantment brokered by your own naneth?” That was the part that troubled him most. He knew that the Elvenqueen was removed and cold, but to offer her own elfling to black magic?

Gandalf had heard enough. “Certainly both of you know enough of the world to not doubt what can be brokered in the name of a cause? I assure both of you, this does warrant full concern and consideration. I have no doubt myself that something will happen should Legolas and Gimli bind, whether it is the release of the fëar trapped in the Dead Marshes that Thranduil wrote about, or even something in addition to that, as Thranduil’s entries allude to gathering an army of elves from Eryn Lasgalen to travel East. And it was not a reference to undead elves, either.”

Arwen shivered. “I wonder what my Adar would think of this? Would Gil-Galad himself be trapped there? Surely he sought Mandos when he fell by Sauron’s hand?”

Gandalf shook his head uncertainly. “I know not, Arwen. Whether it is just hröar that are trapped there, or fëar as well, I do not know for certain, but Thranduil’s journal suggests that it is the spirits of the dead. Saruman’s journals corroborate the idea of souls being trapped in the Dead Marshes. At minimum, images of warriors from Oropher’s army do appear in some form there, as well as the others who fell during the Battle of Dagorlad on those plains, but Gil-Galad fell at the Black Gate. His spirit may very well be safe in the Halls. Perhaps he has even been reembodied at this point.”

Aragorn began rustling through the desk in his study, searching for the herbs he took when he felt a headache coming on. At the quizzical gaze he received from Éowyn, he offered her some as well, but she simply laughed. She had the advantage of already working through this news, and quite the news it was.

The next day, after Gandalf reviewed the findings from Saruman’s journals, Aragorn wasn’t entirely sure he had much more to add. The previous White Wizard’s records were meticulous, and accurate, so far as he could tell. Yet at the same time his own journey East had been much more recent than
Saruman’s, even if it was much shorter and far less thorough, so he worked with Gandalf, Legolas, Éowyn and Arwen into the evening to review items that may have changed with time, and searched his memories for any recollection of talk of the Blue Wizards. He found none of the latter, but he was able to speak to the former.

“Perhaps you should take one or two of the Easterlings who joined my service. As guides.” Aragorn and Gandalf stood on his terrace now, looking across the plain at nothing in particular, while Legolas and Arwen had retired to her garden and Éowyn composed a letter for Faramir in Aragorn’s study.

“Do you think they can be trusted?” Gandalf knew naught of these particular Easterlings, not nearly as much as Aragorn did.

“Yes, there are a few in particular that have sworn allegiance to me, allegiance that I know in my heart is true. I cannot send all of the ones I trust, as I need them to watch over the others who have come into my service, but surely I could spare one or two to accompany you. If they agree to do so, of course. They may not wish to return, particularly if they would be viewed as traitors or perpetrators of treason by coming into my service.”

The King drew from his pipe, raking his hand through his hair, both habits that grew more frequent when he was tired or nervous. The day had been stressful, and he hoped that Arwen had been able to ease Legolas’ mind somewhat, as it continued to pain him to see the elf worry.

“Ah, do not fear, Aragorn. I can contain Legolas’ untoward moods well enough.” Aragorn smiled, for Gandalf retained his ability to seemingly read his thoughts, and he knew once more how much he would miss the Wizard’s stalwart presence when he sailed. At that, the Wizard’s eyes narrowed.

“Not to worry, we shall see each other again. This web of fate into which we have been drawn seems to ensure that.”

“Would that it hold us together longer.”

“You are sounding as morose as Legolas, perhaps it is catching?” Gandalf’s eyes glittered with a variety of emotions. “Partings are as much of the fabric of life as the meetings.” He drew from his pipe once more, then readied to go to the library to look for more recent maps. “And without a doubt, surely we shall meet again at Dagor Dagorath. You do not think you will escape a role in that, do you?” His smile was full of mirth.

“Ah, but how will you find me Gandalf, on such a huge field of battle?”

“I do not think it will be that difficult. That reminds me, Éomer would like to travel to Orthanc with you when you return to collect the treasures of the Mark that Saruman had been holding.”

“How, my friend, does Dagor Dagorath remind you of Éomer? Are you likening travel with him to the end of the world? I am certain he would take great offense to that!”

They both laughed. “No, not so. When we were in Orthanc, Éomer accidentally triggered our uncovering of a majestic map of the stars within the tower. It was thinking of the constellation of Turin therein that drew the remembrance from me.”

“Ah.” Aragorn chuckled a bit when he thought of how this would sound to an outsider, as if star maps and world endings were an everyday topic of conversation.

“I would examine it when you are there, Aragorn. That star map may be further unlocked by words from you. At least, that is my hunch.”

“And your hunches, I must say, tend to be correct. As long as it does not cause the tower to crumble
down around me, I will do so.”

“Well,” Gandalf chuckled, “That would certainly be an untoward end.”

“And Arwen would have your hide.”

"More than that, I think. More than that.” And they smiled at each other, returning to their enjoyment of the night air, Gandalf deciding his trip to the library to look for additional maps could wait a bit longer.

Nearby, the Queen of Gondor walked with the Prince of Eryn Lasgalen in her private garden. “I look forward to when you are able to work on these plantings, Legolas. My skill with flowers and trees pales in comparison to your talent.” Arwen held Legolas’ hand in a gesture of friendship as they walked in the moonlight. The garden itself was nothing impressive as of yet, but it certainly did hold potential.

“I welcome that as well.” He smiled wanly at her. “Would it could be now. Before my Adar was injured, Gimli and I returning here, working on the gates and gardens. We may never have proclaimed love beyond that shared in dear friendship for one another, but at this moment it feels simpler.”

“Legolas! Your penchant for moodiness takes a new turn each time I see you.” She touched his hair fondly. “But I grant you have had more reason to despair than you deserve, and surely your own tide must turn. It will work out, I know in my heart it will.”

He nodded, swimming once more in his sea of insecurity, her words being his anchor to shore.

"If only Gimli was here with you now, Legolas. I am certain he would find a way to eliminate your worry and doubt." She smiled knowingly. "But perhaps that is what you need? Gimli by your side?" She studied his face intently. "Yes, Legolas, summon him. If he knew what you were planning, I am certain he would go with you. In fact, I think he will be quite unhappy when he finds out you did not.”

Legolas knew all of her words were true. Enchantment or not, Gimli's presence would assist him in many ways. He could even hear his beloved dwarf's voice now, chastising him for doubting his devotion.

She continued talking, not sensing, for once, his shift in mood. "Legolas! He has every right to know this." She grabbed his hands. "You know he would scoff at this. He is a dwarf. Dwarves are resistant to magical spells. At the very most, in my mind, his true and utter devotion to you is merely enhanced by this spell. If it actually exists. I certainly trust what Gandalf said, but perhaps there is more to this than was described in your Adar's journal.”

They were interrupted by the all-too-similar voices of her twin brothers.

“Legolas! What brings you to the White City? Did our dear sister drag you down here to begin your planning already?” They smiled widely, their raven hair shining even by the light of the stars.

Arwen smiled. “Ah, my dear brothers, did I not tell you that I received a missive from Peregrin Took? He has made much progress in both Erebor and Eryn Lasgalen.”

Legolas bid hello to Arwen’s brothers, but his interest was completely taken by talk of Pippin’s wedding planning, and she reviewed what she and the hobbit had accomplished thus far. This brought a renewed, lightened spirit to Legolas’ heart, and a sense of boredom to the twins, so they bid quick exits and went in search of Aragorn, to update him on what they had learned on their
patrols of the surrounding area.

Instead of finding Aragorn in his study, they found Éowyn, composing her letter to Faramir amidst a scattering of maps of the land east of Dorwinion.

“My Lady,” Elrohir bowed, puzzled by her presence, as she and her guards had left their southward-traveling party to journey towards Rohan not so long ago, and she had not spoken of returning to the White City until some time after Faramir had completed his betrothal quest and returned himself. “Is all well in Edoras?”

Elladan saw what she looked at, and frowned, speaking before she could answer Elrohir’s question. “Excuse my intrusion, but may I ask for what purpose are you studying maps of Rhûn?”

Before the glare Elrohir sent his direction registered, Éowyn answered Elladan’s question. “We will be traveling there for a brief time. Legolas, Gandalf and I.”

The mutually raised eyebrows that graced both twins might have been amusing in their identical timing, but she knew them well enough at this point to understand that they disliked any reference to such similarities, so she ignored it.

“What on Arda would take you East? Does it relate to some sort of cure for Thranduil? Of what sort?” Their father, Lord Elrond, continued to tend to the Elvenking, and from his tutelage they knew much of medicinal lore. No such reason for Eastward travel came to mind.

She immediately regretted saying anything. But the Elven Lords knew of discretion, and did not push her further. Instead, they decided to change the subject. “Have you had a message yet from Faramir? Regarding his progress on his betrothal quest?”

She shook her head. “No, but nor had I anticipated one yet, either. Soon, though, I hope. I must say I am eager to see what he will find!” She did not add that she felt somewhat unsettled, but attributed the feeling to distance from him and her own upcoming journey. Surely if he sent a raven to Edoras with a message for her, it could be redirected?

But perhaps not, for how would one know where to direct such a bird once she left Minas Tirith? Hopefully Arwen would be able to direct a messenger bird to track her, for she did not relish being out of communication with her betrothed.

Gandalf and Aragorn returned to the study then, somewhat surprised to see the twins sitting with Éowyn. “My brothers! I did not expect you back this eve! What news do you bring from your patrols?”

“None, Estel, none.” Elrohir firmly considered the route they had traveled to be one of the most boring patrols he had ever partaken of. It almost made them wish for times of strife. Almost. But because strife was certain to return sooner than not, wishing for it would be untoward and even unnecessary.

Aragorn understood Elrohir’s mood, for in his very brief time thus far in the desk-oriented portion of his new role, he thought he would eventually consider trading the paper-pushing portion for anything akin to Gollum-tracking. Which gave him an idea, as he had learned his own tracking skills from the two Elven Lords in this very room.

“What say you to tracking Ithryn Luin?”

The twins looked at one another. “Blue Wizards?” Elladan asked, turning to Éowyn. “This is why you travel East?!”
She nodded. “Would that not make our party too large? I thought you preferred us to stay very small in number?”

Gandalf pondered. “No, I think it may be of use. We plan to travel routes that are safe anyway, and we will have two of Aragorn’s trusted Easterlings as guides. But while I will attest to your superb tracking skills, this is certainly not the same type of tracking!” He smiled. “At least I hope not! I have no desire to traipse across all of Rhûn looking for my kinsmen while you study the pattern of footfalls!”

“Unfortunate that you cannot simply summon them with your staff! Lift them here from past the Sea of Rhûn to deposit them at your feet.” Elladan chuckled.

Gandalf shivered slightly at the memory of being lifted and then slammed into the ceiling and ground by Saruman’s staff in Orthanc, though it paled in comparison to the pain experienced at the hands of the Balrog.

Perhaps he was getting too old for these sorts of adventures.

No, impossible. He knew he would miss them once he left for Valinor.

“As much as your offer is intriguing, Aragorn, we are here to assist you as well. Perhaps just one of us should go?” Elrohir, while intrigued by the thought of travel, also knew that they had other duties they had vowed to.

“Good point, my dear twin. We shall pick one of us to go.”

They spent time reviewing planned travel routes and other details with the twins, and by the time Arwen and Legolas joined them, it was time for everyone to retire for the night.

"There is but one decision left, then." Arwen said. "Whether Legolas sends for Gimli to accompany him. Even if you depart now, one of my brothers can ride out with him to meet you." She smiled. "I may even be able to convince one of them to fetch him from Framsburg for you, and head out Eastward from there, for that would be faster. If he is even still there, as he may have returned to Erebor at this point. But that should be easy enough to determine."

All eyes in the room turned to Legolas, who could find no reason to say no, yet was hesitant to voice it. "Let me think upon it during my reverie this evening. Sleep on it, as you would say, Aragorn."

Fair enough, everyone thought.

And so Legolas rested easily that night, daring to believe the words of assurance that everyone had provided to him thus far, quelling his own misgivings and doubt. The night before, reverie had been filled with strange feelings and foreboding, and if he hadn’t known better, he would have thought Gimli was in some sort of danger. But he realized it must be his own discomfiture from his unexpected learnings, his own unease with the idea of spells and enchantments leading Gimli’s soul to hearken towards his own.

He’d been spending too much time with mortals, he decided, for he was beginning to take on their strange dreams. But then he smiled. Perhaps he could find a way to experience some of their good dreams as well. Of Gimli. Yes, definitely of Gimli, amidst a backdrop of trees and stars. And...well, some things were better imagined, as opposed to thought out in words. Especially if the imagining made him blush.
East of the Sea of Rhûn, in the Great Forest of the East, Shénmì de Sēnlín, Morinehtar clambered down the ladder that connected his Tàilàn to the ground. While he did not have laudable skill in communication with animals, he did know the woods he called home, and of all the Istari, he was perhaps most attuned to plant life. Although his memory of it was vague, his acumen had been to Oromë’s benefit many times in Aman when the Maia joined his Vala as a hunt guide, sensing the passage of targeted animals via the surrounding trees and plants much as a Wood-elf might. The enormous tree he called home told him that he had visitors in the glade nearby, and he hastened to greet them.

He quickly strode along the well-worn path that led to a large clearing in the midst of the enormous forest, his sea-tinted robes fluttering around him. He tended to keep his light gray hair braided, and it swung lightly from side to side as he walked, while the thick, darker gray waves of his beard seemed unruly in comparison. He occasionally thought of braiding his beard as well, much as the dwarves of the Orocarni Mountains did, but knew this was not a custom of men, and so had refrained thus far. He’d been eccentric enough in their eyes, he knew.

He was happily surprised and relieved when he saw the newcomers. “I have worried about both of you, I have not heard from you for over a year! I think I need to train you in scrying, so that we can communicate more readily.” He held his hand to his chest for a moment in a gesture of gratitude, silently thanking Eru and Oromë for the safe return of his friend, for the mission he had undertaken had been dangerous.

The tall, lanky visitor dismounted from the Fenghuang, shaking his head. The huge flying creature had held up well to its long flights during the War of the Ring, but then again they had always performed solidly thus far, and for that Morinehtar was glad. When he and Rómestámo had created the animals by joining various species many centuries ago, he had worried that instead of a creature with the benefits of many animals’ strengths—the running speed of the fastest stag, the flying speed of the fastest bird, the keenest vision of any animal, protected in vulnerable places by tortoise-style armor—instead of producing a glorious animal that would assist in the defeat of Sauron’s heinous creations, he initially worried that they had pushed the bounds of nature too far.

But that had not been so, and the Lords of all Birds, as the Fenghuang were now known in the East, had brought good fortune and unceasing fight against forces that threatened to assail them. For this reason they were particularly revered in the far East. To this day Morinehtar recalled how Saruman had been impressed with the creatures, considering creation of his own, but the last he had heard the Wizard of Many Colors had become distracted by his spawning of Uruk-Hai.

Knowing one’s limitations was important, and Saruman had not demonstrated the restraint he needed in the later years of his time in the West, so far as Morinehtar had learned.

“Ao no Mahōtsukai-sama, you are lost in your thoughts again. To bring you back to your question, I have no desire to learn your practices of scrying, as you well know. I came for additional warding mixtures. We ran out due to an unexpected turn of events. And to gather additional forces to bolster those who remain in the Withered Heath and in the Grey Mountains.”

Morinehtar was quite concerned. “What happened? You took so many. Was that not sufficient to retain control of what we must in the West?”

“No, unfortunately not. Your kinsman, the other wizard, made an unfortunate miscalculation during our assault, and we are regrouping and planning to attack again.”

“Was there loss of life?”

“Yes, much.” He made a sign of prayer in remembrance of those who had fallen. “And I have no
desire to recruit orcs and try to hold them in control under a spell, before you suggest that. They are too volatile.” He looked up, eyes glinting. “And uncivilized. They seriously injured the Elvenking of the woods south of the mountains. I am not sure if he lives. Fools! Their leaders are not nearly as cunning as the ones who helped entrap my kin half a century ago. Do they know not the value of the Elvenking, alive? Is it any wonder Sauron was defeated?!”

Morinehtar frowned. Grave injury to Thranduil had certainly not been part of their plans. “No, I would suppose not.” He sighed. “I would like to hear more of it later, but for now I must begin making the components you need. Will you travel to gather more of your forces while I do so?”

The visitor turned his eyes to the sky, searching. “No. I must wait for your Wizard kinsman. He traveled with me. But he has obviously fallen behind in his flight. Strange, as his mount can easily match mine for speed.”

“Was that wise to bring him? Surely it would be better for him to have stayed. We need a continued presence there.”

A glare met his words. He looked grim, as though the words were offensive. “He wants to assist you with the components. He had some thoughts about items that might work more effectively. And not to worry, we do have a sufficient presence there. As we speak, my forces are working on weaving additional traps by tunneling further outside of the mountains.”

“Peace, Tatsuo, I mean no offense. It has been a stressful time for all of us. But not to worry,” he said to himself almost, “I am certain we will win this yet, even if we have suffered setbacks.”

A speck grew closer in the sky then, approaching the glade. A sly eye moving sideways was followed by whispered words. “Yamihorobashi, do not make the wizard feel poorly for his error. He feels badly enough as it is, and it was something that could have happened to any of us.”

Morinehtar raised his eyebrows, somewhat surprised by the kindness demonstrated just now. After all, his fellow Wizard had certainly not impressed any of Tatsuo’s army when he had first been introduced, including the one who stood beside him now. He was too eccentric, too odd at times. But as with many things, there was more to most that met the eye, and the rider of the newly landed mount was certainly a good example.

His brown robes fluttered in the light wind as he dismounted, muttering to himself. When he saw Morinehtar, he smiled. “Ah, it is good to see you!”

“Radagast, I am glad you made the journey safely!”

“Well of course. We simply had to follow our guide,” and he bowed in gratitude to Tatsuo, then looked slightly grave. “We doubled-back when I saw a signal from the Withered Heath. Apparently a party of dwarves breached the warded tunnels below Framsburg. One of your Ryū-ningen was tunneling under those ruins to mark additional warding zones and spotted them, but ignored them. She pretended to be a Long-worm of the variety that only senses motion and sound yet still tunnels through the earth and stone, quick thinking on her part, for Were-worms are held in poor regard by the dwarves of Erebor. Should they end up being trapped, she may assume mannish form to assist them, but she preferred to have them assume she was a Long-worm of the Grey Mountains and hope that they leave.”

Tatsuo nodded, uncertain if the decision was the most prudent, for those of the West held no positive regard for Worms of any sort, but he would have to trust she knew what would be best. “What were they doing there? Had they heard at all of our battle? It should not do for it to leak out, those of the West cannot be trusted to stay their hands and would seek the ruin of my kind.”
Radagast sputtered. “I should think they could be trusted as needed, especially knowing all you have done in the ages-long fight against Sauron!”

“Peace, Chairo no Mahōtsukai. You know as well as I that if they heard of a dragon-upon-dragon war so close to their northern realms, they would attack as soon as they could gather forces, to decimate all of my kind. They have no regard for differentiating between us and label all of us as evil spawn. Look only to the Battle of Five Armies, assuming my kin were Morgoth's dark spawn and not once thinking of what might be the truth, that they were bound by the cruelest of sorcery!” Radagast nodded reluctantly, knowing this was unfortunately true, and that it would do no good for the protection of his forest, the wide span of woods that included Eryn Lasgalen in its northern expanse. Indeed, his mistake had almost cost Thranduil his life, setting off the orc assault that caught the Wood-elves off guard, and he could not afford to make another error. Strange how one small mistake could set a domino effect of so many other changes in motion, changing what Galadriel’s mirror had forecast when he looked at possible future events years ago. He was certain that their war against the dragons of the Withered Heath would have been won by now had he not made his tactical error.

Morinehtar motioned for Radagast to follow him by placing an arm around his shoulders, sensing his grief and regret, and sent a glance to his mount, Gwaihir, who gave him a return look that was almost akin to a mannish shrug.

“Come, Radagast, help me to make the items you need to take back with you. Then I must return my attention to my tasks here.” Morinehtar was curious to learn what had happened over the year since he had last seen those who deployed West, having been much too busy to follow Western events closely given his own immense task, rallying the Eastern kingdoms against the forces of Sauron. His mission had been somewhat successful, he knew, as far fewer Easterlings joined Sauron than the Dark Lord had anticipated. And he had forged many important and useful alliances over time, such as those with Tatsuo and his kin. After the ring was destroyed, his mission had changed and had become more overwhelming in some ways, attempting to guide the containment of uprising and potential civil war that threatened some of the key Eastern realms.

They bid goodbye to the others, Gwaihir departing with Tatsuo for the far Eastern desert, Saigo no Sabaku, where the leader of the Ryū-ningen that had traveled West would attempt to convince the other tribes to join them. The Ryū-ningen told Yamihorobashi that he would return before departing for the West again. The Fenghuang flew to the large bamboo forest that he called home to gather more of his own kin to transport the additional Ryū-ningen to the West.

Radagast looked at Morinehtar as they walked to his Tàilàn and sighed. “I am not built for war, Morinehtar.”

“Are any of us?”

Radagast grunted. “Saruman was. Gandalf can be a force in battle. Not me.” He sighed again.

“Tatsuo said you should not blame yourself, and besides, what is done is done. It certainly sounds like victory is almost at hand. The dragons of the Withered Heath will be contained, eliminating the renewed threat they had posed to those in the West and the East, and none there will be the wiser, as Tatsuo has asked of us.”

“Still, it is hard to not blame myself for what happened to some of the Ryū-ningen. And Thranduil. The Elvenking of the forest south of the Mountains.” Radagast spoke as though to remind the Blue Wizard who the elf was.

“I know of him, remember? No need to explain that. Rómostámo and I traveled through that forest
when we first arrived, although his father Oropher was king at that time. And recall that Thranduil himself came East.”

“Ah yes, that is right, I forgot about all of that, you had told me happened with his wife.” He held his hand to his head. “I fear my mind is not working as well as it should be. It has been this way since, since…” His eyes grew more focused. “No matter. I failed. I did not hold Mirkwood safe.” He shook his head again. “I still do not know what I was thinking, why I did not consider those orcs a threat. As a result, Thranduil was gravely injured. Yet he survives, I am told.”

Morinehtar sighed. “You did what you could, I am certain. Hopefully he will recover, and if the Long-worms are contained, they will not threaten the forest again.”

Radagast nodded. “The Long-worms are contained for now. It is strange how one seemingly small decision can change the course of events. If I had thought differently, had I not been distracted, I think this would have turned out differently.”

Morinehtar stood silently, as he agreed. But it could not be helped now.

“Come, Radagast. There are far more important things for us to do right now than spend your time on regrets and cycle through them over and over. Let us make those additional ward ingredients, and then I must return to matters at hand here. The political environment remains volatile in key kingdoms after the victory in the West, and I must continue to work to contain that as well as I can.”

They ascended into Morinehtar’s Tàilàn, setting to work as they updated one another on happenings since their last meeting.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin Translations:
fëar = souls
hrōar = bodies
Naneth = mother
Ithryn Luin = Blue Wizards

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Japanese translations courtesy of Raelien (thank you!):
Yamihorobashi = "Darkness Destroyer" in Japanese (aka Darkness Slayer) = Morinehtar = Alatar the Maia
Kyokutō no Tetsudai = "Helper of the (far) East" = Rómestámo = Palladano
Chairo no Mahōtsukai = Brown Wizard
Ryū-ningen = Were-worm
Saigo no Sabaku = Last Desert
Ao no Mahōtsukai-sama = Noble Blue Wizard

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Shénmì de sēnlín = Mysterious Forest (Chinese via google translate, apologies if there are errors)
Tàilàn = Talan (Chinese)

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Dagor Dagorath = The Last Battle, or Battle of Battles, after which the world will be remade. "All free peoples" of Middle-Earth participate as well as the Valar, Maiar, etc. Some are prophesied to be summoned from the dead, such as Túrin (it could be argued
Tolkien intended this to be Tulkas using Turin's sword, but I'm choosing the Turin route), so perhaps Aragorn would be as well.

Tatsuo = A Japanese name meaning “dragon man.” In this story, Tatsuo is a leader of a group of far Eastern dragon shape-shifters (see Ryū-ningen/Were-worms below).

Ryū-ningen = Were-worm (Japanese). In The Hobbit, Bilbo talks of Were-worms during the Unexpected Party. “Tell me what you want done, and I will try it, if I have to walk from here to the East of East and fight the wild Were-worms in the Last Desert.” Tolkien doesn't say that they are shapeshifters and an argument could be made that he intended them to simply be huge, very intelligent dragons (given how he uses the "were-") prefix for creatures, but in this story I've made them shapeshifters. A person could also assume they are “evil” creatures but I'm not, based on dragons being often-positive symbols of power, strength, honor, and nobility in far East Asian cultures (Dragons in European contexts tend to be much more negatively perceived, aggressive, etc). I'm extending this difference in viewpoint to assume Middle-earth's Western dragons are more prone to cause destruction (although they greatly prefer to just be left alone, generally-speaking), and the Eastern ones are more likely to be valiant (although all would be feared). ETA: I wrote up to chapter 26 before BOFA, so modified the Ryū-ningen backstory slightly to incorporate Were-worms that were unwillingly used to tunnel/etc by sorcerous means.

Fenghuang. A mythological bird of East Asia that reigns over other birds. In ancient times, one version was described as having a beak similar to a rooster, a face like a swallow, a fowls forehead, a neck like a snake, the chest of a goose, a back like a tortoise, hindquarters like a stag and the tail of a fish. It is described differently in current times. In this story, I am making them similar to the Eagles: Large, intelligent, etc. They are outside-canon and not Manwé’s creation, but rather a product of the sorcery Alatar and Palladano have dabbled in.

Mannish Culture of the East. Based on (primarily physical) descriptions of Easterlings, of which there were many different nations, many Tolkien scholars estimate that “Easterlings” were intended to be equivalent to East Asian and Indian ethnicities. Some may have been Eastern-based dwarves as well, based on the description of some as short, stocky and bearded. There is very little written about the East, and much of what I’ve done has been based on educated guesses, and I hope none of it is offensive—if so, let me know.

Radagast. (Maia name = Aiwendil = bird friend). Radagast in this story is based on beyond-canon guesses. Tolkien scholar John D. Rateliff speculates Radagast took the Mirkwood area under his protection much as the Blue Wizards took the East under theirs. Others speculate his role was to protect flora and fauna. Radagast’s canon story in LOTR isn’t very detailed: He unwittingly helps Gandalf be lured to Orthanc, and then he helps Gandalf be rescued by the Eagles. He can’t be found when Elrond’s messengers search for him to aid in the War, and in this story Gandalf isn’t able to find him after the fellowship dissolves either, so he moves on to visit Tom Bombadil.

Dwarves in the East. There are four tribes of dwarves that live in the Orocarni Mountains (Red Mountains) that run through the center of Rhûn (Ironfists, Blacklocks, Stonefoots, and Stiffbeards). The Stonefoots and others may have sent forces to help Durin’s Folk during the War of Dwarves and Orcs.
Underneath Ruins and Stone

Chapter Summary

In the tunnels below Framsburg, Faramir and his companions complete his betrothal quest, but face the problem of finding a route to the surface. Under the Mountain, Pippin learns more of the marital customs of Durin’s Folk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Faramir studied the cavern that Gimli and Adlia had found prior to the group’s accidental entrapment in the tunnels below Framsburg. He laid a hand on Gimli’s shoulder, shaking his head slightly at what he saw, his face a mixture of curiosity and concern.

The cavern’s floor was filled with luminescent plants that seemed to have no need of sunlight to grow, for no means of obtaining light could be seen. Scattered randomly, they seemed akin to an above-ground field of short wildflowers without the petals, having a similar range of scents, some of which were welcoming, some not.

“Master Dwarf, I must say once more that this is indeed a strange sight. The more I look at it, the more I am struck by how I have never seen anything like it.”

“Aye, Master Steward. But this shall make for a memorable tale, will it not? Your betrothal mead ingredient found amidst strange plants below the desolate ruins of Eowyn’s ancestral home, with the imminent threat of dragon attack looming before us.” Gimli was animated, his affinity for adventure at the fore.

Faramir chuckled as he reflected on the dwarf’s talent for weaving words as he told stories, and then he grew pensive. “After Adlia and Glorfindel return from scouting, we shall take a turn, you and I. I must say that this cavern makes me restless.”

Faramir gazed once more around the large structure, strange for reasons other than its greenery. At least the dwarves thought it was unusual, as the stone echoed with faint vibrations that none of them could quite place, not dangerous per se, but strange. Hence they maintained watch at all times, although all had been uneventful thus far.

A narrow stream of water ended in a small pool of water in the cavern’s northwest corner, the stream entering via an opening barely bigger than the flow of water itself, and as far as the dwarves could determine, there did not seem to be any companion caverns in the vicinity. Dwalin stood guard at the cavern’s entrance and Bofur walked the perimeter, frequently communing with the stone walls for any sign of an encroaching incursion by the Long-worm. The Broadbeam was a miner by trade, and of this group was best able to assess the learnings of stone. Having encountered the Worm on that single (and hopefully only) occasion, they now knew first-hand how quickly it could approach. Constant vigilance was their best weapon. Glorfindel was best-suited to sense an incursion when they walked the dirt-walled tunnels, but dwarven detection skill exceeded his when they could commune with stone and rock, even if said stone seemed strange.

“Hmph, this is surely more of a sight for my elf than either of us. I wonder what he would make of it.
It certainly does not have the beauty of Aglarond, though I imagine the Princeling might disagree.”

The Steward smiled, looking fondly at Gimli. “Well, we simply need to harvest something suitable and find a way out, and I will have fulfilled at least one obligation of my contract.”

“Hmph, not to mention an important custom of the Mark, dear friend.”

Faramir smiled even more widely. “And are there customs you will need to fulfill for Legolas? What is unique to elves in their path to union, aside from the placement of marital rings on the index finger?”

“Surely no Rohirric-style betrothal quest, I grant that. You won’t see us traipsing around the countryside as a condition for marriage, although I must say the custom is charming. I daresay that if you are permitted to view it, you would see more that seems foreign in our dwarven vowing ceremony than you will see with the public portion of the Wood-elves’ avowals.”

“The public portion?” Faramir raised an eyebrow. He knew little of the marital customs of Durin’s folk given how they guarded their customs from outsiders, and understood that when he attended the wedding he might not be allowed to view many of the well-guarded dwarven portions. But the Steward knew much of elven marital customs, having studied their ways as he had studied so many other things. And he found some strange amusement in feigning a lack of knowledge with this dwarf that had grown to be a dear friend to both Éowyn’s and himself.

Gimli did not fall for the bait, however. “Hmph, Master Steward, you know well enough of what I speak!” A twinkle grew in his eyes. “I am well aware of your studious manner and thirst for knowledge. I am certain you know of the marital customs of elves, at least the basic components.”

Faramir’s soft features were merry, appreciating the brevity of the moment in this disquieting situation of entrapment below Framsburg. “I am not sure about you, Master Dwarf, but I am most eager to complete this Quest and return to my beloved. Shall we inspect the plants?”

“Aye, we shall, for I share your sentiment.” Before Faramir could say anything, he spoke again. “To return to my own beloved, not to Éowyn, as fond as I am of her.” He grew serious. “Though given that I am so fond of her, I have appreciated this time to grow to know you even more fully. I knew before this journey that she had chosen well, and it heartens me that I see this even more fully now.”

Faramir inclined his head, flattered by the compliment. Then they checked with Dwalin and Bofur to see if they desired replacement in their vigils, but each declined.

So the Steward of Gondor and his ginger-haired friend picked their way through the plants to the area where Merry was working. The hobbit was attempting to determine which plants to choose as potential mead ingredients and thus conclude their Quest. While Merry was no Wood-elf or an expert gardener like Sam, he had the most knowledge of plants amongst those present simply because he was a hobbit. Hobbits, on average, took more interest in the growing of flowers, vegetables, and other greenery than men or most certainly dwarves. Even though it was not a primary interest of his own, Merry had enough basic expertise that he could generate ideas as to what plants might be potential mead ingredients. The group planned to leave the actual inspection of the candidate plants to Legolas, who would examine them for edibleness and, they hoped, actually recognize them.

“Faramir, Gimli!” Merry spoke quietly yet firmly as they approached, ever mindful that they must keep themselves restrained in order to avoid attracting undue attention from their potential tunnel cohabitant, the Long-worm that seemed to sense sound and movement.

“Aye, Master Hobbit? Tell us what you have decided on for the Steward.”
He led them to each of the plants he had been considering. “It’s unfortunate Legolas didn’t join us, he would know far more than I. Or Sam,” he said wistfully. “So this plant here, it seems like it is spiced almost like pumpkin, it might be lovely as a flavor additive. Or this one, I think it would serve as a grain substitute.” He pointed out several others, and both Faramir and Gimli were impressed with the Hobbit’s work.

And then Merry paused, calculating the best way to convey his concern. “But Gimli, Faramir…I’ve decided that I don’t think we should use these plants. They’re strange, I don’t understand how they could grow underground, and certainly you don’t either. What if they’re poisonous, and Legolas isn’t able to categorize them?”

“Aye, Master Hobbit, I understand your concern. I certainly have never seen anything like this. But I have seen the conservatories the Wood-elves keep in the Elvenking’s halls, and if that is possible, perhaps this is as well.”

“But Gimli, you told me that those caverns all have some amount of sunlight. Not to mention the benefit of Wood-elves tending to the plants.”

“Aye, I agree with you Merry, as does Faramir. This is strange, and we do not have an adequate explanation. But if any might, it shall be the Wood-elves, I think. If they do not think your choices are safe, so be it. Aside from this, remember that my kin, including Adlia, hope to reclaim the Grey Mountains at some point, and if these unknown plants are growing here, they may being growing there as well….it is something that merits study regardless of Faramir’s quest.”

Faramir completely agreed, and his naturally calm manner soothed the hobbit’s worry. “If these end up being unsuitable, we shall have water from the river near the ruins as a back-up. We shall not find anything else in the ruins, we have searched for too long, and this cavern is so close to the surface that it suffices in Gimli’s mind. The weather will continue to grow colder and less suitable for a Quest. This is the best we can do, I think.”

And although they didn’t say it, each hoped their exit would be swift and uneventful, for they knew the more significant challenge was the one that remained, namely the Long-worm while finding a route to the surface.

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A distance away, Glorfindel and Adlia mapped the tunnels below Framsburg, searching for the needed exit route. There had been no sign of the Long-worm in the few days that they had searched thus far, and for that they were thankful.

Their scouting had passed quickly, for Adlia seemed to have a perfect memory for the paths they traveled and an inherent talent for finding routes, one that apparently surpassed that of her companions. And so it was almost routine, becoming an-almost tedious puzzle that needed to be solved, were it not for the potential threat of the Long-worm.

Even so, they had talked quietly during their exploration of the tunnels, trading additional stories of their lives beyond what they had spoken of thus far, building upon the surprisingly easy camaraderie that was growing between them. Now they sat at the side of one of the tunnels, stopping to eat before moving onward once more.

The dwarrowdam sat with her back against the tunnel’s wall, her boot-covered feet straight in front of her, one hand behind her head as she chewed on the dwarven bread Glorfindel had retrieved from their supplies in Framsburg’s Main Hall.
“Tell me, Master Elf, did you bring anything to drink?” She tilted her head, covertly studying his facial expressions as she might a finely crafted weapon or piece of jewelry. He nodded, pulling out a flask.

She took a drink and then suddenly spit it out. “Pfft! What in Mahal’s name is that? It tastes most foul!”

“A specialty of Pippin Took. Dorwinion wine mixed with dwarven spirits. Not bad, if I say so myself.” He took the flask back, taking a long swallow, and passed her a flask of water.

Adlia wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, grimacing all the while. “Leave it to elves to enjoy something like that!”

He smiled. “I just hope you like Faramir’s wedding mead more.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“You will be going to the wedding, will you not?” He had a serene expression on his face and a glow in his eyes, one that led Adlia to avert her gaze under the pretense of retying the bindings on her boots.

She frowned. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Well of course you need to go. If we get stuck in a tunnel on the way there, who will get us out?”

Adlia grumbled, a bit embarrassed. “I am certain you could find a way out. And how exactly would you get stuck in a tunnel on the way to Rohan?”

“If I am escorting Masters Peregrin and Meriadoc, who knows what might happen.”

She laughed softly with him. “Aye. You will end up pursued by Balrogs or Dragons or worse.” She grew serious. “I do not laugh at them, let that be clear. They simply seem to have a penchant for mischief, and at times it works out for the better. More often than not, I imagine.” She thought specifically of Gimli and Legolas, and how a lack of hobbitish curiosity may have doomed the potential betrothal between the two.

“Yet you and Gimli were friends as dwarrowlings, were you not?”

“Aye?” Her look of confusion at his question was clear.

“Certainly you found your share of mischief together?”

“Aye.” She chuckled, a great many stories filling her mind. And she decided to relay him with several, his interest peaking when she told him how far she and Gimli followed Thorin Oakenshield’s Company until they were discovered by Dwalin and Balin. Although his smile was equally wide when she told him the story of how they accidentally dyed Glóin’s beard bright purple when they replaced his hair cream with the cream Gimli used when cleaning his axe.

“Hmm, an unexpected chemical reaction?” He sat with his arm loosely draped over his knee, his namesake long, flowing golden hair falling around his shoulders.

“Aye, perhaps. Let’s just say our Amads and Adads didn’t let us participate in weapons training until Durin’s Day. And we had to sit out the celebration that year. It was quite the punishment.”

“Yet worth it, I see?” He could tell by her facial expression that she greatly enjoyed reminiscing
“Absolutely. Though don’t tell Glóin that, he’ll have my beard.” She smiled at him, and then sobered somewhat. “You know, Master Elf, you are a conundrum to me.”

“Oh? How so?” He drank from the flask once more, offering it to her again, which she steadfastly refused.

“Elves are inscrutable. Haughty. Oh, certainly there are those like Lord Elrond, at least from what I hear, that are good-hearted and kind, but even he is said to be distant, hard to talk to, very proper and well-mannered…”

Glorfindel laughed softly, as much as he dared in their current predicament. “And I am not well-mannered?”

“You know what I mean. You aren’t a typical elf.” It wasn’t a question, simply a statement.

“I daresay you may not be a typical dwarf.” He looked at her closely, a fond smile on his face.

“Eh? What do you mean?”

He shrugged, as much as Glorfindel would shrug, as everything the elf did was inherently graceful. “I am not certain. I suppose I’m surprised you’ve been so forthright about your history, your life…”

“Aye, for your ears only, remember?”

“Of course.”

“So, Master Elf, any chance I can talk you into going to the surface this again eve and cook something for us? This dwarven bread, it wears thin. And the hobbit, well, we do not need him complaining about his rations.”

“Ah, I did that already while you slept last night, as I suspected you would say that.”

She inclined her head in a gesture of satisfaction. “And, by chance, did you bring my pipe?”

He shook his head. “Master Dwarf, you know that would be foolish.” He stood, stretching his sleek form as he did. “Let’s go. We can search for a few more hours before we must return to the cavern.”

“Aye.” And she watched Glorfindel walk down the tunnel before she followed, knowing that thoughts of her pipe weren’t the only foolish thing beginning to cross her mind.

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As Glorfindel and Adlia searched the tunnels beneath Framsburg, Pippin sat in Thorin III Stonehelm’s study. The hobbit had arrived in the late afternoon, seeking an audience with the King Under the Mountain to resolve some of the confusing stipulations of the betrothal contract.

When the hobbit had taken his concerns to the Elvenqueen, she had firmly told him that some items absolutely required further negotiation, for Thorin wanted to keep the betrothal, ceremony, and marriage contracts separate from one another. It was a matter of dwarven tradition and efficiency, Pippin learned, for the betrothal contract covered broad aspects of the engagement and marriage,
including bounds of the dissolution of the latter, and key ceremony elements. The ceremony contract had a different intent, taking the broad themes of the betrothal contract and working through them in minute detail. And the marital contract? Well, that would be for the Elvenqueen and Thorin to finish at a later date, as it was irrelevant to the ceremony itself and Pippin’s role.

Pippin had been embarrassed when the Elvenqueen clarified this, for Thorin himself had briefly mentioned the ceremony contract when the hobbit was in Erebor, but in the midst of everything, the Took had forgotten. Yet both he and Galion had been surprised when the Elvenqueen almost gently told him it was to be expected that he would forget some details simply because there was far too much information for anyone to remember.

The hobbit had begun to make an impression on the Elvenqueen, Galion thought, for her to not react in her entirely cold manner in the face of a forgetful mistake.

And so Pippin had left Eryn Lasgalen for a brief stay in Erebor, to act as her emissary in the drafting of the ceremony contract.

Pippin had already peppered the King Under the Mountain with several questions, and the dwarrow had answered them cheerfully. This hobbit, after all, was the reason Gimli’s desire was coming to fruition in the first place, and Thorin would have answered almost anything for him to show his gratitude and respect. And beside that, Thorin was impressed by the hobbit’s due diligence and desire to get things right, a well-admired quality amongst dwarves, even if it wasn’t always apparent from the hobbit’s actions and demeanor.

“So Thorin, my next question regards the dwarven tradition of crafting jewelry for your One. Is it included in the ceremony? The Elvenqueen said that Wood-elves and Sindar don’t, aside from the ring that is commissioned, that it’s a Noldor custom to exchange jewelry. Well, at least the part about parents giving their child’s spouse a jewel during the ceremony, often set upon a necklace.”

“Nay, Master Hobbit, we have no such marital custom. As is written in the contract, Gimli’s Amad will weave a tapestry that depicts the joining of the two houses, and present it to Legolas at the ceremony, but as with many things, only Legolas and Gimli will be permitted to look upon it. She has begun work on it already. As far as jewelry goes, that is for Gimli to craft on his own and provide to Legolas privately. Aside from the exchange of rings during the ceremony, of course, but that is an elvish and mannish custom, not one of ours. Now, jewelry is a typical Longbeard courting gift, so long as it is crafted, not purchased. It is common for us to craft a range of fine things for our One, an armband with fine engravings, a ceremonial belt buckle of strong metal, or even a fine stone set as a necklace. Even something quickly crafted can be a suitable courting gift.”

“I had no idea.” Pippin looked at Thorin III Stonehelm with a strange expression on his face. An image of the crystal necklace that Gimli had made for Legolas near the Glittering Caves came to mind. It had seemed to have been a gift of friendship, but now Pippin saw that it meant much more to Gimli.

“No idea of what, Master Hobbit?” The King Under the Mountain sat in his private study, twirling a quill between his fingers as he paused in his taking of notes as they worked on the ceremony contract.

“Oh, I’m just impressed by how you craft everything.” He decided this was something Gimli wouldn’t want him to tell others, and he started to change the topic, but then was struck by a thought. “When I was in Eryn Lasgalen, I made the Elvenqueen a woven strand of flowers. And I gave you the Longbottom Leaf. Giving gifts to hosts is a hobbit tradition, but if I was a dwarf, it could be considered an effort to court?”
“Aye, or simply an expression of your love for your One.”

Pippin cleared his throat, growing suddenly uncomfortable. “You do know I wasn’t courting you, correct? That the giving of gifts, even jewelry, means something different for me?”

Thorin chuckled, his bearded face kind and warm. “Of course. But I should add, our gifts for our One are typically jewelry or something else to be worn on the body, and pipeweed is neither of those. Had you given me a necklace I may have wondered about your regard for me, but truly I would have been well-advised to check your intention with you. You are not a dwarf, after all, and I would not expect your customs to be the same as mine. Did you not mention that Gimli and Legolas crafted you a pipe in Rohan as a gift? And they said it was expressly in regard of your customs, was it not?”

Pippin nodded, and Thorin smiled.

"Now, what is next on your list?"

Pippin took a long sip of the dwarven spirits Thorin had poured for him. As outgoing as the hobbit was, this topic wasn’t one he felt entirely comfortable discussing with a King, even if he had briefly done so before.

“My highness, there is a problem with the elven binding ceremony. It doesn’t fit the parameters of the dwarven consummation.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Well, the elves require…physical intimacy to wed, and you would like Gimli and Legolas to remain celibate for seven days…”

Thorin laughed heartily, and Pippín’s face grew red with embarrassment. “Ah, I do not laugh at you, dear one. I’m amused by the idea of a dwarf refraining from sexual relations for seven days after they are married! I absolutely understand that the elven binding will take place on the same day as the elven exchange of vows, but I understand why you were confused. I will explain this to you, and I apologize in advance, for it will make you uncomfortable.”

Pippin shrugged. He’d brought up the topic, and surely that was the most embarrassing part?

Thorin smiled and launched into a brief explanation. “I cannot write our sacred customs into a contract, and I must ask you to keep this to yourself. You may tell the Elvenqueen of course, but let her know it is for her ears only. And Legolas will be told by Gimli.” Pippin nodded solemnly, and Thorin continued. “The dwarven consummation primarily refers to the exchange of True-Names during sexual intercourse within the dwarven-built abode. The abode must be blessed in Mahal’s name each day by the one who conducts the ceremony, which in this case is myself. As you know, seven days must be spent to this effect…”

He was interrupted by a knock at his study door, which Pippin didn’t mind, for the conversation had already treaded further than he had been prepared for. Hobbits simply didn’t talk about this, at least not the ones he knew. He and Merry occasionally discussed sexual matters, but they were best friends. Certainly discussion would not be so easy with acquaintances.

At the door was a member of Thorin’s personal guard, and he conveyed a soft message to the King, who then turned to Pippin. “Master Peregrin, I must take your leave for some moments.” He turned to the guard. “Will you summon one of the Company to keep Master Peregrin entertained? He grew to know them well during his previous stay.”
Thorin departed, and soon enough Nori had joined Pippin in the King’s study, greeting the hobbit warmly.

Pippin then explained what had brought him back to see the King Under the Mountain. “Ah,” said Nori, “that is why he was discussing consummation customs with you.”

Pippin raised an eyebrow at Nori’s bluntness.

“The King told me, in the event you brought it up to me. We keep such things secret amongst us, as you know.” Nori sat down, crossing his arms over his chest as he relaxed in a chair across from Pippin.

Pippin nodded, moving to refill his glass and one for Nori with the dwarven spirits Thorin had left in the study.

“So, what questions can I answer for you?”

“Oh, I can wait until Thorin gets back…” but when a disappointed look crossed Nori’s face, Pippin changed his mind. He knew that feeling all too well. “On second thought, Thorin was interrupted when he told me that he must bless Gimli’s dwarven home, and then they must consummate their marriage at least once a day for seven days.” There. That didn’t feel so awkward, especially since Nori had brought it up first. Perhaps he was growing more used to discussing this.

“Aye, and he told you of the exchange of True-Names?”

“Yes, but then he had to leave.” Yet what more could there be?

“Hmm, I can complete the background for you. And you understand that this goes no further? It is only for you to know in your role, which involves protecting that which we must keep secret.” Pippin nodded gravely, and Nori settled back in his chair, propping his feet up on Thorin’s ottoman. “Ah, these chairs are much more comfortable than my own. I should craft myself some new ones. Thorin built these himself, you know, in such a short time. Feels a dwarf worth his or her beard should craft what they are able to.”

Pippin was impressed.

“Now, where to begin. When dwarrows marry and conduct the seven-day consummation activities…” and as Nori discussed various required aspects of said activities in great detail, much too great of detail, Pippin’s eyes quickly grew wide and his mouth nearly dropped open. By the end, the hobbit imagined his face matched the scarlet-hued dwarven spirits decanter sitting beside them. Pippin knew Nori was forthright, but this?

“Now, these relations must occur at least once a day for seven days using all of those elements and conditions. It is our way of making marital sexual relations different from non-marital ones in the eyes of Mahal. And a means of enhancing the sacredness of our vows.” He leaned forward with a glint in his eye. “If a couple is able to perform seven times a day for the entire week, we consider them to be particularly blessed. I imagine Gimli might be up for that task! Rumor has it his Adad did so very easily, and like Adad so does his laddie, as they say. Wore Nuris right out, I straight imagine! Or maybe vice versa,” he said with a hearty chuckle.

That was certainly another piece of information Pippin didn’t want to know.

Nori described a few other aspects of the dwarven consummation week in his jovial, straightforward manner. Pippin remained red-faced and silent, his eyes wide, marveling at the dwarrow’s bluntness while dearly wishing he could forget most of the details of what the dwarf said. Dwarves may be
secretive, but they—or at least this one—certainly weren’t shy. Hobbits didn’t talk thus, at least the hobbits Pippin knew. Why, the simple mention of marriage to Sam brought a blush to his face. Imagine speaking to him about the details of sexual relations!

Pippin coughed, and then took another long draught of the clear dwarven spirits. “Well, I think that clears that item up.”

“So what would you like to know next?”

Pippin attempted to search his mind for the most neutral question he could think of. But unfortunately his mind had gone completely blank.

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“And this message arrived just now?” Thorin III Stonehelm looked once more at the parchment that had been sent via messenger bird from Minas Tirith, detailing the impending arrival of Elrohir and the purpose of his travel.

“Aye, my King.” The guard nodded, then returned to his firm-footed stance.

“Have we received any word from Framsburg?” Thorin knew the answer was no, as he would have been informed, but he needed to ask regardless.

“Nay. There have been no messages.”

“Tell Dori to coordinate a message to be sent to Framsburg. I will write it now. We will need to use some of the specially-trained ravens that are capable of seeking Gimli if he is no longer in the ruins. I would prefer to save Lord Elrond’s son as much travel time as possible, if he indeed needs to locate Gimli for King Elessar.” He paused. “I wonder what this concerns. I hope it is nothing serious.” Yet Thorin knew it might not be his place to ask. Gimli was good friends with Aragorn, and the matter could very well be personal, especially in light of the elf enroute to fetch him.

“And Faramir’s retinue? Do you think we should send them to Framsburg? I know that Dwalin had talked of potentially proceeding to Rivendell from the ruins if the trip seemed passable, and if Gimli travels southward without returning here, Faramir would need to return to the Mountain alone.”

“Nay, my King. Adlia would accompany him on his return journey.”

Thorin pondered that. “I was wary of the three of them possibly returning without the others, but as a party of two, no, I cannot accept that. Let Faramir’s guards know that they should prepare for travel to the ruins. One can never be too careful.”

The guard raised an eyebrow. “Yet you are comfortable with the Rivendell elf transporting Gimli? That is a simple party of two.”

“Aye, but elvish horses are much swifter than other mounts, and elves can go with less sleep than the rest of us require, reducing the problems that would arise with nightly watch duty. A host of problems become less significant.”

The guard nodded swiftly.

“And have someone take a message to Glóin and Nuris to let them know that their son will be traveling to Gondor to assist Elessar.” Thorin then beckoned the guard to leave, and the King Under the Mountain began to work on his missive to Gimli, wondering briefly once more of the cause of the message, but then pushed the question from his mind.
“It blocks our exit, we must be prepared to kill it. I do not see any other option. Are there any dissenters?” Adlia posed her question to the others as they gathered in the large cavern. Adlia and Glorfindel had returned earlier after their latest scouting trip, having found a potential escape route. It was a slanted tunnel some distance from the cavern, and it clearly led to the surface. The only problem, which was significant, was that it was occupied by a sleeping Long-worm. It appeared to be the same Worm they had previously encountered, which made their desire to leave the vicinity of the tunnels that much more urgent. A dragon below the ruins of Framsburg was not something they were prepared to endure much longer, being ill-equipped to fight it should it attack. Luck and diligence would only take them so far, and soon enough it seemed the risk increased that they might encounter the Long-worm in an even less desirable manner. For even if it slept, it might awaken at any moment.

“I am not certain that engaging a Long-worm in battle is prudent. I would rather we continue to search for an alternative way out. If the Worm has settled where it is, surely it act as other dragons do and simply remain there for a long period of time, in its new home, as it were.” The Steward of Gondor attempted to be as contemplative as possible, even as he knew no good options lay before them. Yet he was not one to give up easily.

But neither was Adlia, and they simply saw the situation differently. “Aye, Master Faramir, I would agree, but we cannot stay here forever. I believe we have exhausted our options. And what if it decides to simply destroy us? Dragons have their whims, even this type does, and surely Arda will be better off being rid of this spawn.”

Faramir glanced at Glorfindel, who clearly agreed. “It is not my desired course of action either, but it is the only other exit we have found, aside from the way we entered, which remains impassable to all but I. Our options are to build a means for all to cross the hole it created, or work our way around the Long-worm, and we must be prepared to deliver its destruction.”

“But why would it have burrowed to the surface, when you said these types of Worms stay underground?” Merry felt a great deal of unease at the solution they were considering, and wanted to be sure it had been thought through. For while a dragon firework might be a welcomed sight, one
seen in person was not, even if it was wingless and did not breathe fire. It seemed like a strange tale from his childhood, almost, battling a dragon to earn an exit.

“Ah, my apologies, Master Hobbit. While you rested, the elf scouted the location, and determined that the tunnel leads into another cave, and that cave leads to an exit, for he could smell the outside air coming through. It is not far from the surface whatsoever, and there must be a sufficiently sized exit for an elf to be able to smell the air in a cavern like this. My point being, Master Hobbit, is that I think the exit from the other cave is a naturally made one, and the Worm had tunneled up there as he burrowed, but he considered it a dead-end, not a path to the world above as we would.” Unless the worm was tunneling for orcs or goblins, but the haphazard nature and small size of the tunnels seemed to discount that theory, for these tunnels were very different than the ones carved during the Battle of Five Armies.

Adlia’s explanation made more sense to Merry, although his queasiness about the idea did not dissipate.

All of them were queasy about the idea, yet from what Adlia had described, killing the Worm would be swift, especially at the hands of an elf renowned for skill with his sword. They had no desire to remain in these tunnels, for all other paths simply led up to the Grey Mountains, likely still infested with smatterings of orcs, goblins, and worms, though surely those numbers had been reduced post-Ring War, as many of the two-legged evil spawn would have been recruited for Sauron’s army.

“What do you say to preparing something to eat, thinking on this idea, and then acting on it, unless we have second thoughts?” Bofur stood to the side, chewing on some of the dwarvish bread.

“Aye, that is a good idea.” Dwalin and Merry moved to look through the provisions with Bofur.

After they ate, Glorfindel moved to sit by Adlia, who had removed her boots and was dangling her feet in the small stream that traversed the cavern. They further strategized their potential escape and reviewed possible battle strategies once more. Glorfindel polished his finely crafted sword as they spoke, and Adlia was drawn to its craftsmanship.

“Tell me, Master Elf, who crafted your sword? I have never seen such a fine weapon.”

“It was given to me in Aman, a gift from Fingon. He told me he understood Aulë himself crafted it, although of that I am not certain.”

The dwarrowdam knew her upcoming request was highly unorthodox, but at the mention of Mahal, she could resist no longer. “May I look more closely?”

“Of course.” He didn’t hesitate to hand the weapon to her, which she took with reverence. Gimli happened to view the scene, and his eyes widened, for handling of weapons in this particular manner was a matter of intimacy, almost, amongst Durin’s Folk. A stray thought entered his mind, wondering if his childhood friend was developing a fondness for the Balrog Slayer. Certainly the golden-haired elf seemed to attract admirers wherever he went, but Adlia?

Never, he chuckled to himself. Comrades-in-arms, for surely there was much to respect in this elf who was perhaps Middle-Earth’s fiercest warrior. His eyes were seeing things that weren’t there, the product of too many days underground.

Glorfindel and Adlia spoke further of the blade’s crafting and attributes, and then she handed it back to him, wondering if she might be able to replicate such fine work.

“I would be happy to lend it to you for a time, to see if you can enhance its design via crafting of
another blade.”

She chuckled. “I doubt that, Master Elf, not if the story behind it holds true. And I am certainly not Telchar either. But if I could approximate half of its quality, I would be pleased.”

He smiled fondly. “Speaking of pleased, Master Dwarf, I would be most honored if you would accept and wear this.” He presented her with a woven braid of greenery from the plants in the cavern, and began wrapping it around her upper arm, forming a makeshift armband. Her eyes widened, and he explained. “It is—or was—a custom of my House to exchange braids of golden flowers before battle. A sign of good luck to brothers-in-arms, as it were.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “I must go find the stone I use to sharpen my sword. The blade can never be too keen if it must slay a dragon.”

And when the Balrog-Slayer left, she let her expression grow true, a nearly crestfallen look crossing her face, for what she had momentarily thought the woven braid represented was not so. But then she quickly quelled her disappointment, chastising herself for her continued foolishness.

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A short while later, Adlia approached the Steward of Gondor. “Have you harvested your chosen plants, Master Faramir?” Adlia asked as they prepared to leave.

“Yes, I have. And as Gimli has said before, what a story it will make, a mead ingredient obtained by slaying a dragon. I suppose I should slay the dragon myself, although by my calculations such an attempt would be more likely to result in us not returning to tell said story,” he said wryly.

“Aye, the quiet footsteps of the Balrog-Slayer are much more likely to help us succeed, for he will kill this Worm while it sleeps.” Adlia finished gathering her things.

Bofur and Gimli returned then from the other side of the cavern, where they had finished taking down their small camp.

“Hmph. Are we ready to depart, then?” Gimli’s mood was both stoic and fierce.

Bofur looked at everyone. “I believe so. All are prepared to fight should this go ill?” All assented, so they departed the cavern.

“Merry and I have ‘definitively decided’—his words, not mine—to bring Legolas here some day.” Gimli whispered to Faramir as they walked.

“Perhaps wait until the threat of Worms has diminished?” Faramir smiled as he whispered in return.

“Aye, although the princeling might be enticed by the thought of such a battle. Make the journey more adventurous, as it were.”

Faramir looked more closely at the ginger-haired dwarf as they moved towards the point in the tunnels where they would need to be silent. “You are serious! You would bring him back here, to adventure amidst Worms!”

“Aye. It would fire his blood, I think!” And then Gimli was struck by his own sentence, realizing that perhaps it might be a most welcome adventure to undertake after their wedding. Assist in the reclaiming of the Grey Mountains. Assuming the elf could manage the time underground. But if they indeed experienced an elven soul-based bonding like Legolas had described, surely the elf would draw strength through it from his husband.
Yes, Gimli thought with a smile amidst the rush of adrenalin produced by the upcoming danger presented by the Long-worm, there would be many adventures ahead of him with his husband.

They walked for quite some time uneventfully, and then came to a halt, reaching the point past which Adlia and Glorfindel had deemed talking, even in whispers, to be risky.

“Glorfindel and I will proceed, you provide cover as we discussed,” the dwarrowdam whispered softly to Gimli.

The ginger-haired dwarf would have chuckled had his elf been present, for surely Legolas would have seen the humor in this statement. While Gimli’s battle skill knew no equal, coverage in this situation would have been best served by the Prince’s bow, not a dwarven axe.

“Adlia,” Merry whispered as they drew in sight of the Long-worm. “See, it sleeps. Let’s just tiptoe around it. There’s enough room.”

“Impossible,” she hissed. “The elf will deliver a killing blow, and I shall follow right behind him. No more of us can go so closely, it will awaken. But be prepared, Master Hobbit, for I know you helped to kill the Witch-King, and you may yet be needed here.”

Neither Glorfindel or Adlia held any remote liking for dragons, certainly not after the destruction of homes in Gondolin and the Grey Mountains had been wrecked at least in part by Worms, even if this one was much smaller than its brethren who had produced devastation and mayhem. So without a second thought and with unparalleled skill, Glorfindel crept up to the Worm, sheathing his sword in its body in the place Adlia said it was most likely to be vulnerable. The Worm awoke from its slumber, eyes wide and in pain, and Adlia saw its huge mouth move reflexively towards the Balrog-Slayer as it released a long howl. With a fierce battle cry, Adlia assailed the Worm's head with her axe, raining blow after blow until the Worm moved no more.

“Well,” she said proudly, “That was certainly the fastest battle I have had.”

Glorfindel smiled widely at her, both overcome by the fire of victory, and the Balrog Slayer clasped her arms in a warrior's embrace. "It is good to know I have such reliable cover." He knew he would have easily escaped the Worm, at least so he thought, but this moment felt reminiscent of his battles beside warriors of his own House. This was a powerful warrior partnership, he decided. "And surely the greenery braid of my house brought us luck today."

The dwarrowdam might have blushed had she not already been flushed from the brief, ferocious, entirely one-sided battle.

“Come,” she yelled hoarsely at the others. “Follow me!”

And they easily exited to the surface, marveling at the fact they did so.

In Saigo no Sabaku, Tatsuo completed what was likely his second-last day of gathering reinforcements for the war against the dragons in the Withered Heath. He’d sent several flights of Fenghuang carrying Ryū-ningen already. At this point both the Blue and Brown Wizard thought he was gathering unnecessary assistance, yet they understood that he wanted to ensure a decisive victory and win the war while minimizing any additional casualties.
He knew the instant his bonded mate was stabbed by the sword. He could feel her pain and shock, even from such a far distance away. The helplessness that permeated his being was unending. Why had Radagast not known that she was the one who had played the role of a Long-worm in the dwarves' presence, hiding her true nature? And why had she stayed, why did she feel the need to look over those who would simply kill her? Unprovoked! He knew that was true as certainly as he knew anything.

His helplessness mingled with intense sorrow, and then he exploded into rage, shifting into his dragon form and flying through the sky, reigning fire amongst the clouds.

And when he lost all sense of contact with her, not knowing if she lived or died, his outrage forced such vividly painful sounds from his throat that they were heard at least a league or two away.

Chapter End Notes

Japanese Translations (thank you Raelien!):
Ryū-ningen = Were-worm
Last Desert: Saigo no Sabaku
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Telchar = A dwarf of Nogrod in the Blue Mountains, one of the finest smiths of the First Age, who forged Narsil and other well-known weapons and armor.

Fenghuang = the mythological Lord of Birds that is made of various animals, as described in the end note to Chapter 20. In this story, it is a product of the Blue Wizards’ sorcery.
Towards Imladris and Dorwinion

Chapter Summary

Following the one-sided battle with the Long-worm in the tunnels below Framsburg, the betrothal questors depart the ruins for different destinations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Tatsuo’s rage and sorrow flowed as streams of blazing fire far above Saigo no dezāto, the *Framsburg Fellowship*, as Merry called them, rested outside the main hall of the ruined hamlet. While the air had grown colder that it had been prior to their descent into the tunnels, the fresh open breeze was most welcome after their forced confinement underground. The walk from the cave found by Glorfindel and Adlia was a good distance from the ruins proper, yet they found their way back to Framsburg without incident.

Gimli sat beside Glorfindel on the stone steps of Fram’s Hall, the ginger-haired dwarf enjoying his well-missed pipe. “Well done, elf. That’s one less spawn of Morgoth that could bring harm to our kindred.” Gimli brought to mind the terrible tales of Smaug’s destruction, of Scatha’s, of all the dwarves killed during the decades-long War of Dwarves and Dragons...those and others who had perished from a dragon’s ire. And Glorfindel certainly had his own recollections of such carnage.

“I certainly had help.” Glorfindel glanced at Adlia, standing some yards away beside Dwalin, the pair talking quietly.

“Aye, I would say the two of you make a good team, almost as good as Legolas and I in battle.” He leaned back on his elbows, his pose relaxed as he studied the Balrog-Slayer. “Almost, but not quite.”

Glorfindel’s eyes glinted. “Is that a challenge, Master Dwarf?”

Gimli shrugged, smiling. “Hmph. Only if you want it to be. Perhaps we should return here one day, see which team can slay the most dragons. My elf would enjoy that.”

“If Adlia saw benefit to that, I would be happy to do it. Perhaps when she embarks on her own quest to reclaim the Grey Mountains. I hazard to say that they remain infested, with many opportunities presenting themselves for such battle.”

Bofur strode over, joining their conversation. “Well my dear traveling companions, given that took a mite longer than expected, I recommend we journey to Rivendell from here?”

The question drew Dwalin’s attention, and the warrior agreed. “Aye. Adequate provisions remain for such a journey, the distance is much shorter from here, and soon enough the mountain pass could be covered with snow, making our travels all the more difficult.”

Gimli nodded. “Faramir and I plan to head back to Erebor and Eryn Lasgalen, however, and perhaps Adlia as well.” He wasn’t certain of the dwarrowdam’s plans at this point. “Legolas shall inspect the plants we located, and then Faramir will travel homeward with his guards.” The dwarf, who still knew nothing of Legolas’ travel Eastward nor the reason for it, looked at Merry to inquire about the
hobbit’s travel preferences. “Master Brandybuck! Do you plan to journey to Rivendell and then to the Shire, or would you like to return to Erebor?”

The hobbit pondered and quickly made up his mind. “I need to go collect Pip, who knows what he’ll got up to while I’ve been gone! And on top of that, King Thorin offered to send a group of dwarves back with us, to help in our rebuilding of what was destroyed in the Shire. Sam was worried that it will be a lot of work, tearing down the new Shirriff-Houses and all of the construction of Sharkey’s – Saruman’s – men, and then making repairs to our hobbit holes. Thorin said he’d be happy to have send some of your kin to help us. I think….”

A squawk in the air drew their attention. It was a raven circling the skies above, preparing to land.

Bofur squinted his eyes, pointing. “It looks like one of King Thorin’s messenger birds.”

Dwalin followed his gaze, brow furrowed, signaling to the raven. “Aye. Well, let’s see what it brings us.”

The bird landed near Gimli and Dwalin, and the older warrior untied the small parchment from its right foot. The missive was concise, in part detailing King Elessar’s summons of Gimli and Elrohir’s impending arrival in the vicinity of Framsburg.

Dwalin handed it to Gimli. “It’s for you. The bird was looking for us during the last portion of our stay in the tunnels, given the date on this parchment.”

Gimli read the message and grew concerned for Aragorn, as the purpose of the summons was unclear, and the dwarf knew that it had little likelihood of good import. “And Elrohir, as well as a few members of Faramir’s White Company will be here soon.” Gimli turned to the Steward. “Thorin sent some of your guard this direction, to escort you and Adlia back to the Mountain, and Merry if he wishes. Which seems like a good plan, for you can stop in Eryn Lasgalen and have Legolas identify the plants, as I will unfortunately need to travel to Minas Tirith with Elrohir.”

Faramir nodded, for that indeed sounded best. Yet Adlia was taken aback. “Hmph! Why did Thorin send the Gondorian guard? Surely we can travel back together safely. We are warriors, after all!”

Gimli shook his head. “Aye, but he probably would have decided to do the same if it was the three of us. He’s a cautious dwarf in that respect.”

Adlia frowned, considering Gimli’s words. “Nay, more like he would feel responsible if something befell us. Still, I think it is strange.” She would have said offensive, but she did not want to speak of her King that way, as he was noble and well-intentioned. Yet she wondered, as she often had, if she would ever truly break free of the confines of her gender. Many dwarrowdams spent their lives close to home, as crafters and caretakers, even while those such as herself were devoted to the arts of war. And while no dwarf believed that a dwarrowdam needed protection, their much smaller numbers did lead to occasional undercurrents of protective behavior. Which made her grow a bit infuriated as she thought on it, but now was not the time.

Dwalin stood with his arms crossed, tapping his fingers impatiently. “Harumph! Well, there is no need to stay here any longer. Faramir, Adlia, and Merry can head back towards Erebor, and save the Steward’s men some traveling time. And you head southward with us, laddie. Lord Elrond’s son will intercept us soon enough.”

Gimli completed his reading of the missive. “Aye, you are right. But the message also says that Pippin has decided to stay in Erebor and Eryn Lasgalen for a spell longer, and that you, Merry, could travel to Rivendell with the rest of our group. Thorin will send some of our craftsfolk to assist in the
Shire. In light of that, Master Hobbit, what say you?"

Merry frowned, for it was a difficult decision. Pippin had a role Under the Mountain and in the Elvenking’s Wood, but Merry had no interest in wedding planning. Surely he would be needed back in the Shire. And he had his own upcoming role in Éowyn’s wedding to consider, and Sam’s, although Pippin did as well….. “I’d travel home, Gimli, and take Thorin up on his offer, but I worry about Pip. He’s…unpredictable sometimes. He needs an eye kept on him.”

Faramir laid a hand on the hobbit’s shoulder. “He’s a Knight of Gondor, and he co-commanded the Battle of Bywater with you, many of his tasks performed without your keen vigilance. I think he can manage. I shall send word to you if it looks as though he's not.”

Merry nodded. That sounded best, although he remained nervous about leaving his cousin behind, an anxiety that Faramir easily observed. “Worry not, Meriadoc. I am certain our dear cousin was well aware that you might choose to travel homeward.”

“Aye, and he will follow soon enough,” Gimli added, “as I doubt Pippin would tarry so long that my elf and I will need to escort him ourselves to the Shire for Sam’s wedding. Though we will be there, invitation or not!”

“Oh Gimli, you would surely be invited.”

As the conversation continued, Glorfindel sat silently, confused. The second day in the tunnel, Adlia had clearly shown interest in traveling to Imladris as they discussed it…and he had pledged to show her the Valley that she had heard much of but never laid eyes upon. Had she forgotten? Had he done something to offend her? Never one to shy away from a situation, he walked over to her, sitting beside her as she sorted through her pack.

“Master Dwarf, pardon my potential misunderstanding, but I had thought you planned to travel with us to Imladris – Rivendell, as you call my home?”

She continued her sorting, not glancing up. “Nay, Master Elf, I must return to the Kingdom Under the Mountain.” Gimli overheard and sent a curious glance her way, but said nothing, returning to his conversation with Merry and Faramir.

“I should like you to go with us. I am certain you would enjoy it, and surely there is nothing pressing in Erebor at the moment? Indeed, I would request your axe at my side along the way.”

She grimaced. “Hmph. You jest, Master Elf. You nearly took down a dragon single-handedly, surely a random pack of orcs would not produce your defeat. I belong with my kin, in my Mountain, not frolicking with a bunch of elves.” She stood, a change of clothing and bar of soap in her hands. ”I must go bathe and change, even if the water is colder than the breath of the drakes of the barren north. I cannot stand these clothes any longer.” She stomped off without any further words.

Glorfindel stared after her, a frown crossing his features.

And Gimli stared at them both, a question growing in his mind once more.

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When Adlia returned, the ginger-haired dwarf settled himself beside her, busying himself with rummaging through his pack and determining the supplies he needed to take with him on his journey to Minas Tirith. He stole a glance at his childhood friend, who worked intently on her own packing while the dwarrows took a turn washing up in the Langwell River. Finally he spoke, unwilling to wait any longer, for they needed to depart soon. “Something troubles you, my friend. Tell me what it
She said nothing, and he took no offense to that. He simply knew this meant her thoughts were as bothersome as he had anticipated.

After another period of silence followed with the packing pretense wearing increasingly thin, and so the ginger-haired dwarf spoke again. “On the Ring Quest, we traveled through Lothlórien, and I met the Lady of the Forest, Galadriel. She remembered the times of collaboration between Khazad-Dûm and her Forest, and held a fondness in her heart for them.”

“Hmm,” she said absentmindedly, not truly paying attention to him, for she held little regard for, or interest in, the elves of the Golden Wood. “I thought those elves were distrustful of us. To say it mildly.”

“Aye, many were and are, but a few are not. Certainly not her, for the most part. She was – is – wise, powerful, beautiful. One of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. I bear love for her, love for her kindness and gentleness and power and physical form. For the sense of fierceness that emanates from her in such an unusual way. Close to my heart, I carry three hairs from her wondrous tresses, given to me as a gift from her very head.” He patted his chest.

Adlia turned at that, frowning in disbelief, her eyes wide and her mouth dropping open. “But you said Legolas is One to you! What has happened to your virtue? You betray him by wearing something of another so close to your skin?!”

“Nay! Never! Of course he is my One, do not doubt that. That is the point. The love I bear for him is completely different than what I feel for Galadriel. We love others aside from our One, do we not? Our parents, our kith and kin, our craft. I love the Lady much as I would a rare stone that has been painstakingly carved into the Seven Stars, it’s beauty and meaning inherent within, meant to be admired and cherished. Legolas, ah, I cannot put into words what I grew to feel for him. It is so entirely expansive and soul-consuming that phrases cannot do it justice.”

She nodded, somewhat understanding the difference now, although she did not entirely comprehend his carrying of Galadriel’s three hairs close to his heart.

He continued talking, treading as gently as he could. “I know you guard your heart closely, but part of me has always wondered if Dis was One to you….had you been born of her generation, perhaps you may have married. I see the affinity between you. Yet I also see the affinity between you and Glorfindel.” She sputtered, about to send fierce words in his direction, but he raised his hand her. “Hear me. I ask you, is one or the other your Galadriel? Or your Legolas? Or are you simply attracted to him, interested in a dalliance, even though it is not really a possibility with an elf?”

In resignation she closed her eyes. “Dis is as a mother to me, Gimli. I do not see her as One. I place her on a pedestal, yes, but nothing more or less. Would it have been different in a different set of circumstances? Perhaps. Only Mahal knows.”

“And the elf?”

She hissed in response, “I know not, Gimli. I know not. But if you say anything to anyone, by Mahal’s hand I will…”

“Peace, I will do or say nothing. And we do not need to speak of it any further. I know you would not want to. But I have been in that place of yearning for something that cannot be, and I can recognize it many leagues away. It shines brighter than Durin’s Hammer to my eyes.”
He remembered back to his time in Minas Tirith when he witnessed Erestor’s own longing for the Balrog-Slayer. The raven-haired advisor’s words had been true, for now Gimli had direct evidence: Glorfindel was desired by many, and where his affections lay were never clear, for while he was friendly and kind, at times even flirtatious, he never spoke of love or romance, and there had been many opportunities to do so in Erebor and Framsburg. There was no clear longing for another in his eyes, no shadow of a heart broken, nothing that Gimli could easily detect. Nothing that Merry had yet been able to determine, although the hobbit hadn’t truly had a chance to investigate who held the Balrog-Slayer’s heart. And now the dwarf was in the awkward position of having pledged assistance to Erestor while his childhood best friend seemed to be developing feelings for the very same elf.

“I cannot give you good counsel.” He knew he could not, not knowing that Erestor had loved Glorfindel for centuries, not when he had pledged to help Lord Elrond’s advisor.

She nodded, needing no explanation, primarily because she did not want counsel. She simply wanted this discussion to cease.

“Dwalin would. He is wise in matters of the heart, though as you are aware it rarely appears that way at first glance.”

“Aye, I know. If I have need to speak with someone, I will consider him. After he returns from his trip to Rivendell.”

At the pained look in her eye, he could not resist one piece of advice. “Go to Rivendell. You will regret not doing so, not least because it is indeed a sight to be seen and you have always wanted to travel more. They need your axe on the journey more than Faramir does, for he will meet his guard soon after he departs from here.”

She nearly rolled her eyes, concluding of her own accord that Gimli was too in love with his elf to be able to think clearly about others’ situations.

They continued their preparations for departure, and were soon enough interrupted by the sudden appearance of Elrohir on the horizon, arriving much more quickly than the raven’s missive had predicted he would.

When Gimli saw the coal-haired son of Elrond ride so swiftly, a sense of foreboding and trepidation grew within his heart, one that did not dissipate as the elf reached his side.

“I must say, Master Dwarf, that locating you was much simpler this time. I shall humbly request that any further tracking of you be conducted on plains and ruins, not in ancient forests.” Elrohir dismounted from his horse, a satisfied smile on his face from his second successful finding of the dwarf post-War of the Ring.

“Aye, yet I pray to Mahal for no bad news this time.” The dwarf looked at the Peredhel thoughtfully. “Yet you wouldn’t track me to convey good word, I am certain, so surely you have become my personal harbinger of ill tidings.” He sighed. “What requires my attention so urgently, Master Elf? What is wrong with Aragorn or his kingdom that he summons me in such a pressing manner?”

Elrohir pursed his lips, uncertain of the best way to tell Gimli about Legolas and his journey Eastward. But the dwarf was practical and to-the-point, so perhaps this message should be as well. He pulled Gimli to the side, out of earshot of the others. “Estel did not send me to take you to Minas Tirith. He sent me to tell you that Legolas is traveling to the East, seeking the Blue Wizards, but it is for your ears only. The Prince has reason to believe that your love for him is the result of an enchantment. You see….”
Gimli’s eyebrows rose in shocked disbelief at first, but by the end of Elrohir’s tale the dwarf was laughing, tears streaming from his eyes. “Aye, this is grand. I have not had such a good practical joke played on me since I was a young lad, and Adlia saw to it that I was covered in granite dust, and I had shiny specks in my beard for months. I nearly glowed in the dark in the beginning!” He looked around, as though trying to see if Legolas hid nearby. "Where is my elf, does he wait in the trees downriver?"

Yet no laughter was seen in return from Elrohir, the son of Lord Elrond not understanding the joke whatsoever, and soon Gimli’s chuckles died down. “You are serious, Master Elf.”

He nodded, his expression grave.

“What foolishness befalls my elf when I leave his side for a few days, a few weeks?!” Gimli shook his head, uncertain if he remained amused, albeit in a different way, or was now enraged when he thought of Legolas’ journey East. Or anxious, because if he knew anything, it was that the elf meant more to him than anything, and he worried for his safety, Gandalf by his side or not. He’d traveled Eastward before, and he knew that in some areas, a post-war situation would the opposite of peaceful and kind to the victors.

But more importantly, Gimli thought, How could he possibly doubt a dwarf’s love for One? Elves! Gimli, of course, didn’t realize he was muttering his thoughts out loud.

“That was Estel’s sentiment, at least in part. But he defers to Mithrandir and asked me to locate you. If you desire, I will take you Eastward and intercept them. We should be able to find them in Dorwinion, before they pass beyond the Sea of Rhûn, as I know their planned route.”

“Hmph, if I desire! Of course I desire! Why would there be any question of that?!” The concern in his eyes was clear, and now he dearly regretted accompanying Faramir on his betrothal quest, for his absence had obviously led his own betrothed to make ill-informed, maddening decisions.

Dwalin joked from time to time that he lost hair on his head from pulling it out when others frustrated him, and for the first time Gimli could truly see himself doing the same.

“I should tell you more specifically, Master Dwarf, that while Estel has some doubts regarding the nature of the enchantment, Mithrandir does not. Or more accurately, Mithrandir thinks there will be negative consequences if you bind to one another without negating the enchantment, and it is also possible that undoing the spell will undo your love for one another.”

“And I would tell Gandalf that a dwarf does not suffer enchantments! I know my heart as well as I know my own mind, and my love for my elf is true. Both of them are addled, it seems. Did dear Tharkûn find a superbly-strong batch of Weed? One that led him to hallucinate and imagine truths that are falsehoods?”

Gimli waved his hand when it became apparent that Elrohir had no idea how to answer that, not understanding his meaning once more. Elves. “I shall just ask him myself. Let me take leave of our friends, and we shall depart.”

A short distance away, Glorfindel approached Adlia once more. “May I ask once more if you will travel to the Last Homely House? I give you my word that you will enjoy it. Surely you do not want to miss the opportunity.”

Her reaction, which she immediately regretted, was to snap at him. “I told you, elf, I cannot!”

“You’ve acted strangely since we’ve returned to the ruins, Master Dwarf. Are you well?” He moved
to touch her forehead, knowing that was one means by which Lord Elrond assessed the health of mortals in particular, but she swatted his hand away.

He sighed, his disappointment clear, and turned to leave. But he was stayed by a hand on his arm. Adlia looked downward, her features nearly covered by her hair and beard. “I…am sorry. Indeed, I am not myself.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “I will go.” Then she looked him straight in the eye. “And perhaps you can show me these elven forges you spoke of in the tunnels. I would like to compare them to ours. And you can detail to me your defense strategies in this valley of yours. Though why you’d choose to live above ground, in some open-aired mansion…Mahal help you, but elves are peculiar.”

And she stomped off to ready her mount.

Gimli and Elrohir left the group with Faramir after discreetly reviewing the situation with the Steward of Gondor, for the twin added the not-small-detail that Éowyn traveled to Rhûn as well. Faramir briefly considered accompanying them Eastward, yet decided she would not appreciate such a decision. The situation with Gimli and Legolas was far different, after all, and he knew she would only interpret his following as overly protective. And he has so much to do in Gondor, Aragorn could only be without him so long. So he decided to only ride with them towards Erebor, knowing he would encounter his retinue along the way, at which point Gimli and Elrohir would simply make haste.

Gimli’s goodbyes were quick, as he believed had no time to waste. The sooner he was on the road, the sooner his beloved flaxen-haired elf could be shaken to his senses.

“That was strange.” Merry murmured, to no one in particular.

“Aye,” Bofur replied, standing beside him as they watched the elf, dwarf, and man depart. “And unexpected. Which is exactly how Bilbo Baggins shall feel when he sees us! Ah, I grow very excited to depart!”

And so it was that the Framsburg Fellowship dissolved, for the moment at least, as each member considered a return in the upcoming years to assist Adlia in her quest to regain the Grey Mountains. But that was a task for later, and with a much larger company to deal with the threat of Worms and more.

For now, it was time to journey to other destinations.

Glorfindel and Adlia sat beside the campfire late into the evening the day after their departure from Framsburg. The party of five had made good travel time, passing the River Rhimdath and nearing the High Pass. The Captain of Imladris had used that mountain passage when he escorted Elrond to the Elvenking’s Halls, and it had been clear of orcs and goblins, any remaining stragglers likely taking refuge further north or deep within the mountains. Grimbeorn and the Beornings patrolled it still, yet encountered little of interest aside from stray bands of orcs.

“Hmph. Well, elf, have you decided which we should take? The higher or lower pass?” Adlia squinted at the stars above as she spoke, for it was a clear night and Durin’s Hammer was something that she always found solace in.
“I have not known your folk to enjoy stars, Master Dwarf. You are unusual indeed.”

Aldia snorted. “Well, I hardly get a chance to look, Master Elf. Lately you seem to glow in the dark!”

Glorfindel frowned, indignant. “I most certainly do not!”

She shook her head and pulled out a piece of licorice, of which Merry seemed to have an endless supply. Yet unlike the others who ate it, she enjoyed chewing it and spitting it out, akin to a chewing tobacco.

“May I?” Glorfindel asked.

“I doubt you will like it, Master Elf, but who am I to hoard this fine treasure?” She handed him a piece, and he dutifully chewed and swallowed, a purposefully neutral expression on his ever-young face.

“Well, elf?”

“It is…”

“Tangy? Refreshing? A veritable symphony of flavor?”

He paused, searching for the right words. “I would say...like one of Lord Elrond’s herbal tonics. Made from the herbs that smell of warg sweat.”

She laughed heartily. “Aye, then you must have a memorably rancid aftertaste in your mouth right now.” She grabbed the wineskin closest to her. “Here, I think this is your dwarven spirits concoction. The one with the Dorwinion. Surely that will mellow the aftertaste.”

He drank it, wondering about some of their clear differences in taste preferences. “Why do you not like this? I know Erebor imports Dorwinion from Laketown.”

She shrugged. “Aye, some enjoy it. I do not.”

“Miruvor, then?” he asked.

“Mira-whom? Is this some dwarf you met under my Mountain? One who enjoys the hobbits’ delightful cocktails, as they call the spirits and wine they like to combine together?”

He laughed gently. “Not at all, it’s a cordial we serve in Rivendell on special occasions. I shall serve it to you when we arrive. In the Hall of Fire, as we listen to Lindir’s songs and Bilbo’s tales. For while we rarely partake of it, surely you will enjoy it, as it is a recipe of Yavanna herself. And during the day we shall hunt orcs, though there are not many to find. Ah! And you will be there for the Penninor celebration!”

“Eh? What’s that?” She tugged at her beard, trying to decide if she needed to rebraid its wayward strands before she went to sleep.

“Our festival on the last day of the year. We did not celebrate fully last year, given all that occurred. So we shall make up for it this year. I imagine Erestor has it planned thoroughly by now. I learned dwarven steps in Erebor, though I did not know you well then, and I shall teach you the ever-ancient dances of my homeland.”

“Harumph!” Dwalin interrupted, “I hate to interrupt the planning of your social calendars, but there is
movement in the distance. Come and see.” He beckoned them to follow to where Bofur and Merry stood on a tall, flat boulder that provided a solid vantage point of the surrounding land.

“Aye,” called Bofur. “Something approaches.” He pointed to the clear, moonlit sky. “We hope it would be Eagles and not dragons. What say you, Master Elf?”

Glorfindel climbed up beside Bofur, squinting into the distant sky. “I am not certain either. The Eagles' Eyrie is not that far southward of us.” He peered at it some more. “Regardless, I do not think it is a threat. What of you?”

Dwalin nodded. “Aye. Yet one can never be too certain. Have you any skill with a bow, Master Elf? In the event we need to defend ourselves from a distance?”

“Not at all, Master Dwarf. I daresay your skill with a bow may exceed mine.”

Bofur laughed at them both. “Yet we do not have a bow to shoot with, so it’s a moot point!”

They deliberated awhile longer, deciding once more that the two creatures in the sky were likely to be Eagles returning to their nearby mountain nests, and the dwarves turned their attention to lighter topics. Yet Glorfindel was struck by a premonition, somewhat like the one he’d had of the Wraith’s fall from which he drew his prophecy that the wraith’s fall would come not from the hand of man. Unbidden came images of a vast desert and flame, and while he did not recognize any of the foes, he did recognize the dwarf in the image. Adlia.

In his premonition of the Witch-King’s fall, he had seen the Lord of the Nazgûl slain, but there had been no image of Éowyn or Merry in his mind, just the knowledge that it was not a man that slew him. In his current foresight he saw a great battle, and the dwarrowdam stood alone near a mountain peak in the vast sea of sand surrounded by what must be enemies, for they seemed to regard her none too kindly.

His heart nearly skipped a beat, for while he did not foresee her death, he wondered what this portended. All he sensed was her rage and fear in that moment.

“Elf,” Dwalin said, interrupting Glorfindel’s thoughts and the scene playing in his mind, “get that frown off your face and tell us more of this festival you were describing to Adlia. Bofur and I may have need to dust off our dancing boots to keep up with Merry. Though Bofur made quite the impression last time we were there, Mahal as my witness.”

“How so, Dwalin?” Merry asked, “I think Bilbo told me a story about that, but I just can’t remember.”

“Aye Master Hobbit, we shall recount it for you. And on this visit I shall have elven maids swooning at your feet, Dwalin!” Bofur was at his merriest, gleefully imagining the sullen-yet-festive warrior entrancing lasses in his unique way.

“Harumph! Mine? Try yours, my friend.” While he would never say it out loud, Dwalin thought Bofur was more physically attractive than he, what with his full head of hair and the Broadbeam stature for which his house was renowned, even though the Longbeard’s years of service as a warrior had created a build that made many a dwarf swoon for him alone.

“Far too modest, you are! Dwalin, when everything settled down after the Battle of Five Armies, you were swarmed by more dwarrowdams than I!” Bofur chuckled, picking up a stray branch to begin to whittle as they talked. “And a few dwarrows, may I add!”

“Pfft, we could quarrel about this all eve. Perhaps we should consider the courting contracts our dear
Adlia will be showered with upon our return to Erebor. You’ll be set in song just as Azaghâl, though the outcome is much more favorable this round.”

“Azaghâl?” Merry asked.

“Aye,” Dwalin replied, “King of the Broadbeams, he perished trying to slay Glaurung, and he nearly succeeded. Which makes our dwarf’s defeat of the Worm very impressive indeed, and certain to be set in song.”

“Hmph!” Adlia shook her head. “It was more the elf here, than I.”

Glorfindel brought his mind back to their conversation, shelving his thoughts for later, as he would have more than enough time to try to ponder them again. He would try to bring the vision back, but that would require being in Imladris or another quiet, undisturbed setting. “Wait a moment,” he said with a puzzled, strangely pensive look on his face, "courting contracts? I thought there were only betrothal contracts?”

“Nay, Master Elf.” Bofur said merrily, continuing his whittling. “Courting contracts are the beginning. Though I may say Balin ensured that Dwalin’s were much more extensive than anything I ever constructed. Yet that was one of his gifts, as he was a dwarf through and through.”

Dwalin smiled at the recollection, for his brother indeed had a talent for crafting the most detailed contracts possible. “Aye. I only wish he had entered two additional stipulations: That my One had not traveled on to Mahal’s Halls quite yet, and that Balin himself had not traveled to Khazad-Dûm. Though both of those are unusual, nay impossible, conditions for a set of marital contracts.” The dwarrow turned solemn and wistful, wondering, not for the first time, what he could have done to hold his brother back, even as he knew it would have been as impossible as dictating his One’s time to move onward from this life to the next in Mahal’s Halls.

Bofur knew Dwalin well enough to read those thoughts and respond, ever kind and thoughtful. “I have said before, and I say again, it was an honorable mission, and the outcome was not clear. It could have turned out differently. He is a hero regardless, as are all those who went with him.”

“Aye.” And they toasted to the memory of the fallen of Khazad-Dûm and elsewhere, particularly those who weren’t able to achieve their desired goals before meeting their undesired ends, of whom they all knew too many.

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High in the sky above the three dwarves, hobbit and elf, Landroval and Meneldor carried the female Ryū-ningen away from Framsburg tunnels toward their Eyrie. The Eagles had a greater affinity for these strange beings from the far East than they did for the humanoid races of the West. This combined with a summons sent by Radagast had led the two Eagles to make haste from the Withered Heath, carrying three Ryū-ningen in their mannish form.

The Were-worms that traveled with Gwaihir’s kindred believed she had perished, yet only her bonded one would be able to tell for certain, for a wounded Ryū-ningen often entered a form of stasis when harmed. Regardless, she needed to be transported to a location of safety.

Pulling the Ryū-ningen from the tunnel in her Worm-form had been a difficult task, for while she was close to the exit of the cavern and the entrance was wide enough to permit her passage, she was extraordinarily heavy and cumbersome as a Worm, even for those of such extraordinary strength as the shapeshifters. Yet they had eventually pulled her out, unclear all the while as to whether she was truly dead, for in dragon form it was extremely difficult to determine, even for her kindred.
And so they hastened to the Eagles’ Eyrie as quickly as they could safely carry her in flight. There
they would attempt to further assess her status, treat her wounds as though she did survive, and await
Tatsuo’s arrival from Saigo no Sabaku. Only he would be able to determine with certainty whether
she was alive or dead. And then? The other Ryū-ningen knew there would be no mannish seeking of
vengeance, at least not from the living. But beyond that, they could not say, for that would be up to
Tatsuo and the result of his meditative contemplation of this dishonorable act. And the Ryū-ningen
also knew that it was highly unlikely that their leader was currently in a purely reflective state of
mind. He was honorable, he was merciful, but he would not be immune to sundering from his
bonded one.

Leagues away and days later, the son of the Elvenking and Elvenqueen sat beside the cooking fire,
stretching his legs in his graceful manner, quietly singing. The weather was pleasantly warm, just as
their Easterling guides had said it would be, and thus far they had avoided any significant civil
disturbance resulting from the aftermath of the War of the Ring. Yet this was the reason they traveled
from Minas Tirith in a northeasterly direction towards Dorwinion on their journey Eastward in search
of the Blue Wizards, one of whom purportedly lived in Shénmi de Sēnlín, the other closer to
Sauron’s eastern fortress, both east of the Red Mountains.

The Dorwinion province was populated by descendants of the Edain that had much affinity for the
men of the West, including strong trade ties with Eryn Lasgalen, Laketown, and Erebor. But it also
maintained such ties with pro-Sauron realms as well, and had escaped most inter-kingdom conflict
over time by maintaining a well-understood neutral stance.

Its proximity to the Sea of Rhûn in the warm lowlands of the Ceduin provided the perfect climate for
the growing of grapes and the making of various wines for which the province was fabled.

Of the four Westerners who traveled—Legolas, Gandalf, Éowyn, and Elladan—Elladan was by far
the most outgoing, and he had built a strong rapport with their two Easterling guides almost as soon
as they left Gondor. Gandalf suspected this was more the result of the twin’s relationship with
Aragorn than anything else, as the two guides had pledged themselves to King Elessar’s service in
exchange for asylum.

Their Westron was passable, one of the reasons Aragorn had selected them, aside from his trust of
them. Each was discreet, neither of them needing to know the reason the Blue Wizards were sought,
aside a pledge that they would not be led back through their homelands, where the punishment for
desertion would be death - or worse.

Nergüi was from a nomadic tribe whose chieftain had originally fought against Sauron’s hold on his
people, one of few such groups in an area so close to Sauron’s fire-ringed fortress in the East. But his
chieftain had fallen into obedience to the Dark Lord when a plaque decimated a third of his
population. Believing the plague to be the last of several ill omens, the chieftain ignored any further
misgivings and pledged allegiance to Sauron in return for lifting of the curse as well supplies and aid,
for the self-titled Lord of the Earth held sway over the tribe’s trading partners.

Dhruv hailed from a small kingdom east of the southern range of the Red Mountains. He’d been
forced to fight in the War of the Ring, as his countrymen were, when his Overlord became
convinced of the various misdeeds of the Westerners and their lack of honor. His Overlord had been
particularly concerned about possible pillaging - and far more - of his Eastern homeland if Gondor’s
forces gathered and struck eastward as Sauron said they would.

When Sauron was destroyed it ended the Dark Lord’s persuasive mind-hold, but leaders’ and followers’ thoughts of the West didn’t suddenly turn to open-armed welcome. Most, but not all, of those who fought for Sauron retained their varying dislike and negative opinions of Westerners, some seeming to capitulate out of need, some willing to reconsider if Elessar proved himself to be noble and useful, some simply biding their time until they could regroup.

And many of the realms were now prone to civil unrest, as any might be when a far-away war decimates populations and destroys alliances that had been forged because of a figure with unmatched power. As a result, Morinehtar and Rómestámo faced a task more daunting in some ways than their initial one, the reduction of civil unrest and assurance of survival of populations with little access to wealth or bartering supplies, food, or other necessities.

Nergüi came to sit beside from Legolas near the fire, having developed an affinity for the elf as their personalities were both on the quieter side, relatively speaking. The Easterling pulled out his own thin wafers to eat, as he didn’t care for the food cooked by his traveling companions, partially due to custom, as he ate nothing which had been heated beyond a certain temperature by fire, and partly due to taste, as he simply did not like most of the other food that he had tried in Gondor or during this journey. And whatever Dhruv was currently teaching Éowyn to cook smelled terrible, though he was much too polite to say so.

“‘The ring you wear,’ Nergüi asked the elf as he tried not to wrinkle his nose when Éowyn began crushing fragrant herbs under Dhruv’s instructions, “does it ward off evil?” It was hard not to notice, the man thought, the wide ring so finely made, the tiny leaf-shaped emeralds and star-shaped diamonds glittering in the light of the fire. It reminded him of the tale his mother used to tell him, of the elf that wandered near the sea and sang laments, wearing a ring of stars intended to cleanse his spirit over the course of eternity.

“No,” Legolas said quietly. “It’s a betrothal ring, given to me from the One I hope to marry.”

“No,” Legolas said quietly. “It’s a betrothal ring, given to me from the One I hope to marry.”

“Ah. It is very fine. She must come from a very wealthy family. Betrothal, does this mean you were given to her by your family?” He’d heard of such things occurring in one of the larger eastern empires.

Legolas smiled softly yet somberly, twisting the ring as he spoke. “No, well, it is an arranged marriage, in a satisfactory way, as I love him dearly. Betrothal is any type of pledge to marry, as we use the word. This ring was actually made by my betrothed. He is very talented.” Nergüi’s eyebrows raised when he realized the elf was marrying another male elf, but then he shrugged. Elves would be different, after all, and who was he to harshly judge their customs?

“Do all elves have such abilities? Did you make him one in turn?”

Legolas shook his head. There was no point, he supposed, in withholding such details. “He made both of our rings. He is a dwarf, and all are gifted with crafting.”

Nergüi’s surprise was clear as Legolas spoke, but then he shrugged again. Dwarves had no women-folk, it was said, at least those in the Red Mountains, so was it really that surprising to hear of a dwarf seeking out such a fine creature?

He wanted to ask if the elf was taking a spiritual journey before he married, seeking the blessings of the Blue Wizards and perhaps traveling to the lands of the Avari in the East, but felt he’d asked enough questions for now, so he’d save that question for later.
“And you?” Legolas asked. “Are you wed?”

Nergüi shook his head, his eyes growing dark. “I have not yet completed the tasks I must before taking a wife, if I so choose. But I have no desire to return to my family.”

He said nothing more, and Legolas did not ask, not wanting to intrude quite yet. Dhruv and Éowyn had been too engrossed in their cooking lesson to pay attention to their conversation. So engrossed, in fact, that they didn’t notice Elladan approach from where he had taken watch some distance away.

Legolas wondered what they were cooking this time, as it seemed complicated, although he had to admit that Éowyn’s skill was quickly improving, and he’d enjoyed most of what had been prepared thus far.

Elladan kneeled by Gandalf, whispering in his ear. Legolas, of course, could hear their words, but the others could not. “Mithrandir, I think I saw a swiftly flying creature high in the sky.” Legolas looked upward, but could see nothing. The moment had already passed.

“You think it means to attack us?” the Wizard asked calmly.

“No,” the elven warrior replied in an even tone, “it seems to travel westward. Mithrandir, if I did not know better, I would say it was a dragon.”

Gandalf raised an eyebrow, his white hair gleaming in the firelight. He nodded slowly. “There are dragons still in the Withered Heath, and the Northern Waste, as you know. Perhaps it feasts on the kine near the Sea of Rhûn, I have heard some have a taste for that.”

And then the Wizard sighed and smiled wryly. “Let us hope that it does not rouse its kin.”

Elladan smiled back, both silently acknowledging the faint ill feeling they shared, faint enough that their minds quickly turned to other things, but not before Gandalf silently motioned for Legolas to take Elladan’s place on watch. And so the fair-haired elf stood, studying the horizon when he was struck by a sudden, intense longing for his dwarf, wondering how many more days would pass before he and Elrohir joined them. And what would Gimli think of what had transpired? It made twinges of nervousness and sadness flow through him, although his face didn’t betray it, for while he could almost hear the dwarf scoff at the idea of spells such as this, uncertainty weaved in the back of the elf’s mind like a vine that could not be uprooted.

Chapter End Notes

Azaghâl = King of the Broadbeams of Belegost during the first age. He was killed by Glaurung after wounding the dragon.

Penninor = Last Day (Sindarin)

Shénmì de Sēnlín = Mysterious Forest (Chinese per google translate)

Saigo no Sabaku = Last Desert (Japanese translations courtesy of Raelien, thanks again!)

Ryū-ningen = Were-worm (Japanese)

Dhruv = Constant, the polar star, faithful (Sanskrit)
Nergüi = "No name" (Mongolian). A name traditionally given in order to mislead bad spirits or divert bad fortune from a child. NOTE: I may (very loosely) borrow very specific customs or beliefs to “inspire” a realm in this story, but I don’t intend to represent Mongolian culture with this character.
Reunions

Chapter Summary

Reunions between old, dear friends, newly made acquaintances, and one loves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Erestor didn’t consider lifting quill from parchment when the sound of hooves clattering in the courtyard drifted through his open terrace door. With the War of the Ring over, managing Imladris required even more work than usual. Glancing at every arriving visitor was something he had no time for, particularly in light of Lord Elrond’s necessary absence as he continued to tend to the Elvenking. Post-war items were added to the usual tasks of governing, including the review of an influx of requests to leave the fabled valley for Valinor. Developing a plan for the steady and safe reduction the Last Homely House’s census as the age of men dawned was a full-time effort in and of itself.

It was such planning that he was in the middle of when the knock came at his door. “Lord Erestor,” his assistant said with quiet politeness, “Lord Glorfindel has returned, and has brought with him several dwarves as well as a hobbit, including Master Meriadoc as well as Masters Dwalin and Bofur of Erebor. We have assigned them rooms, and Masters Brandybuck and Baggins request your presence this evening in the Hall of Fire, if it is feasible.”

Erestor’s heart was gladdened to hear of Glorfindel’s safe return, though none would have known it. Except Gimli perhaps, he thought wryly. He remained impressed with the dwarf’s acute perception and the ease with which he had determined the Advisor’s long-standing love for Glorfindel amidst Arwen’s wedding revelry.

Erestor smiled as he reflected on that, as he’d heard congratulations were in order. The ginger-haired dwarf had achieved his heart’s desire, one that had initially been surprising. Legolas? Yet he’d seen their deep companionship with his own eyes, and that in itself made it not so very surprising after all. They certainly made a good match as friends, and apparently more. The stoic raven-haired advisor looked forward to giving his regards and well-wishes in person at the wedding.

And what a wedding it was shaping up to be.

For when Erestor completed his work and entered the Hall of Fire that evening, he immediately knew he would be told all sorts of details about the upcoming wedding and the events surrounding the betrothal. Bofur was in the midst of retelling the tale of the elf and dwarf’s arrangement, beginning the part of the story that detailed Meriadoc and Peregrin’s timely intervention during Legolas and Gimli’s betrothal ceremony.

Erestor sat down beside Lindir, the minstrel’s harp leaning against his intricately wrought chair as candles on elaborate stands created a warmth that was equally matched by those present. Lindir acknowledged his friend with a kind nod and whispered to Erestor as sipped his tea. “I have not seen Mr. Baggins this happy since he saw his nephew safely returned to him from the Quest.”

Erestor agreed with a slight nod. From the look on Bilbo’s face, seeing Dwalin and Bofur once more
was a most welcome reunion, and the sentiment was obviously returned.

The elder hobbit had, however, been entirely shocked to see the two dwarven visitors when he’d been summoned to the Hall of Fire. It had been set up as a good surprise, really, Merry seated in one of the warm alcoves of the Hall as he told his relative that he’d brought an early Yule gift.

It had been unexpected enough to see the young hobbit here, and most welcome. But Bilbo had not expected to see Dwalin or Bofur again, yet here they were. He’d had a chuckle when Merry made a joke that Bofur couldn’t convince Dwalin to surprise him out of a box tied up with a ribbon. In his heart he was glad it didn’t happen, for that was the sort of thing he’d always thought was silly anyway, doing his fair share of eye-rolling when the Sackville-Bagginses engaged in such elaborate schemes. Then Bofur had warmly embraced him and Dwalin did gruffly so, and everything that seemed a lifetime ago flooded back.

The dwarves had aged more slowly than he, yet somehow a few years slipped off him as he sat beside them, drifting back to the memory of his first visit to Rivendell in this very hall with these very dwarves. Time had passed so quickly and seemed to stand still, all at once.

“Well Merry,” Bilbo said as Bofur finished the story, “It’s good to see that Pippin’s eavesdropping was useful, for that certainly has not always been the case. Although,” he said wryly, “It should help him in the Shire, for keeping an ear to the grapevine should serve him well.” He looked at the younger hobbit. “You will need to recount this to Frodo, to add to his retelling of events. Perhaps after they marry.”

Bilbo wasn’t certain he even believed it, not truly, for the elf and dwarf had not been the friendliest with one another when they had been here for the Council, and that was certainly an understatement. Add to that the fact that they were both male…well, he couldn’t think of a time that had happened in recent history in the Shire, but who was he to know that for certain?

And then a wave of interwoven jealousy and sadness washed over him, a wave of weariness, an ache in his heart for what had never been nor would be. For this was why he had never sought out the dwarves of the Company, had various excuses if they extended an invitation to visit Erebor, and had not extended invitations in turn.

Balin knew better, had seen through his false distance and come to Bag End, and he’d been visited from time to time by other dwarves passing through the area, wanting to meet this Hero of whom tales expounded. The others probably wondered about his false refusals as well, he supposed. Hence Bombur’s boys had come to fetch him around the time of his last birthday party in the Shire, insistently so, and he’d never felt so young in years. But he never made it back to the Lonely Mountain, his body simply too weary to complete the journey, and he took up residence here in Rivendell.

Generally speaking, reflecting on the loss his heart had borne was too difficult, and he no longer had the Ring to provide him any distraction. There was some degree of solace with the elves, as they were so very different than dwarves, and while there were reminders here, they had not been very powerful ones. Until now.

Bilbo sighed and looked up from his tea, Dwalin’s eyes meeting his own, and in that moment the hobbit knew that the warrior understood. But did he want him to? He was a private hobbit, really and truly, perhaps even more private now, and he lowered his eyes, feeling as though his thoughts had been intruded on, breathing a sigh of relief when a reprieve was provided.

“Bilbo, listen to this song. It’s marvelous, my favorite. It’s the story of Durin the Deathless, and Bofur sings it wonderfully. It’s quite a good history lesson as well.” Merry leaned back, excited for
Bofur to begin, and Bilbo listened intently.

The next hour passed thus, taking turns in the telling of tales via song. It came to be Merry’s turn once more, and he eagerly turned to Bilbo as though he had a dearly held secret.

“I’ve a riddle for you, dear Bilbo.”

Bilbo smiled, nodding for him to proceed.

“I’m the type of room you can’t enter or leave.”

Bilbo pondered for a few moments, and then smiled more widely. “A mushroom.”

Merry looked entirely gleeful, as proud of the riddle as his uncle’s skill in solving it. “Good riddle, isn’t it? Adlia told it to me, on the way here.” And he caught himself, almost referring to her as female, but caught himself just in time. “The dwarf made up the riddle after I told a few of yours!”

“Ah!” said Bilbo, “I shall like to meet this dwarf. Where is he?”

Dwalin crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair. “Harumph! Touring the armory of Rivendell with Lord Glorfindel, though I imagine by now they are sparring, testing out the weapons as any good dwarf should. By my beard, I should like to see that, as I wonder who would win.”

“Well, our Lord Captain certainly doesn’t back down from a challenge.” Lindir smiled.

“Harumph! I’ve noticed!” Dwalin retorted with a strange smirk on his face.

Bofur frowned at the warrior in confusion, and then shrugged his shoulders. “Well, what sort of challenge can we have here in this Hall? Perhaps a musical one?” He was struck by an idea. “Lindir, I’ll learn your harp, you learn my clarinet! Are the rest of you in?”

Merry immediately volunteered, dragging Erestor along to watch, while Bilbo graciously declined, Dwalin not very interested in this type of game either. Soon enough the music drifted towards them, and both were glad they understood one another: It was horribly out of tune.

Bilbo stood up slowly, balancing himself with his walking stick and stretching out the soreness in his back. “Come, let’s move to one of the sitting areas down the hall, it will be much less…noisy…there.”

They walked slowly down the hall, Dwalin feeling saddened to see Bilbo’s frailty, wishing he’d been more serious about seeking out the hobbit sooner. But such was the nature of regrets, and this was surely not the dwaven warrior’s only one.

Bilbo grew thoughtful as he shuffled along. “I was very sorry to hear of your brother. I grew to be very fond of him. I greatly enjoyed the visit he paid to me in Bag End after the Lonely Mountain was reclaimed.”

Dwalin nodded. “Aye. He was certainly fond of you, and I know he enjoyed seeing you just as much.”

“I couldn’t believe how much his beard grew, in such a short time, really. And all of his news, just as I enjoyed the news of the others who would visit from time to time.” Bilbo thought back to the visit Balin had paid him with Gandalf in tow, and then his mind moved to the fate that had ultimately befallen the dwarf, tears welling in his eyes. “I was saddened to hear of his fate in Moria.”
Dwalin nodded gruffly, his eyes moist as well.

They stopped at one of the wide, airy verandas that Bilbo was fond of, sitting on a well-cushioned bench, moved to reminisce about happy times as well. Eventually Bilbo thought back to the trip that brought him to the Last Homely House once more. “I’m sorry I didn’t make it to the mountain, Dwalin.” He’d wanted to, knowing it would be his last chance, putting his fear of reminders aside. “I was just too weary to go any further. I suppose my next great adventure will be seeing what lies beyond the circles of the world.”

“Harumph. Is that where hobbits travel when they pass?”

Bilbo said nothing in reply, as it wasn’t something he liked to think about, for at least now he had distractions, ever-so-faint slivers of hope. When he died….that would be the end. Truly over.

Mandos reimbodied elves, Aulë reincarnated the occasional dwarf, but man and hobbit? To the arms of Eru Ilúvatar.

Arwen had chosen mortality, and she would follow Aragorn beyond the circles of the world. Sam and Rosie would marry soon, and do the same when they each reached the end of this life. Elrond would be reunited with his fair Celebrian when he sailed, together until Arda was remade, and even if their hröar were essentially consumed in years yet very far away, their fëar would remain forever joined.

Bilbo Baggins? He need only to look to the tale of Aegnor and Andreth.

He had no bewitching beauty or song with which to sway Mandos, such as Lúthien. He had no inherited blood line that permitted him to choose a different course, such as Arwen. In the back of his mind he wondered if he might merit a “special exception” such as Tuor and be counted amongst a different kindred, but he had no truly fantastic feats. Yes, he’d found the Ring, but he hadn’t destroyed it. If he was certain of anything, it was that he wouldn't have been able to.

His heart died on the battlefield that day long ago, recognizing Love for what it was it was too late, but sadly not even requited, for he simply needed to look at the parting words etched in his mind as permanently as the inscription and designs on Sting: *If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world. But, sad or merry, I must leave it now. Farewell.*

There would be no Oakenshield awaiting him beyond death, even if Thorin had wanted to, which was certainly not the case, not based on how it ended. At least if Andreth took Fingon’s counsel to heart, she had hope that after the world was unmade, Aegnor would come to her, for Fingon told her of his brother’s deep and abiding love.

Dwalin studied Bilbo out of the corner of his eye, pondering if he should speak what he was thinking, wondering if he read the hobbit’s silence correctly. Yet he had told a few others, including Legolas, and it was unseemly to keep it from the object of the words.

And there were regrets enough, here and elsewhere. Neither of them was growing any younger, and hobbits and dwarves did not reunite in Mahal’s Halls to revisit regrets there.

So he did as he always would and cut to the heart of the matter. “I apologize in advance, Master Hobbit, for the abruptness of what I will say.”

Bilbo looked at the dwarf, both concerned and confused.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” Dwalin suddenly felt great need for it.
Bilbo shook his head, laughing slightly at the diversion. “Not if you share.”

“Of course.” He cleared his throat. “Master Baggins, I should like to discuss Thorin with you.” There was no need to clarify that it was Oakenshield, not Stonehelm, of whom he spoke. “I am certain he regretted the effect the Quest had on him, his fury about the Arkenstone, how it blinded him.” How it held all of them in its thrall to some extent, no matter how briefly, much like the Ring could manipulate minds, though there was not need to say it.

Bilbo spoke in a whisper, “I know that he did.”

Dwalin looked at him closely, his sage eyes piercing. “And you know then of what he felt for you?”

Bilbo nearly laughed and cried at the same time. “Annoyance? Irritation?” At Dwalin’s beginning frown, the hobbit switched gears. “Respect. He thought I was brave, a good hobbit through and through.”

How utterly hollow it sounded out loud.

“Aye, he certainly did.” Dwalin nodded, reflecting back to the battlefield that had seen Thorin’s fall, the fight which had been a win at such great loss. But didn’t all victories come with a cost?

“Mahal help him, I am certain he regrets how he treated you. Harsher than he meant to be with his words, his anger, even if he apologized by the end…”

Bilbo knew, and nor did he care, not really. And he himself wasn’t purely blameless either.

“But he’d regret most not telling you how he truly felt, I am certain of that.” He passed his pipe to Bilbo, as it was Mr. Baggins’ turn, and was struck once more by Bilbo’s aged face.

No, the hobbit was not long for this world.

Bilbo silently puffed, wondering what Dwalin would say next. Perhaps that Thorin would have wished he’d said something a bit different at the end, less about parties and cheer and more about other truths of life?

“I am convinced that he loved you, Bilbo, he loved you as his One. Would that it had been different…”

And Bilbo Baggins went entirely still, not hearing whatever it was that Dwalin said next.

Erestor gracefully extricated himself from the impromptu instrument challenge, shaking his head in amazement at Bofur’s incredibly quick skill in learning. As fun as it was to observe, surprisingly so, he still had work to do, and it certainly wouldn't complete itself on its own.

He ran into Glorfindel as the Golden Lord left the kitchens, carrying a tray piled with an enormous amount of food.

His raised eyebrow said it all, one of several quirks he’d absorbed from spending so many centuries alongside the Lord of Imladris.
“Ah, Erestor! It is good to see you my friend!” Glorfindel balanced the tray with one hand and grabbed Erestor in a warm embrace with the other. “Follow me to my rooms, you shall join us! I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

It was common enough, the Lord of the Golden Flower entertaining an acquaintance and dragging the advisor along to meet him or her, for the Balrog-Slayer thought his friend spent far too much time alone. Glorfindel always ensured the environment was tolerable – never a large group, usually just an interesting individual or two – and Erestor knew that this dwarf apparently fell in that category.

Erestor tolerated it, perhaps secretly enjoyed it, because without Glorfindel’s gently prodding arising from his social and inclusive nature, the advisor likely would spend far too much time alone.

Erestor followed Glorfindel to his sitting room, something he did from time to time even without the presence of others, conveying news, playing a board game, or simply reflecting on events. A dwarf sat on the settee, his beard braided and held in place with light blue beads. Glorfindel motioned for Erestor to sit in a nearby chair, placed the large tray on the short table in front of the settee, and sat down beside the dwarf, his arms along the back of the settee in a friendly, relaxed gesture.

“Erestor, this is Master Adlia. Adlia, Erestor.”

They nodded to one another, and Glorfindel nodded to a map in the dwarf’s hands. “We had just been planning our route for tomorrow. We’re going to hunt orcs. Adlia’s axe is a powerful one, Erestor. We slew a dragon together.”

Erestor raised his eyebrows. That was impressive indeed.

Glorfindel recounted the tale of Framsburg, animated the entire time, while the dwarf sat beside him, at times gruff, at times animated in turn, at times interrupting to comment on the taste of the food the Lord of the Golden Flower had brought. Dwarves. Could this one not keep his reflections about blandness or spice or whatnot to himself?

“A fine tale,” Erestor said at its end. “Lindir shall set it in song.”

“Aye, if Bofur doesn’t do so first.” The dwarf smirked.

Glorfindel sent Adlia a blazing smile. “Perhaps they will collaborate. At times the best things come from collaboration.”

Erestor couldn’t quite tell, but he thought he saw the dwarf blush slightly. “Hmph. True enough. Well, I must say that I grow tired,” the dwarf continued, “as I have not your…elvish…what do you term it? Reverie?”

Glorfindel nodded.

“I can show you to a guest room, Master Dwarf, near your companions, as I understand one has been readied for you.” Erestor offered.

Glorfindel lifted his hand. “No need, mellon-nin. I shall host Master Adlia here in my guest chamber, as I promised unforgettable hospitality. If you accept, Master Dwarf?”

Adlia considered. She wanted to, and yet she didn’t, not entirely sure it was a good idea, for continued constant proximity to the elf might serve to enhance her foolish thoughts. But Glorfindel wouldn’t accept no for an answer, and she knew him well enough by now to understand that his feelings would be hurt if she refused. Beside that, from what she knew elves were different, so it wasn’t as if the Balrog-Slayer hosted her because he harbored any sort of romantic intentions. He
was just being friendly, as he would to any comrade-in-arms.

At least no one could accuse her of being illogical or unrealistic amidst her silly emotions.

“Aye, so long as you don’t snore, elf. Gimli kept me awake for far too many nights in Framsburg.”

Glorfindel laughed. “Certainly not! When have you heard me snore, Master Dwarf?”

“I’ve not seen you sleep, Master Elf! And does this guest room of yours actually have walls? For in this sitting room I feel as though I am actually outside.” Adlia looked around, continuing to be struck by grudging admiration at its fine construction, combined with disbelief regarding the sheer airiness of the rooms of the Last Homely House, for the walls were not truly walls, not as she knew them. And she wasn’t certain she liked that.

As their banter continued, Erestor grew to feel awkward and uncomfortable, but if he didn’t know any better, he would have sworn to Elbereth that the dwarf sensed his discomfort. Adlia stood up, bowing slightly. “I shall see you tomorrow, as I imagine you have much to catch up on.” She began to walk away and then turned, seeing Glorfindel watching her with a twinkle in his eye. She had no idea where to go, and he found it amusing! *Elves!*

Yet he gallantly rescued her, leading her to his guest chamber, and her eyes narrowed somewhat. “My things are already here?”

“Of course,” he said simply. “I certainly would stand for no less. If you’d like to bathe, you can do so here,” and he lead her back out of the room to a small bathroom.

“Running water?” She was surprised, certainly not expecting this. But at least it had smaller windows than the other rooms she had seen in the Last Homely House, and even Glorfindel’s guest room was open and airy yet somehow private.

“Of course. Elrond was fostered by sons of Fëanor, after all. He’s had many inventive ideas over time. Tomorrow I shall explain the mechanism to you, for I can see you are tired.” He clasped her hand and looked at her fondly. “I am very glad you traveled here. I shall see to it that you will not regret it.”

And he left the room, shutting the door behind him, while she pondered. *But how could he ensure that?* And the foolish longing she felt for him returned, but she quickly pushed it away once more.

Glorfindel returned to his sitting room, taking his place back on the settee.

“How do you make friends wherever you travel?” Erestor asked wryly.

“Ah, mellon-nin, this dwarf is more than a mere friend. I’ve not felt such a quickly-developing affinity for someone since I met Ecthelion. I cannot describe how it feels to meet such a comrade-in-arms. Our synchrony in battle was truly amazing.”

Erestor raised his hand to silence the Lord of the Golden Flower, a warm smile on his face. “I understand your point.” The advisor stood. “I will see you tomorrow. It is good to have you back.”

Glorfindel stood to walk him out, placing a friendly arm around his shoulders. “It is good to be back. Tell me, have you finished the Penninor planning yet?”

Erestor nodded.

“Good. Master Adlia is quite excited.”
Erestor secretly wondered if Glorfindel had partaken of too much of that concoction – no, cocktail – that Pippin had created. The dwarf didn’t seem like he was the type to be very excited about such a thing; his personality seemed more akin to his own than to Glorfindel’s. But it was obvious the golden lord was in a hosting mood, and that gladdened Erestor’s heart. For while Glorfindel seemed perpetually cheerful and made friends with virtually everyone he met, this dwarf put a twinkle in his eye that the advisor hadn’t seen for quite some time.

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Radagast sat on the side of one of the enormous nests that comprised the Eagles’ Eyrie, the wayward strands of his eyebrows furrowed in thoughtful sorrow. Tatsuo sat four nests over beside the still form of his bonded mate in her Worm form, as he had sat for two days thus far.

The Ryū-ningen had flown from Saigo no Sabaku in his dragon form, for that was much faster than flying with one of the Fenghuang or Gwaihir. He’d never regained contact with her through their bond, and determined that the stasis she’d entered was but a half step from death. His best healers had traveled before him from the battle in the Withered Heath, and had tended to her wounds as though she would live.

Then Chairo no Mahōtsukai had arrived on Tatsuo’s heels, and he’d had an absurd idea. Summon the Lady of Light, from the forest to the south. Tatsuo knew it was unlikely to help, for how could an elf who knew nothing of the Ryū-ningen assist beyond what his best healers could do? And was it worth the danger, yet another of these Westerners knowing of them?

Yet Chairo no Mahōtsukai trusted her entirely, and Tatsuo trusted him, so Gwaihir had gone to the forest of trees even stranger than those of the forest of the Elvenking.

Galadriel glided over to Radagast, taking a seat beside him, smoothing the front of her white robe with its shimmering dress underneath, and smiled.

“I can tell you wonder how my garments stay clean.”

“Magic of the elves?” He asked wryly. They were a study in contrasts, he supposed, she with her fair white glow as if it came from sparkling diamonds, he with his rumpled brown exterior of the earth itself.

Yet both were essentially creatures of the forest, and across all of their differences they had much in common.

He knew that if she desired she could read his thoughts and determine all that had occurred. But she did not, for she respected him too much. And so she simply asked. “How did these Were-worms come to be here? I truly thought these were creatures of legend.”

“Do you mean how did they come to be here,” pointing to the Eyrie, “or here” spreading his arms to refer to Arda itself.

“The former first.” She looked at him with an expression of gentle amusement.

“Good, because I’m not sure of the answer to the second.” He said nonchalantly.

She wasn’t entirely certain that was true, but she let it pass.
“You cannot tell anyone of this. Well, Celeborn I understand, but no one else.” He didn’t need to look at her, because he knew she agreed. “During the War of the Ring, the dragons of the Withered Heath began to amass, planning what would be a truly devastating assault. I became aware of it accidentally, really. I asked Morinehtar for assistance, as I knew he had a strong relationship with the Ryū-ningen, and I thought they could help. And here we are.” Radagast’s face was entirely sorrowful, blaming himself once more for things that had gone wrong. “She would not be dead if it was not for this battle I asked them to fight.”

“Morinehtar? Who is that?” Galadriel was entirely puzzled as she moved to place a comforting arm around the wizard’s shoulders.

“Ah, I suppose you might not know. They did not visit you, I take it?”

Her expression made it clear that they did not, as she remained entirely confused.

“He is one of the Blue Wizards, one of my kindred.”

“One of those who traveled East and has not been heard from.” She didn't understand how Radagast had come to know them, but she didn't press him further.

“Yes, exactly.” Radagast mumbled.

“And this war? Is it ongoing?”

“Yes.” He explained Tatsuo’s gathering of additional recruits in his hope to gain decisive advantage. “His mate was attacked in tunnels leading from the Grey Mountains, initially delved by the Worms there to facilitate attack from underground. She’d been weaving what they term barrier tunnels, preventing incursion by spells laid within, spells that prevent trespass. Spells that Morinehtar taught them.” He sighed. “I am not quite sure what occurred, but it seems a party of dwarves entered the tunnels and attacked her. Unprovoked.”

She nodded in understanding. “Because they thought she was a dragon, and that was enough. Like they – or I - would attack an Orc.”

They sat silently then, staring at Tatsuo and his grievously injured, entirely too still mate, wondering about all of the other times in which assumptions of evil may not have been based in truth.

Nearly due Eastward from the Eagles’ Eyrie, across the leagues of trees that were Eryn Lasglaen, the Elvenqueen tidied the branches of berries she had left on Thranduil’s bedside stand, studying his face as she did so. The Elvenking had grown even more argumentative in recent days, an unfortunate continued result of his slowly improving condition, for his gradual recognition of his impairment was certainly not accompanied by unflinching acceptance. And his memory loss had not really improved, furthering his frustration. Elrond had decided to keep him lightly sedated, believing that the Elvenking’s volatility would gradually subside as he improved further, although the eventual outcome remained unclear.

Yet she’d found there had been an unexpected side effect of his light sedation, for when he awoke from it he would for some moments forget time and place, his entire being unguarded and their fëa-bond fully open.
She’d discovered it accidentally as she sat beside him in the middle of the night some days ago, unable to slip into reverie and somehow finding herself at his bedside. Thranduil woke in the early morning light and stared at her with clear love in his eyes, whispering her name and not her title, and certainly that hadn’t occurred since Dagorlad. Then he’d reached for her hand, gently asking her what troubled her so. But the moment then passed, and he drew into his shell once more as consciousness came back to him.

And now she tended to take vigil by him at in the hour before he would wake, working at his bedside as she needed to, simply to await those brief moments before he would rage at her. Lord Elrond had quickly caught on, and her respect for him grew when he said nothing, aside from telling the staff that he and the Queen were to tend to Thranduil when he woke.

She was fooling herself, she knew, but part of her guiltily hoped it would stay like this, with brief moments of the only thing that could salve her wounded fëa interspersed with those long periods of stark reality in which she was entirely alone.

And in the very back of her mind, so far back it was not an entirely conscious thought, she hoped against hope that this portended change for the future.

But that would be complete and utter folly, and she had given up anything remotely resembling folly long ago.

“My Queen.” Galion whispered. “Pardon the interruption, but Master Peregrin has returned from Erebor, and he brings with him Prince Faramir of Ithilien, the Honorable Steward of Gondor.”

“And what do they request?” She answered coolly.

“Master Peregrin returns from his negotiations with Thorin Stonehelm, and as for the Steward, he apparently some plants he requires assistance with.”

She tilted her head in her Thranduil-like way, Galion immediately understanding her clear unspoken question.

“I think he requires assistance with identification. They are to be used in a brew he needs to make.”

She swept out of the room, Galion following. “A brew? As in a concoction?”

“No my Queen, I think he is planning a beverage. Akin to the ales mortals create.”

She slowed such that Galion could walk by her side, her face as neutrally cold as ever. “Surely I have no expertise with that.”

“Of course, my Lady. I think he simply requires determination if the plants are toxic.”

She nodded nearly imperceptibly. This was more her sister’s domain, but her sister hadn’t walked Arda for three millennia.

And her expression grew colder as she thought on that. “Shall I send for the Rîs-Naneth? She has much knowledge of herbs and other plants.”

Galion knew that nothing useful resulted from the Queen’s Naneth visiting the Halls and as such he was most appreciative that he had an excellent alternative. “No, my Queen, I do not think that is necessary. Lord Elrond should be able to assist if you cannot.”

The butler thought of the ever-proper Lord of Imladris, who faithfully drank an evening cordial or
glass of wine, assisting Faramir with his brew. The idea made him laugh, especially as he thought of Lord Elrond drunk on a mortal’s concoction, something he imagined none had ever seen.

His chuckling led the Elvenqueen to turn her cold gaze toward him. “Did you partake of this brew they are making, Galion?”

And he wasn’t entirely certain, but he thought he saw a glimmer of laughter in her own eyes.

They entered her study, Pippin and Faramir quietly talking, both rising as she entered the room. She gestured them to sit as she moved to her desk, sitting gracefully, handing Galion some paperwork she needed him to review.

“And to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” She asked in her entirely formal manner. “I understand you have some plants you require assistance with?” She gestured for them to speak with a brief movement of her hand.

“Indeed, my Lady.” Faramir bowed his head once more, deciding to get to the heart of the matter promptly, for this Queen did not seem to be one to engage in idle pleasantries. “I procured plants and we are unable to identify them. I’d like to know if they are safe for consumption within a mead.”

“An ale-type beverage?” She clarified, as her only experience with either was the ale taste-testing she had performed with Galion and Pippin before the hobbit traveled to Erebor.

“More like wine, as the ingredients and brewing are different from ales, and mead tends to taste much sweeter.” He pulled out a small box containing the plants, placing it on her desk.

She frowned when she looked inside, for she had never seen such plants before.

“Galion,” she said, “Will you find Lord Elrond? Perhaps he can assist with this, as you had suggested.”

Galion looked up from his work, glancing at the box of plants on her desk.

And he froze, for he recognized at least one, and perhaps some of the others. The one he clearly knew had served as a key spell component from the myriad of plants the Elvenking and Queen had brought back to Mirkwood from their journey Eastward. Yet Thranduil had destroyed all of those after they - well, she - had erased her memory with the spell at the mouth of what was now the Enchanted River.

“Where did you locate these?” the butler asked.

“In a tunnel below the ruins of Framsburg.” Faramir replied.

“It was a truly exciting quest, Galion. They even slew a dragon!” Pippin grinned excitedly. “I can tell you all about it!”

Galion smiled, glancing at the Elvenqueen who stood with her ever-present cold expression. “I – We – look forward to that. But these grew underground?”

“Without sunlight?” the Elvenqueen frowned as she spoke.

Faramir nodded, but Pippin answered for him. “Yes, isn’t it the strangest thing? And they glow in the dark. Watch!” He blew out the candles in the room and true to his word, the plants glowed faintly.

“Odd,” the Elvenqueen said, her frown continuing to deepen as Pippin relit the candles. “I have
never seen such a thing.”

Galion sighed inwardly, for he knew what she said wasn’t true, she just didn’t remember that she had seen such plants before. And he also knew that these plants could have strange side effects, for it seemed likely that they were all used by sorcerers as spell components.

But who would have planted them in those ruins? More correctly, in tunnels below the ruins? It made no sense. Surely there were no sorcerers outside of Rhûn, sorcerers that had traveled to the area of the forest?

Surely they did not seek the Elvenqueen?

“I will fetch Lord Elrond.” Galion said while he once more he lamented Thranduil’s state, for the Elvenking was likely the only elf who could answer any of his questions. But perhaps with regard to this alone it was for the best, for reminders of their time in the East with the Blue Wizards would simply worsen matters even further between the Elvenking and his Queen.

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Legolas rose from his bath, appreciating once more the tavern they had found. Well, more correctly, the one that Aragorn recalled from his own journey Eastward. Just as the now-King had stated, the wine was delicious and the accommodations welcome. There were other such establishments scattered throughout Dorwinion, but this one held fond memories in Aragorn’s heart.

Primarily because they somehow infused their own version of galenas with their wine, rolling it into tubes, a new treat that Gandalf was certain to be currently enjoying.

He heard a knock at the door, knowing it would be Dhruv, one of his Easterling guides, bringing him word of the next day’s plans.

“Just a moment,” he called.

The knock came impatiently once more. Legolas quickly drew on his leggings and tunic and opened the door, slightly worried what his Easterling traveling companion would think of his unbrushed hair, for he had heard Éowyn mention Dhruv’s customs required proper presentation of one’s clothes and hair in public at all times.

But it wasn’t Dhruv on the other side of the door. “Gimli,” Legolas breathed, entirely happy that he hadn’t argued against Aragorn’s decision to summon the ginger-haired dwarf.

During his journey with Elrohir, the dwarf had considered all sorts of things that he wanted to tell Legolas when he saw him, many inspired by the lectures his own Amad and Adad would give him when he was a younger lad.

But now that he saw him, he simply drew him into his arms. This was Legolas, after all, and while in many situations the elf ranged from inscrutable to happy, even humorously silly, Gimli knew his elf would be thoroughly distressed, or, as his Amad liked to say, he would have tied so many knots in his beard that he couldn’t brush them out.

Granted the elf didn’t have a beard, but his hair certainly looked disheveled, so the metaphor seemed close enough.
“How did you find me?” Legolas looked at his dwarf with a fond smile on his face.

Gimli laughed. “Not so difficult, my elf, with a White Wizard sitting out front smoking like a chimney. And Elrohir knew your route, that this was one of the potential rendezvous points, as he likes to call them.”

“Oh, I missed that discussion, I think.”

Gimli looked at him fondly, so fondly that Legolas felt his heart skip a beat. “I imagine, my elf, that you were worrying yourself sick all this time.”

Legolas shook his head. “Not sick, Gimli. Just…a bit preoccupied.” He skirted around the main point of their travel, feeling uneasy about saying anything out loud.

But Gimli had no such concerns. “What do you need to find, my elf, to know that this enchantment is just a silly thing? A hoax that Gandalf fell for?”

“Gimli, you know that’s not true. Mithrandir does not have spider webs cast over his eyes.” He moved over to his pack, finding Thranduil’s journal. “Here, read this.”

Gimli did, and then looked at Legolas as calmly as he had before, with some hints of apology. “I will admit I did not entirely take this seriously before, and I am not entirely sure I completely do now.” At Legolas’ frown, he quickly spoke again. “Understand, my love, that I am a dwarf, spells and enchantments aren’t something we are familiar with, and with Mahal as my witness, something our maker designed us to be resistant to.”

Legolas nodded, for he understood.

“If this is true, which I will say I know is possible, especially if you and Gandalf believe it could be….if this is true, the solution is simple.” Gimli continued, his hand covering Legolas’ own.

“Oh?” Legolas spoke nearly as calmly as his betrothed, with only a slight hint of trepidation in his voice.

“Yes, Gandalf will undo this enchantment, we will be married, and that’s that. It will not be that challenging, we’ve done much more difficult things than this. Trust me.”

“But, it may not be so simple.” He looked at Gimli and then downward at their intertwined fingers, still unable to voice his greatest concern.

Gimli grabbed his chin, forcing him to look in his eyes. “Legolas,” he said sternly. “You are my One. One cannot be gained by enchantment. It is unfortunate your parents do not share love, for you have not learned by their example, and the elves in your kingdom are not exactly…affectionate. But I shall enjoy teaching you, and your first lesson is this: Even if your worst fear is true, and I love you because of an enchantment, and negating the spell removes what I feel for you, it shall be regained. Or if it is the consequence of our binding that is to be feared and not actual loss of love, well, we shall fix that also so the consequence doesn't occur. Mahal as my witness, I know this to be true, and we will be married next year, no matter what happens.”

A faint yet challenging smile was his reply. “Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens?”

“Nay, just simple common sense. How could I resist you? When the world is remade, we will come to know one another again, and it will not simply be a reunion as we are having right now. I would have to come to know you again, and you grow to know me. But my soul would know yours, my
soul does know yours. How would your worst fear be any different?"

Legolas nodded, finally feeling his burden truly shift, for this was what his mind had wanted to hope but simply could not find words for. “It is good you followed me, Gimli.”

“Hmph, I cannot leave you alone, look at the trouble you get yourself into! Nearly worse than Pippin! Nay, perhaps more so! I will not leave your side again, or else next thing I know you’ll have cast some spell to turn yourself into an oliphaunt! Or an ent! Or,” he said with a grin as he ran his hand through Legolas’ hair, “a stone creature, like those trolls my Adad was fond of telling tales of, the ones from the Company’s Quest!”

“Surely not, dwarf.”

“Surely yes, elf.”

And Gimli kissed him then, Legolas entirely forgetting about oliphanuts, ents, trolls, and spells.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin translations
fēa = soul / fēar (plural)
hrōa = body / hrōar (Plural)
mellon-nin = my friend
Rîs-Naneth = Queen Mother
Galenas = pipeweed
Penninor = last day

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Japanese translations (courtesy of Raelien)
Chaio no Mahōtsukai = Brown Wizard
Ryū-ningen = Were-worm
Saigo no Sabaku = Last Desert

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Aegnor & Andreth = Male elf and human female who fell in love in the first age. Aegnor wouldn’t marry Andreth due to ongoing war as well as the fact she was mortal. He (ironically) died in war before she died, and it’s said that he refuses to be reimbodied because he doesn’t want to live in a world without her. While the story is tragic, it has slivers of hope: In Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth, Finrod (Aegnor’s brother) says to Andreth “But you are not for Arda. Wither you may go may you find light. Await us there, my brother— and me.” (Finrod has a strong friendship with her, and in the context of their discussion it reads to me that when the world is unmade, all of Eru’s children will be gathered together).

Tuor: Man who married an elf (Idril). Eärendil is their son. When he was aged, they sailed to Valinor and he was “counted amongst the elves” (granted either immortality or an extremely long life).
Perspectives

Chapter Summary

Sometimes things are exactly what they seem - such as the love between Gondor's King and Queen. And sometimes it's more complicated, depending on who's doing the looking - such as a found-chain or the slaying of a beast of Morgoth.

Chapter Notes

Please keep in mind that Thranduil still has memory loss and severe mood swings (both resulting from his head injury) as well as significant physical impairment in this story. He can't remember anything that's happened after the point when Legolas leaves for Laketown in the Desolation of Smaug, including his own injury at the hands of various orcs during the Second Battle Under the Trees after the War of the Ring ends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“These are unlike anything I have ever seen. I am not sure what to say.” The Lord of Imladris was perplexed as he studied the plants retrieved from the cavern below Framsburg. He looked up at the Elvenqueen, his puzzlement answered by her cold, impassive gaze. “Perhaps I will search through the books in your library, for there are a good number of tomes on plant lore. An answer may be hidden there.”

Faramir was soon to respond, driven by both a sense of obligation and keen interest, for this was one of the most learned of elves, and the Steward of Gondor ever appreciated scholarly pursuits. “I can assist you, Lord Elrond, for certainly this is my task.”

The Elvenqueen turned her head slightly to look at Pippin, waiting expectantly for the hobbit to volunteer as well. When he did not, she was somewhat surprised, though the emotion was not reflected in her expression. “Master Peregrin? Do you wish to join them as well?”

“Oh no, I have much to fill you in on,” he said excitedly. While the Elvenqueen was the furthest from friendly of any hobbit – or man or woman or dwarf or elf – he’d ever met, he truly enjoyed assisting her with planning Legolas and Gimli’s wedding.

“We can do that over dinner this evening, Master Peregrin. I have much to do at the moment,” she said, her mood the entire opposite of his.

“Oh, I don’t mind. I can assist you. As Faramir can tell you, I’m actually quite helpful.”

Faramir's face was purely fondness and warmth as he considered the hobbit’s self-endorsement. “It may not always seem thus, but his help is among the most true you will find.”

Pippin frowned as he considered Faramir’s words, and the Steward noticed. “I mean that as a sincere compliment, Master Took.”
“Very well,” the Elvenqueen stated in her ever cool manner, “Follow me.” And she swept out of her study, beckoning Pippin to follow with a slight gesture of her hand.

“If a hobbit cannot warm her heart, I am not certain who could,” Elrond calmly stated under his breath once the pair was a safe distance away, speaking softly enough that Faramir could not hear but forgetting for a moment that Galion stood nearby.

Galion knew that was not true, not in the purest sense. Yet he imagined Morgoth would return from the Void before the one who could mend the Elvenqueen’s shattered fëa would do so.

And as he thought of Thranduil, he resolved to speak to the Elvenking about Faramir’s plants, for it was something he would surely want to know, regardless of his state. But he would need to wait for an opportune moment, as the news would not bring pleasant memories.

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The day brought much that was monotonous to the Elvenqueen yet surprisingly interesting for Pippin, as the Quest and the Scouring of the Shire had stoked his interest in governing. Those who knew the hobbit well would have been somewhat surprised at the extent to which he kept his attention on the task at hand despite the numerous potential distractions he encountered during the day.

Yet as the evening meal drew near, one proved too much for him. Pippin saw the Queen's typical state turn almost sad after she bid him to wait outside the Elvenking’s chambers and briefly checked on Thranduil. When she exited, she seemed to forget the hobbit was standing there, and it proved too much, firing Pippin's curiosity about her mate. In that moment, he needed to see the Elvenking of Bilbo's grand tales with his own two eyes.

And so the hobbit somehow found himself at the Elvenking’s bedside – how exactly, the Took couldn’t say – saddened at Thranduil’s condition yet impressed by his strength, for he looked worse than Frodo had after being rescued from Mount Doom, and Pippin knew the Elvenking’s condition was much improved from his initial injury.

“Who are you?” Pippin jumped when the Elvenking spoke to him, peering from the side of his bed at the small form before him, his mind bleary and barely awake from the herbs that kept his recently labile moods in check. Yet perhaps they were unnecessary in this moment, for Thranduil’s anger was absent – he simply thought he must be dreaming of some strange creature. A child of Yavanna’s gardens perhaps? This certainly wasn’t an elfling beside him, and he’d never seen a dwarf like this. Not hairy and stocky enough, he said derisively in his mind, for he remained incredibly offended by Thorin Oakenshield’s ill behavior upon his intrusion into Mirkwood. The dwarf should have been grateful that he had been captured by Legolas and Tauriel, but instead he simply scowled and blustered and rebuffed…. And then to have the gall to escape, drawing his beloved son Legolas in his stead….

“I'm Pippin.” The short figure answered, somehow quelling his growing ire and agitation, “Peregrin Took, your Highness. Of the Shire. And Knight of Gondor.”

Thranduil’s initial reaction was one of sheer amusement as he decided this was real and Turgon, the Steward of Gondor of whom he knew little, must have lost his mind. But that soon gave way to a respectful view, as he knew far too well how looks could be deceiving. He felt some guilt for his initial judgmentalness, though it wasn't something he would show.

“Do you bring news of my son? Legolas?” Yet Thranduil was confused, for why would Gondor be involved in this, and why wouldn’t Galion or one of his staff bring such news? “How did you get in
here?” And why could he not move very well? “Have I been injured?” Why was he so tired?

The Elvenking spoke almost incomprehensibly. And when he spotted the Elvenqueen as she backtracked her steps to find her missing shadow and moved to pull the hobbit away, Thranduil flew into a rage at the sight of her. If Legolas was still in pursuit of those dwarves with Tauriel, if he ended up binding with her....

In that moment, Pippin began to understand the Elvenqueen a bit more clearly. And if Thranduil’s behavior did not improve when he got better, Pippin resolved to give him a good lecture on manners. And perhaps the Elvenqueen too!

He had been on the receiving end of derision himself, though decidedly much less intense. In viewing how she reacted to it Pippin understood immediately that it wasn’t new, that this must be something that hurt her. And he also naturally wondered what she had done.

Yet all Thranduil’s anger did was to hurt the Elvenking himself, the hobbit thought. He sorrowed at the family’s state. And he understood, if only slightly, why Legolas might have hid the fact that he loved Gimli.

It was good that he was here, he told himself once more, for this royal family truly needed help with far more than wedding planning.

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“How I let you talk me into this, elf, only Mahal knows.” Adlia grumbled as she fidgeted, trying to find a comfortable position.

It was something Glorfindel had always wanted to do after he had been reimbodied, but he’d never encountered an elf with whom he wanted to share this. At least in Imladris.

But now he’d met Adlia, and their swift camaraderie struck him as a gift from the Valar themselves. They’d spent several days together in and near Imladris, hunting orcs, visiting the elven forges, and simply enjoying one another’s company. Sharing this with her was a simple matter of common sense, as she might say.

“Do you need another pillow, Master Dwarf?” He looked at her fidgeting with fond amusement.

“Nay, but I would like my pipe.”

His ever-young face looked at her with an expression of mock insult. “I assure you, Master Dwarf, smoking is not something that is done during this.” He sat back on his heels, beckoning her to do the same, and then sat in silent repose, his graceful hands folded in his lap.

Adlia snuck a peek at him out of the corner of her eye. “Um, Master Elf?”

“Yes?” he said softly, not opening his eyes.

“Can you explain to me again what to do now? I cannot recall.”

They had been engaged in this traditional meditational ceremony of Gondolin since the full moon had appeared in the sky, and while she had made it her goal to keep her fondness for him to herself, she had grown too entranced with his melodic, detailed instructions of this meditational prayer to remember the latter portion of his words.

“Oh, I am sorry!” His eyes instantly opened and – was it guilt? – flooded his face.
“We now reflect on those lost in the twelve houses.” He leaned closer to her, almost conspiratorially. “And since you have enjoyed the tales of the House of Rog nearly as much as those of my own, we shall start with those. Now recall…”

He kept speaking, and she grew entranced once more. This time she finally erred, her expression finally betrayed what was in her heart, and the Balrog-Slayer noticed. He looked at her for a long space of time, and then drew his hand up to touch her cheek. “Master Dwarf, forgive me if I speak out of turn, but…”

A yelp in the distance severed the moment, and they both scrambled to their feet to determine the source of the sound. “Was that Mr. Baggins?” Adlia asked.

“It certainly sounded so,” Glorfindel replied as they ran through the garden.

It was indeed dear Bilbo, tears in his eyes as he sat beside one of Imladris’ fountains. “Mr. Baggins, do you require assistance?” Glorfindel swept to his side as Adlia directly followed, both of them concerned at the sight of the elderly hobbit.

“Oh, no mind. It was just a foolish thing.” He looked at his hands and then attempted a smile. Adlia carefully pulled him to his feet, wondering at his seemingly saddened state of mind while softly asking him if he was injured, which he was not. Then she hooked her arm in his to escort him back to the Last Homely House. “Wait, Master Dwarf!” he said, nearly urgently. “It was under my foot. I hope I didn’t ruin it by stepping on it.”

The dwarrowdam easily spotted what it was, what Mr. Baggins had dropped, namely a thin blue-hued chain. It was clearly of dwarven make, and she passed it back to him. “Surely you know that something like this will last an eternity, Master Baggins. It’s slightly long for you, however. Did Bofur make it for you? I can make it shorter.”

Yet she wondered at her hypothesis, for something worn on the body would be strange for a dwarf to give to another in a simple gesture of friendship. But not unheard of, she supposed, thinking back to Gimli’s carrying of Galadriel’s hair near his heart.

Perhaps this time spent in the company of non-dwarves was getting to her kindred.

Yet surely this was a courting necklace, missing only the pendants or charms that would be placed on it in recognition of key shared times, lovingly crafted by the dwarrow or dwarrowdam who had gifted it. And it would not have been provided by Bofur, for he had One. And typically the blue-tone was used by members of the royal family, symbolizing Durin’s line.

Yet she didn’t push Mr. Baggins further when he didn’t respond. It simply wasn’t her way.

Little did she know that he hadn’t told anyone who the chain was from, and he likely never would. He knew this as surely as he remembered how it had been obtained.

Now the dwarves took down mail and weapons from the walls, and armed themselves.

Royal indeed did Thorin look, clad in a coat of gold-plated rings, with a silver hafted axe in a belt crusted with scarlet stones.

"Mr. Baggins!” he cried. "Here is the first payment of your reward! Cast off your old coat and put on this!"

With that he put on Bilbo a small coat of mail, wrought for some young elf-prince long ago. It was of
silver-steel which the elves call mithril, and with it went a belt of pearls and crystals. A light helm of figured leather, strengthened beneath with hoops of steel, and studded about the bring with white gems, was set upon the hobbit's head.

"I feel magnificent," he thought; "but I expect I look rather absurd. How they would laugh on the Hill at home. Still I wish there was a looking-glass handy!"

All the same Mr. Baggins kept his head more clear of the bewitchment of the hoard than the dwarves did. Long before the dwarves were tired of examining the treasures he became wary of it and sat down on the floor; and he began to wonder nervously what the end of it all would be "I would give a good many of these precious goblets, thought, "for a drink of something cheering out of one Beorn's wooden bowls!"

"Thorin!" he cried aloud. "What next? We are armed, but what good has any armour ever been before against Smaug the Dreadful? This treasure is not yet won back. We are not looking for gold yet, but for a way of escape; and we have tempted luck too long!"

"You speak the truth!" answered Thorin, recovering his wits. "Let us go! I will guide you. Not in a thousand years should I forget the ways of this palace." Then he hailed the others, and they gathered together, and holding their torches above their heads they passed through the gaping doors, not without many a backward glance of longing.

Yet Thorin held Bilbo back with a hand on his shoulder, the hobbit turning to wonder what had stopped the dwarf. "And this, Mr. Baggins." Thorin passed him a blue-hued chain, Bilbo promptly putting it on underneath his mail coat.

"I wonder if it is part of a matching set," he wondered.

He hadn’t seen Thorin remove the chain from his own neck, where it had rested since he came of age.

“Come!” said Dwalin, wondering what had led the pair to dwaddle as a thought lingering in the back of his mind was found once more, much like a valuable stone placed aside for safekeeping in the midst of work, polished a bit further while it waited for full attention at a more opportune time.

“Mr. Baggins?” Adlia’s voice shook the hobbit from his memory. “We’re at your chamber door.”

Bilbo shifted the chain to his other hand, still threaded through Adlia’s arm, as he searched his pockets for his key. Locking the door was a hobbitish custom that Lord Elrond gladly indulged for the elderly ring-bearer, for while he enjoyed a great many things about staying with these elves it was difficult to give up his ways of being entirely. Soon enough he had gained entrance to his now-home, and he wanted to show his appreciation to these two caring souls.

“Will you come in for tea?” Bilbo presented a welcoming invitation, and the dwarf and elf did.

They chatted about Adlia and Glorfindel’s orc hunting and the upcoming Penninor celebration, leading Mr. Baggins to talk in turn of Yule traditions in the Shire. It was an intriguing holiday, for both the elf and dwarf knew it was also a mannish custom celebrated across their lands, and a lively discussion of decorated trees, gifts, mistletoe, and more ensued.

“Tell me, Master Baggins,” Glorfindel eventually asked, “Is that fine chain of yours a gift you received at Yule? Or on a fellow hobbit’s birthday? I haven’t seen it before.”

“This? Oh, no, no.” He paused, not wanting to say more, yet he also did not want to be rude to this noble elf who had been friendlier to him than any other since he’d made Rivendell his home. And
there was the not-small feat of saving his dear nephew from the Black Riders.

“It was found during the Company’s Quest, from the treasure of Smaug.”

Realizing she’d been wrong, that this courting chain wasn’t a gift from any within the Company, Adlia grew open to discussing it, for discussion of a found treasure surely wouldn’t intrude on the elderly hobbit’s privacy. “Aye, a treasured find indeed, then. A courting chain from a member of the royal family of old, before Smaug attacked the mountain. Yet an unmarried one, for there are no pendants attached to it.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened, and Adlia misunderstood the cause. “Do not worry, Mr. Baggins, there is no offense in wearing the courting necklace of one of my ancestors. Simply finding it doesn’t have the same meaning as when it is freely given. Perhaps it was to have been Frór’s, as his was not worn, struck down as he was before coming of age in the War of Dwarves and Dragons.”

Bilbo’s surprise was greater than it had been when Dwalin had talked with him those days ago, and he had a sudden urge to speak with his Quest companion, for this dwarrow seemed to confirm his words. He hadn’t dared believe the elder-yet-not-seeming-so dwarf as he told Bilbo that Thorin regarded him as One….but this simply reinforced his words. Surely Thorin would have known the meaning of such a gift if the dwarrow currently sitting beside him did? Yet how to excuse himself from his guests to seek Dwalin?

He ended up not needing to find a reason to part from their company and shorten their evening, however, as a knock came at the door. It was Erestor, and he sent a glance straight to the Balrog-Slayer and his dwarven friend. “The two of you hide more effectively than Wood-elves who don’t care to be found within their forest. Come. Radagast has traveled here and seeks an audience with you.”

Gandalf stood at the prow of the ship, wondering if he had made a mistake in listening to the advice of their Easterling guides. Their reasons were sound: Sailing would save them countless days of travel, was likely safer than being on foot, and it allowed them to rest their horses. So it was not that their counsel regarding routes was unwise, far from it.

Rather, it was the effect this sailing had on the elf for whom they undertook this quest.

While it wasn’t the size of its entirely different counterpart, the Sundering Sea, the Sea of Rhûn presented its own difficulties for Legolas. Sea longing firmly held the mind and heart of the Prince of Eryn Lasgalen, the inland sea producing a strong echo of Eru’s song, incessantly reverberating through the call of the gulls flying overhead.

Gimli came to stand beside the Wizard, sharing one of the rolled galenas that Gandalf had grown fond of during their travels through Dorwinion. “Hmph! Mahal help me, but it’s strange that I am more comfortable on this vessel than my elf. Our maker did not build us for sailing!”

The White Wizard studied the dwarf as he thoughtfully gazed at the horizon. “I may look in on him, see if I may be of use. Are Elladan and Elrohir below with him still?”

“Aye. They’ve created another concoction of herbs for him to try. Perhaps you can add some wizardry to them, as Pippin might say.” The Longbeard’s grumbling words belied his own worry for his elf’s state of mind.

“Rest assured Gimli, I shall see what I can do.” Gandalf patted Gimli’s shoulder and went below
Gimli turned from the prow and began pacing, stopping when he saw Dhruv, one of their Easterling guides. An opportune encounter, he decided, one that would help to pass the time, as his own presence below deck currently only served to make Legolas more agitated.

Of their two guides, Dhruv was the more outgoing, and Gimli had grown to enjoy his company in the short time they spent together, much as Éowyn did. “Master Dhruv! I have been meaning to ask you, do you know any of my kin in the Red Mountains, given that you lived east of the Orocarni’s southern range?”

“I do not, but my father’s father encountered one once. He would tell the story when I was a small child as our family gathered around him after our evening Ślóka. They are a secretive folk.” He told the story of the Blacklock that had saved his grandfather from the certain starvation in the wilderness and had then forbidden him to speak of it to any of his kindred aside from the family that lived under his roof. But surely the dwarf would not mind the telling of the tale to another dwarf.

Part of him had always wondered if it was a tale for children, a fantasy story to teach lessons. Not the existence of dwarves themselves, as he was certain they lived in the Orocarni Mountains, but whether his father’s father had actually met one. Elves, those were a different story, and he’d even wondered until he’d met Legolas if elves were mythological creatures, much like the Ryū-ningen of Saigo no Sabaku. Perhaps Were-worms and Avari did walk the far East.

He shook his head. “The one to whom I was arranged was killed.” Yet he said no more, not wanting to discuss the heinousness of how she was murdered, the severing of her body parts attributed to Western spies, a warning of what would occur to others if his kingdom refused to assist Sauron’s forces during the War of the Ring. His Overlord had encouraged Dhruv to join his army, citing need to avenge her honor and prevent further violence on the part of Westerners. When his father refused Dhruv’s participation his entire family was slaughtered - without his Overlord’s knowledge, he still hoped to this day - to provide an example for others who resisted war.

“I was older than most when the marriage was arranged, midway through my childhood, and most relieved when it occurred. Yet my father’s father said he had waited for a sufficient dowry to equal my worth.” He smiled in remembrance, pulling out a small elephant carved of a stone unknown to the dwarf. “This is was given to me when I was born, to be exchanged with whomever I marry so that we might find ourselves again in our next life. Hers was placed in her hands atop her funeral pyre such that she may find another when she lives again.”

“Had we married, we would have held these in our hands by our matrimonial fire when her father presented her to me. Then we would have thrown them into the fire, joining us in this life and the ones beyond.” He put the stone back into his pocket. “I think I am content to wait until my next life to find my wife, should I be graced with this mannish form once more. Yet whatever form is deemed for me, whether I have six more lives to live or this is the last of my seven, I will accept, as I cannot argue Devá’s grace.”

“Master Dhruv,” Gimli said, pondering the reference to seven lives while refraining from embracing his new friend in light of his losses as Legolas had told him such contact was deemed insulting, “What do you mean by the form that is deemed for you?”

“Whether I am reborn as a human, or some sort of animal. I shall strive to bide by Devá’s laws and please him as best I can, so that upon my seventh death I can fly to his arms. With, I hope, my wife.”

“Aye, well I hope that occurs for you, then.” It left the dwarf a bit troubled, for he had never thought about this sort of reincarnation before. Dhruv as an oliphaunt? Such as one like Legolas had slain?
He just could not see it.

And yet, perhaps anything was possible. Just as Durin might walk Arda again one day.

Éowyn approached them then, having overheard the last of their conversation. “Gimli, your elf is doing much better. Nergüi had mixed an herbal tonic that worked far better than Elrohir’s did. The twins have him nearly cornered right now, trying to learn all of his plant lore!”

“Hmph! That is good news indeed. I shall go see to him then, and rescue Nergüi at the same time.” He stood to leave.

“May I tell him your story of the dragon, Gimli?” Éowyn asked with an expectant look.

“Aye, of course! Tell him the entire story. It is grand!”

“What is it?” Dhruv asked excitedly.

Éowyn explained the betrothal quest that her beloved undertook, recounting it even more lushly than Gimli had to her. She was so engrossed in the telling of the tale that she did not notice Dhruv’s expression of sheer horror until she realized he hadn’t commented, and turned to look at him.

“What, what is it? Are you well?”

“Slay one of the Áhi? Why would they do such a thing?” It was incomprehensible to the Easterling, and he knew Nergüi’s reaction would be even worse, for his culture revered the creatures even more. All of the tales of bravery of those who tended to the Áhi, the men and women of the House of the Dragon in Saigo no Sabaku. And the Áhi themselves. Ai! What folly!

And what would Devá think of one of his favored creatures, his token of nobility and strength, being slaughtered?

Éowyn was utterly confused. This man’s seeming proclivity for the beasts certainly did not fit with the person she had grown to know. “A dragon? A creature of Morgoth? Why would they not slay it?”

Yet even as she said it, she knew it was not so simple, not based on the Easterling’s expression.

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Later that evening, after Dhruv had faced the Door of Night and said a prayer of keeping, praying to Devá to hold Morgoth there for eternity and beyond as he did every night, the entire group gathered in the large common area below deck.

“Gimli, he looks at you strangely.” Legolas whispered to his dwarf as he held his hand. The elf’s face was somewhat wan and strained, but Nergüi had been able to lessen much of the torment that lingered in his mind when every ounce of his body had screamed that this was the wrong sea. A near-irrepressible urge to bolt for the Sundering Sea had been his primary difficulty, yet it was much tamed now.

“Aye,” he whispered back. “Perhaps he is envious of the treasure beside me.”

Legolas smiled widely. “Or the one beside me. Come, let us go and sing to the stars.” It had taken the elf much explaining to help his Easterling guides understand that in doing so he did not worship Sauron, for while the night sky was a symbol of hope in the West, in the East it had often become a reminder of darkness, though each of the Easterlings had entirely different explanations for why. In
the end, it was their knowledge that the stars were different in the West that convinced the Easterlings of the elf’s veracity.

“Aye, if you sing, I’ll listen. It has been far too long since we have done that.”

And they headed above deck to enjoy the pleasure of one another’s company in welcomed privacy, while Dhruv continued to struggle to understand the concept of evil dragons and what had been done in the tunnels below the ruins of Framsburg.

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The air was cool across their faces as the ship cut across the water in the darkness, the light of Ithil shining down on them and stars twinkling above. Their hair wafted lightly in the breeze as they sat with backs against the railing of the ship, red and gold strands mingling together, Gimli’s hand resting on Legolas’ knee as the pair viewed the stars.

“Aragorn was correct, Gimli. The stars are strange in the East. The map of stars that Gandalf uncovered in Orthanc matches these, I think. I imagine it was created by the Númenóreans as a reference to these.”

“Have I mentioned before that I’d like to see that upon our return? I would enjoy crafting one for you myself.”

Legolas smiled, his face full of warmth and affection, folding Gimli into a warm embrace. “You have. And it fills me with joy.”

He sang, and they sat together with arms around one another.

“Hmph! What is that song, Legolas? I still do not understand your Sindarin words, but I am certain I have not heard these lyrics before.”

Legolas turned to look at Gimli. “It’s a tale my Elvenking used to sing me when I was an elfling. Of the wisdom the Avari hold, though the Noldor will not see it. I hope to encounter my Eastern kindred during our journey. Some of the Silvan elves in my forest have an Avari heritage.”

“Hmph, I thought your father dislikes Silvan elves? And I would guess the Avari by default. Why would he sing their praises?”

“No, it’s not that way at all, they hold the simpler way of life my grandfather was striving for.”

Legolas saw the raised eyebrow, knowing Gimli wondered about Oropher and Thranduil’s love of gems. “Being with the trees, Gimli, being with nature, defending and cultivating our forests, moving away from the rule of the Noldor and the trappings that led them to slay one another. He just doesn’t want me to marry a Silvan elleth - or ellon, I suppose. Although you know, Gimli, while I spent time by his side, and especially after I read of the enchantment within his journal, I wondered further if his requirement that I only wed a fellow Sindar was a false pretense, a way to keep me from binding. There are no eligible Sindar in our realm. At the very least, I understand now why he didn’t want me to bind with Tauriel, given the enchantment. Her hair was more fiery red than yours.”

Gimli frowned, jealous at the very idea of his elf being attracted to another. “I thought you said you didn’t view her that way. That she was but a fancy.”

Legolas turned closer towards him, their cheeks touching, enjoying the way Gimli’s beard felt against his face. “I didn’t. I was just speaking of his reasoning. But I must say, I like seeing you jealous.”
“Hmph, when you speak of others whom you might bind with, the fire of my jealousy grows more fierce than the light of your beloved stars.”

“You of all creatures should know you have no reason to be jealous.”

Gimli smiled to himself, his heart filled with love for his elf, and they sat on the deck still entwined in one another’s arms, gazing at the stars and listening to the sounds of the Sea as Legolas softly sang the few tales of the Avari that he had been taught in his childhood.

“Do you think the stars shine as brightly in Valinor, Gimli?” Legolas’ melodic voice cut through the Gimli’s own reverie.

“Hmm?” the ginger-haired dwarf said drowsily, having nearly fallen asleep in the warmth of his elf’s embrace, the motion of the ship relaxing as it traveled across the Sea. “I have not really thought of it before, my elf.” He yawned. “I wonder if there are stars there or not. Surely your Lady Elbereth would like to gaze upon them. And Mahal as well, given his part in crafting Durin’s Hammer. Let us hope we can find out someday.”

Legolas smiled, for it was his hope as well, and in that moment, as in so many since Gimli had joined him, any doubt regarding the truth of Gimli’s love could not be found in any recess of his fëa or hröa. Enchantment or not, this love felt more pure than anything Legolas could have wished for, and this moment of utter contentment felt like one he would treasure forever, regardless of what happened when they found the Blue Wizards and negated the spell.

Aragorn woke in the early dawn light, warmed by the sun streaming through the window. He reached for his love, but was not surprised when he found her pillow empty and her side of the bed cold. He sat up, gray eyes seeking the one who held his heart so strongly.

Yet she found her quarry first, somehow eluding his senses until she kissed his cheek. “You grow complacent in times of peace.”

“And in my own chambers.” He tracked her face with a gaze that spoke of his love for her, and his devotion reached the very depths of her soul.

“Yet I have captured you,” she whispered, “So what is my prize?”

He reclined, inviting her to claim whatever she might want, but they were interrupted by incessant knocking at the door. At first they ignored it, but it grew more rapid, and soon enough Aragorn rolled his eyes and shrugged on a robe.

As he opened the door, the glower in his eyes was clear, yet he immediately relented, for on the other side was one who would never interrupt him needlessly. “Your Highness, please forgive my intrusion. There has been an attack on one of your Easterling soldiers, in the second level, and it threatens to become a riot.”

“Allow me five minutes to ready myself. I will meet you in my study.” He moved to shut the door as his aide bowed in the taking of his leave. “I’m sorry, Arwen.”

“Sorry that you must leave me, or apologetic that I will need to take over your duties as well this morning?” Laughter danced in her eyes.

“Both. Although you enjoy my duties more than I, so I shall not feel too badly. Yet I promise to make it up to you when the day is done.” A searing kiss accompanied his words.
“They accused him of assisting in Sauron’s treachery, King Elessar, and proceeded to attempt to stone him.”

Aragorn winced as he rapidly proceeded to the second level of Minas Tirith, accompanied by his aide and his Royal Guard. “And this occurred outside of his quarters?”

“Yes, your Highness. As he was returning from his midnight duties. He lives, but barely, and was taken to the Houses of Healing by a squadron of our warriors. But the crowd remains on the verge of becoming a mob.”

It took much to bring the crowd under control, and Aragorn ordered all of his Easterling warriors to travel with Westerling guard until further notice.

Late that evening, King Elessar was intent on finding his Evenstar and making good on his promise. As he strode to his chambers, he was interrupted by one of his aides.

“Your Highness.” the aide bowed as Aragorn fought off the urge to remind him his manner of address was far too formal. “The Queen bid me to give you this.”

He smiled as he read it, for she awaited him in her private garden, and after a day such as this, her counsel and embrace was a gift beyond measure.

They sat under one of the fir trees in the cool night air, each reviewing the events of the day, Aragorn’s quelling of the riot and Arwen’s managing of most other aspects of their rule, for there was much to do each day that could not be ignored.

“I must tell you, Arwen,” he sighed, “that I am loathe to take this trip to Orthanc after the turn of the year.”

“Éomer awaits retrieval of the treasures of his ancestors. Perhaps you can determine for what purpose Saruman desecrated the barrows of his deceased ancestors. I can rule in your stead easily enough, and Faramir will happily assist. I'm sure he will have returned by then.”

“Perhaps you are right. It would be a short trip, I suppose.” He stroked her face in fondness. “Ah! And there is the matter of this star map that Gandalf described. Perhaps you should come with me, it may be a glorious sight.”

“But then who would see to duty here?”

“I shall most certainly see to my duties here,” he smiled roguishly, his lips descending onto hers as all thoughts of star maps faded from his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin Translations

Galenas = pipeweed
fëa = soul / fëar (plural)
hröa = body / hröar (Plural)
Turgon is the 24th Steward of Gondor, ruling at the point in time where Thranduil's memory is "stuck" (i.e., Thranduil thinks the current time is right after Legolas has left for Laketown in the Desolation of Smaug). Turgon rules from TA 2914 to TA 2953.

The Hobbit's events take place primarily in TA 2941. (TA = Third Age)

Long section of italicized text in this chapter is taken from the Hobbit, copyright J.R.R. Tolkien, with my additions at the end.

House of Rog = House of the Hammer of Wrath (Gondolin)

Yule was celebrated on two days in the Shire, 1 Yule (Dec 21 on our calendar, always on Highday aka Friday) and 2 Yule (Dec 22 on our Calendar, always on Sterday aka Saturday). The Yuledays fell between the months of Foreyule and Afteryule and weren't part of either month. 2 Yule was considered the start of the new year in the Shire. Yuletide included the 2 Yule days as well as the 2 days before and after. Yule was celebrated in mannish realms in northwestern Middle-Earth as well (Gondor, etc).
Chapter Summary

The Destroyer of Darkness and Helper of the East spend millennia rallying the people of Rhûn against Sauron’s influence.

Chapter Notes

SA = Second Age
TA = Third Age

(Note that the end of the War of the Last Alliance in SA 3441, in which Sauron is defeated, marks the end of the Second Age. Orophér’s early charge (accompanied by Amdir of Lorien and his troops) aka the Battle of Dagorlad occurs in SA 3434.

Also note that I'm following Tolkien's SA 1600 arrival of the Blue Wizards (the remainder of the Istari - Saruman, Radagast, Gandalf - arrive in Middle-Earth approx TA 1100).

And one final note that the Third Age events between Thranduil and the Elvenqueen will be covered in an upcoming Interlude as Prelude Chapter, but in a nutshell she travels East in TA 2103, during the Watchful Peace, when Legolas is still an elfling, approx. 10 years old (born TA 2093, 30 years after the Watchful Peace begins, i.e., when Gandalf discovers Sauron is the presence in Dol Goldur and the Dark Lord flees East). (I'm following estimates by some Tolkien scholars that Legolas is approx 800 to 900 years old by the time of the Fellowship of the Ring - I've made him around 925 years old during the Ring Quest. In the movies he's born in TA 87.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Northeastern shores of the Sea of Rhûn, Second Age 1789

Morinehtar stood near the edge of the large forest that grew on the northeast corner of the sea, unruly light gray hair and beard framing weary eyes that stared at the seemingly endless shades of green presented before him. “Aside from this region to our north, the countryside is nowhere near as inviting as it was in Dorwinion or south of the Sea. Surely if Oromê hunted here there would be more vegetation along the rest of these shores? How do the kine south of us survive?”

Rómestámo drank from his waterskin and leaned on his staff, his face equally tired. “The land is not nearly as desolate as you portray. Perhaps you simply miss the comforts we have left behind.”

They both most certainly did, for they had only recently been gained.

After traveling from the West with only brief sojourns along the way, including a visit in Orophér’s Wood nearly two centuries ago, the Blue Wizards had spent most of their time thus far within the kingdoms that fit within the many leagues-wide corridor between the Sea of Rhûn and Western
lands. The Dark Lord of Mordor held all in his thrall, severing each kingdom’s long-held trade ties with western realms, ties that had been hard won after the memorably grim East-West conflict in the First Age, ties that were now left tattered and broken following the invasion of Eregion.

It had been orcs and trolls who comprised the majority of Sauron’s army, yet those numbers were insufficient in and of themselves. Easterlings had been compelled to join, some of free will, some not. The Dark Lord had various means of ensuring compliance, although he had little need for his own direct use of his most repugnant ones, as his power of influence over minds was strong and others could carry out what he need not do. Provision of supplies and passage through lands was not all that Sauron required of the kingdoms he essentially controlled.

It was a great source of relief to each Wizard when they gained enough trust to convince the leaders of Dorwinion to move away from their temporary travel into Darkness and put forth a stance of neutrality. The defeat of Sauron at the hands of Tar-Ministar's army nearly a century ago created an opportunity that the Blue Wizards capitalized upon in every way they could, and the descendants of the Edain emerged as if from a paralyzing nightmare, one in later centuries they would seem to forget.

Even the Odan - known in the West as the Balchoth - were far less influenced by the Dark Lord and his servants than they had been. They considered - and even acted upon - the Blue Wizards' counsel, and the kinsmen decided it was time to travel further Eastward.

“Perhaps we would be best served to cover ground separately. There are so many places unvisited. At this rate it shall take several more centuries.” Rómestámo straightened his robes carefully, his incredibly quick movements incongruent with his elder mannish form. His face bore wrinkles and his meticulously groomed straight hair and beard were dark gray, yet his fingers and limbs were nimble, just as his kinsman’s were. Rómestámo favored clothing colored like the sky, while his companion preferred robes tinted the color of the sea, yet the greenery before them enticed in a way that air and water could not. Both wizards eagerly looked forward to their upcoming travel within the forest, for it pulled forth distant feelings of contentment, reminders without actual memory of their Lord Oromë's favored landscapes.

“I concur. Yet let us travel together for a bit longer, for we are still not aware of the dangers we may be presented. There is strength in numbers.”

Rómestámo reluctantly agreed.

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_Ulford, Second Age 1793_

“I assure you that worship of one other than the Supreme One is not for my people, regardless of past decisions made by my forefathers.” The relatively young King sat back in his wooden throne and stroked the animal pelt covering it as he studied the Blue Wizards’ faces with his keen, wise eyes.

“As you know,” he continued, “the complete union of our tribes has been recent, the legacy of my father’s work. I have dedicated myself to his mission, rekindling the honor of Bór and rejecting that of Ulfang.” The King’s realm was a union of those distantly related to Ulfang’s descendants and followers, historically allied with forces of darkness even after Morgoth’s betrayal, most recently assisting the Dark Lord in the War of Elves and Sauron three generations ago. The Blue Wizards’ efforts had influenced those who rejected that history, and a century and a half later they had grown strong enough in number to seek other goals. The nomadic hunters had little in common culturally with the farming society of Bór that was now merely part of the annals of First Age history, but Bór’s sterling rejection of Morgoth was a lesson they wished to heed.
Both wizards breathed an inward sigh of relief and sent a quick prayer of thanks to Eru. Ulford was tremendously large and densely populated, its Wainriders a loose conglomeration of many tribes that had recently been united under King Ulon and now led by his son, Ulam.

They took no heed of the finely crafted ring of elven design that adorned King Ulam’s finger, for it seemed just another addition to the wide array of jewelry that he wore.

Spires of Morning, Second Age 1855

“We cannot do this alone. We need additional tools.” Rómestámo’s frustration had grown over the last two decades as he and Morinehtar tried to cover an incredibly vast range of territory, with four key kingdoms ruled by men – and a woman - who had grown inexplicably powerful, influential, and paradoxically resistant to meeting with them.

“What more do we need than our words of influence, our staffs, ourselves?” Morinehtar struggled to understand what Rómestámo thought they might be able to access, even as he empathized with his current state of mind.

“I have met some folk. Some folk who could teach us – useful enchantments.”

Morinehtar was simply more confused. And he worried about Rómestámo’s malleability, if he was truly honest with himself. And perhaps his own.

“They term it sorcery.”

Shénmi de Sēnlín, Second Age 1862

“The only reason I agreed to trying this, Rómestámo, was because it would save us significant travel time. I certainly did not want us to create an abomination of nature that will be a mockery of its former self.” Morinehtar rubbed his temple, increasingly uncertain that he had made the right decision in attempting to learn any arts of sorcery, light or dark.

They were attempting to create a new animal, a creature with the benefits of its component animals. It would assist in various ways in their fight against Sauron, helping them to travel faster but also assisting them in their fight against the creatures of the Dark Lord that seemed to be growing in number once more.

Oromë had been a hunter both in these lands and in Valinor, and while Morinehtar was not, he assisted on those hunts, although his memory of it was vague. The idea of death of a living creature was not new to him. But for this reason? He began to wonder if this was no different than Sauron’s own experiments on creatures, albeit by different methods and means.

In the end they produced what would become known as the Fenghuang, Lord of all Birds, swift, strong, armored, an invaluable tool in the fight against Sauron both directly and indirectly, for within two centuries the animal became known throughout the East as a symbol of good fortune.

In producing a magnificent creature that provided hope against the ever-enchroaching darkness, Morinehtar worried that they had pushed the bounds of nature too far while Rómestámo felt stifled in not pushing them far enough.
“Do you truly believe sorcery could have produced this outcome? I know of no spell that could make a mortal man extend his life for so long, and even though we are newer to its study, we know enough. Even the spells of those who worship the Dark Lord have not successfully extended life.” Rómestámo rearranged his legs on the large pillow he sat upon in Morinehtar’s tàilàn, a sturdy, camouflaged construction gifted by the Avari they had recently befriended.

Rómestámo was filled with an unease that would not dissipate, one mirrored in Morinehtar’s own frame. Yet it was countered to some extent by the peace they both found in the great forest that Morinehtar now called home.

King Ulam continued to rule in Ulford, exceeding the bounds of the expected mannish lifespan, and his decisions had become more erratic of late, less in line with his previous history and more similar to those selected powerful leaders who refused them entrance to their territory – or clearly aligned themselves with Sauron.

“He isn’t aging at all! What could it be aside from dark sorcery?!” Morinehtar countered.

“Perhaps he is a man of long lifespan. Númenórean.” Yet even as he said it, Rómestámo knew he did not believe it.

Morinehtar’s response was wordless. On this they both agreed.

“But what could it be if not dark arts?” Rómestámo whispered.

Morinehtar sighed. “I know not, but we must attempt to find out.”

Red Mountains, Second Age 2013

“Tell me, Khaghol Zigrál, of what do you truly speak?” The dwarrowdam stood with her hands across her chest, her black hair elaborately braided and sparkling with gem-studded beads.

Rómestámo had spent substantial time trying to build an alliance with these secretive folk of the Orocarni Mountains, and gaining the trust of the Blacklocks had been the most difficult. Yet he had finally grown close enough for them to listen to his counsel. Assuming he spoke plainly, of course, for they had no tolerance for his tendency towards vagueness and other mannerisms, his proclivity for providing just enough information to influence without directly swaying those in his path. Yet these dwarves would not settle for indirectness, and the wizard seemed to have momentarily forgotten what he had learned when he vaguely and broadly spoke of their mutual need to avoid shadows of darkness.

“I believe, my Queen, that the Dark Lord of Mordor has produced possible gifts, gifts that come from shadow and will lead to no good end.”

“Aye, those have been offered.” She spoke with the knowledge that the Blue Wizard would not betray her words to another, aside from his comrade, whom she respected equally well.

Rómestámo felt the beginnings of dread seep into his bones as he wondered what had occurred.

“Fear not, Nudnahubál, for I refused his gift over a century ago and alerted my kin to do the same. I think he was not pleased, but we have been through much already, and Mahal as my witness we will die in these mountains before we turn towards him.”
Relief flowed through his body. At least for the moment he need not worry about Aulë’s children, and he could keep his attention focused on other matters. “What did he offer?” He asked, almost an afterthought.

“A ring. A ring of elven design.”

Ulford and Surrounding Lands, Second Age 2251

Morinehtar and Rómestámo acknowledged that their task was not easy in the face of a reign of terror. Khamûl had become a twisted shell of his former self, as dark as the black speech of the name that replaced his former moniker. But it mattered not as his kingdom had grown, conquering land after land, drawing Wainriders and more under his wing. Morinehtar experienced his first set of nightmares in his Wizard form after he came across a vast field of dismembered bodies within a small realm that had resisted invasion but was ill-equipped to do so. The Blue Wizard cursed his decision to not have visited this realm sooner, for he could have helped them. And he knew if he had done so, a different one would have been targeted, for he and Rómestámo could only be in two places at once regardless of their incredibly fast speed of travel atop their Fenghuang steeds.

Neither wizard could forgive themselves for what would have been an impossible task without the benefit of hindsight. Yet berate themselves they did, for King Ulam had been a noble and honorable soul, and later they would determine that he was the last to succumb to the influence of the ring he bore. But he fell nonetheless into darkness, becoming the wraith Khamûl, Shadow of the East, for no man could resist the influence of one of the Rings of Power for as long as he bore it, regardless of their fealty and honor.

And now he had suddenly disappeared. To where, they knew not, for they did not have the skills to track him, but it presented an opportunity.

A chance to rally those who were not held in the thrall of darkness in key kingdoms.

Neither Blue Wizard desired battle, for theirs was a task of influence, of words.

But their time for words seemed to have run out. The embrace of the Dark Lord in the East was alarming in its expansion, both broad and deep, and threatened to topple into permanence.

And so began a series of bitter Eastern wars that stopped the ever-spiraling descent of the East into complete shadow. A shadow that would have overtaken the entirety of Middle Earth had the strength of Eastern forces aligned with Sauron continued to grow.

Red Mountains, Second Age 2873

“Have you the ring?” Morinehtar asked as casually as he could. Each of the four houses of dwarves in the Orocarni Mountains had amassed tremendous hoards of treasure, and both he and Rómestámo suspected that it related to their eventual acceptance of Sauron’s gift, for some sort of mechanism was at work and none of Aulë’s children would attempt the arts of sorcery. Yet somehow they had not fallen under the rings’ sway in the mannish manner.

The dwarrow shook his head. “Nay, Dusnûlukhâl. Well more correctly, I have contained it within stone. History states that the Queen of the Blacklocks labeled them as evil, and it is a shame her words went unheeded over time. But that ring led my father to become obsessed with gold and jewels, and we Stonefoots are more than that. We are of the rock itself, and I shall not succumb to its
Morinehtar drank the clear spirits that he had been served, enjoying the jolt that seemed to slightly ease his mind without addling it, his suspicions confirmed. He looked up at the dwarf, idly playing with the braid that kept his hair manageable. He studied the dwarrow’s stern features, attempting to gauge his potential reaction to what he wanted to propose. Sensing that this dwarf would listen, he made his suggestion.

“I could have it destroyed. But I would need to take it.”

The dwarf studied him for long moments, for this was a pivotal moment. Could Dusnûlukhâl be trusted to this extent? Or would he prove to be like Dushîn-zabad?

Yet Dusnûlukhâl seemed true of spirit, and had not betrayed them to this point, not one single time as darkness ebbed and flowed over their Mountains.

So the Stonefoot gave the Khaghol Zigrál the Ring he had embedded in rock, as did the Ironfists and Blacklocks. The Stiffbeards had no Ring any longer.

Sauron had already taken it back, and his method of obtaining it had been gruesome.

Saigo no Sabaku, Second Age 2877

Morinehtar stood in the wide expanse of the Last Desert, not entirely certain how many weeks had passed thus far. He had begun to grow thirsty, but wanted to conserve his water, although he knew he could replenish it when he encountered the next cacti. A simple spell would make the water digestible. Yet he did not know how long that would be, and prudence was ever forefront on his mind.

This would be as good a place as any to make camp, he supposed, as there was no cover here, just endless sand as far as his eyes could see.

He began to wish he’d listened to Rómestámo and brought his Fenghuang steed with him. He’d been uncertain how the Ryū-ningen would react to a flying beast, however, and did not want to startle them.

If he encountered them at all, for he had never been certain they actually existed. Yet something in his heart had told him it was true.

In the end, it was the rings he carried that saved him, for unlike any other who had encountered them, the Ryū-ningen somehow sensed the darkness woven into their metal. Unbeknownst to him, he was trailed by them for the entire three years that he searched, and they only made their presence known after their leader’s mate became convinced that he sought their help in battling darkness.

The darkness he bore with him.

He was sitting by his small cooking fire one evening, toasting a lizard he had captured when he sensed the presence beside him appearing as if from nowhere.

Turning slowly, aware he had been caught completely offguard, he looked at the figure to his left. He was tall and thin, with long flowing dark hair, and reminded Morinehtar of the fierce martial artists who lived in his home forest. Beside him stood a slightly shorter female, less stern but equally as fierce.
“What do you seek here?” The question was blunt, surprising Morinehtar, for he had wondered if they were deciding whether to strike him down where he sat. Yet that would not fit with their legend, he knew.

“I seek those of the House of the Dragon. I require assistance in fighting the Dark Lord.” He was equally as blunt, for he had traveled too long in the desert for his mind to have come up with a more persuasive explanation of his presence.

The blue-robed man’s stated purpose was as Tatsuo had suspected, yet he said nothing, turning to his mate for her opinion. Ryoko placed a hand on his arm, speaking into his thoughts, and Morinehtar knew that they were conversing about him.

“I pledge to you, Ao no Mahōtsukai-sama, that we shall assist your cause.” His eyes flashed with the might of his power. “For we will not see this world fall to the shadow. The House of the Dragon represents honor and battles the darkness as well. What would you have us do?”

He did not add that the gray-haired man with the unruly beard reminded Ryoko of the long-departed Oromë, that his bonded one believed this man was the respected lord’s servant.

Morinehtar pulled a stone and two small containers from his pack. “These contain rings that must be destroyed. Dragon fire can destroy them, it is rumored.” He looked at Tatsuo and Ryoko to judge their reaction, for none of them had spoken of the Ryū-ningen’s secret, their mythological ability to assume Worm form and breathe fire stronger than Glaurung, the father of Dragons.

Tatsuo’s eyes studied him so intently it seemed they almost reached into his very mind, and then the leader of the Ryū-ningen was interrupted in his deliberations by a hand on his arm. It was Ryoko, his bonded mate, and he spoke to her through their bond.

She studied Morinehtar intently. “Do what he asks, Tatsuo. We can trust him, and you know this already.”

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Vikraanta, Second Age 3255

“I don’t know where the Dark Lord went. He has grown so strong, proclaims himself the King of Men, and yet the lands he had occupied in Mordor and in the East are empty of his presence. I learned of this during the meeting of the southeastern realms.” Rómestáno had met his kinsman immediately following the conference, frustrated by this new knowledge.

Morinehtar sighed. “Well, his comings and goings are nothing new. And we have never been well-equipped to track him, nor should that to be our primary goal. He likely seeks to influence those in the West, but we must continue to instill resistance in those who live here.”

For doing so was just as important, if not more, than battling the Dark Lord himself as his power continued to grow. The latter was a fight they knew they could not win.

Sauron’s own belief that he had conquered the East and could move on to domination of other lands would contribute to his downfall as the Blue Wizards continued to move Easterlings away from his thrall over the next 3000 years.

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Bashnya Zvezda, Third Age 467
Rómestámo collapsed onto the bare ground amidst the poorly growing trees, his body succumbing to exhaustion as he drew his filthy robe around his body for both warmth and disguise, for it had been a gift of the Avari and they were cunning in their ability to create cloaks that camouflaged. His undertaking had been risky, one that Morinehtar had warned him against. But now he had a clearer understanding of Sauron’s plans at the end of the second age, including greater knowledge of the enchantment that captured souls on the edge of the Plains of Dagorlad.

Rómestámo had been adamant with his kinsman when discussion turned to this task. If they did not investigate corrupt imprisonment of fëar and souls, who would? Those who fell in that battle had been trapped for centuries already, since the end of the Second Age and the War of the Last Alliance, and it was certainly not in a mere state of stasis.

No, it was a place of torture, and the wounds inflicted upon those souls grew with time, and would take even longer to heal. But that would not happen until they could be released to Mandos or Eru, and Rómestámo had learned the outcome could be far worse.

Those souls, those many trapped souls could end up being completely obliterated, their spirits entirely destroyed in service of Sauron’s ill purpose.

And then there would be no hope for travel to Mandos or the arms of Eru.

Morinehtar had certainly disagreed with his decision to infiltrate the fortress, and Rómestámo fully understood the riskiness of his actions. Yet Rómestámo believed the need to learn the truth potentially outweighed the risk, and he needed to find firm answers for his growing suspicions that the tower, the strangeness of the stars, and the Battle of Dagorlad related to one another.

The Blue Wizard took stock of his surroundings, trying to decide if he needed to cast a spell to protect him from those who might encounter him, for he had gone undetected thus far and needed to remain so. Yet could he risk being found because of such casting? For any attuned to such things, it would be a telltale beacon that advertised his presence.

So as he had done for so many days, he put the idea of spells away, and moved to find a better location amidst the stones and trees, one that would provide more protection and privacy. He drew his cloak tight around him once more, thankful he had such a boon to assist him in his need to hide.

And then his exhaustion overtook him, but not before he sent a prayer to Oromë for protection.

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The wizard woke with a jolt as he felt a hand on his shoulder, and his brain was so muddled that he thought, for an instant, that he was back in Bashnya Zvezda. Except this time he had been caught.

The resignation and fear coursing through his body was palpable.

A voice spoke. “You grow unwise. This is not a place to rest. And your cloak has fallen from your body.”

Rómestámo looked blearily at the figure above him. And then relief flooded him. It was Ryoko, the kindly, stern, powerful mate of Tatsuo, and he said her name with a force of gratitude that he hadn’t felt in some time.

“How did you find me?” He was amazed, almost, at her powers of tracking.

“It was not difficult. Tatsuo would have come himself, but he had other tasks to attend to. So Morinehtar asked if I would go in his stead.” She looked at Rómestámo, her charcoal eyes seeming
to see straight into his mind. “Others could have found you. The enemy. And if they did, they would have taken you to their Master, and he would have found uses for you.”

He shuddered, the thought of serving Sauron or his lieutenants as a permanent servant not something he wanted to enter his mind. It was true, he had let himself grow too tired. Perhaps it was simple luck that it was she who stood here now and not one aligned with darkness.

She held out her hand, drawing him upward. “Come, I will take you to Morinehtar. He is worried for you. And you seem not quite yourself.”

She began walking, and then turned to look at him, an amused look on her generally impassive face. “I used one of those steeds you created. It led me this far. Hopefully we shall make it back, assuming you constructed it well.”

He laughed. It seemed she had spent more time with his kinsman, for that was not something she would have said even a century ago. “Well,” he replied. “We cannot have that. For Tatsuo would have my head.”

“And perhaps affix it to a beast of burden.”

He grunted in affirmation as she helped him climb atop the Fenghuang, and as he sat behind her relief filled him, for her words were more true than perhaps she even realized. Had he been detected, he would have been captured, tortured, and more.

“How did you fly without others noticing?” He asked in sudden agitation.

She turned to look at him. “Fear not. Morinehtar cast a spell on us before we departed, one that hides us as well as the magic upon us. You have been awake too long if you forget that is possible.” Her face grew stern.

He nodded, for what she said was all too true.

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The flight was uneventful, stopping only once when Rómestámo’s continued exhaustion led him to fall asleep, and Ryoko placed him in front of her so he would not fall off their mount.

Morinehtar returned to his tàilàn in Shénmì de Sēnlín four days later. By then Rómestámo was well-rested and had thought through the implications of his findings, growing a bit impatient to relay them to his fellow wizard. What Rómestámo had discovered was slightly expected but primarily unbelievable, and when the tale was complete Morinehtar was compelled to ensure he understood.

“So you have determined without doubt that Sauron trapped souls from those who died in battle on the plains of Dagorlad.”

Rómestámo nodded. “He created an elaborate enchantment that, combined with the One Ring, heightened dissension among those who fought him, leading to an ill-advised early charge. Those souls were trapped. And perhaps the ones who fell after, of that I am not certain.”

“And you truly believe that these souls will provide the means needed for Morgoth to escape the Door of Night?”

“Yes. Sauron’s Númenórean allies hid the mechanism within two of their great towers. There is one in the West and the one I infiltrated. Activation of Bashnya Zvezda is what created this strangeness in the stars above us, and I believe it was a portion of the initial enchantment Sauron cast, required
for the capture of souls to occur. Activation of the one in the West will complete Sauron’s plan.”

Rómestámo explained what he had learned in more detail. Activation of the Eastern tower had triggered a subtle yet noted shift in the Eastern night sky, some of Varda’s creations seeming to move position and even change hue. This combined with specific spoken words had created an environment that would strangely preserve the bodies of the fallen, but more importantly capture their souls as well. The shifting of the night sky went far beyond what they had originally believed its purpose to be: A reminder of the power of Sauron even after his defeat in the War of the Last Alliance. Those who worshipped him continued to do so, and fear of his power held Eastern kingdoms in check when he returned, for whether he was in a weakened state or not, his altering of the stars enhanced the fear found in the hearts of many Easterlings.

Sauron turned Varda’s symbols of hope into the entire opposite.

Rómestámo had finally pieced together the entire truth: Activating the seemingly aesthetic replication of stars in the Western Númenórean tower of Orthanc would shift Varda’s creations in the West as well. A chain of events would be triggered, all powered by the energy released from the obliteration of the souls Sauron had captured, their bodies becoming the warriors of an undead army. Eärendil would be struck from the sky, destroying the guard that stood at the Walls of the World, releasing Morgoth from the Void by destroying the Door of Night. If it went as Sauron had planned, there would be sufficient energy left over to destroy Túrin as soon as he returned to the Circles of the World, negating the prophecy that Túrin would drive Gurthang into Morgoth’s heart.

Rómestámo remained uncertain what would occur with the Gates of Morning in the East if they did indeed exist.

And the mechanism had been so cunningly crafted by Sauron’s Númenórean allies that had the Blue Wizards not known this, they would never have suspected its true purpose, that the star map itself was essentially a weapon of destruction.

It filled them both with a sense of dread, for this was a cunning move on Sauron’s part, a means to negate the prophecy of Dagor Dagorath, ensuring Morgoth’s rule of Arda should it succeed as Sauron had planned. Yet he had not completed this task, and there seemed to be only one clear reason as to why.

Morinehtar looked at Rómestámo in sudden understanding – his rebuttal to his kinsman’s mission had proven true, Sauron had no desire to act on it further. “And he has not done it because he truly wants to rule the world himself.”

Rómestámo agreed wordlessly.

They both sat in silence, pondering these findings.

Morinehtar looked more closely at his kinsman. “So tell me exactly how you think it can be disabled.”

“With Fëanor’s counter-enchantment. It is deceptively simple, actually.”

Morinehtar waited to hear more, knowing it would not be as simple as Rómestámo painted it to be.

“The enchantment itself is simple. But we need certain components. Two souls, actually.”

Morinehtar expected the worst, for he and Rómestámo certainly differed in their assessment of what was acceptable versus not. “We will not destroy souls, no matter the number of others it saves.”
Rómestámo was not certain he agreed, but he kept silent. Morinehtar was entirely too rigid at times. And surely that loss of two souls would not happen. Should the counterspell be successful, of course. If it didn’t succeed…

“No, no. It just involves them binding. This entire abomination is a corruption of one of Fëanor’s designs – the star maps, everything. It was his invention – and hence the mechanism that can stop this – requires one of blond and one of red hair.”

Morinehtar laughed, for it sounded entirely ridiculous.

But then again, he thought, wasn’t all sorcery to some extent a bit unbelievable?

“In Fëanor’s plan, he would have used the power of the silmarils, not souls, to generate a potentially disastrous end for the Noldor via the shifting of the stars through a similar tower mechanism. It was constructed so that it could be negated by his binding one of his sons with an elleth of light hair. Lady Galadriel, I believe, for her hair was gold touched by silver. Perhaps it was a plan borne of her rejection of him, to influence her alliance with his House. Perhaps he decided on a different course, or thought better of it, for it never passed beyond a blueprinting stage.”

He paused to take a long sip of his tea, and then continued. “Sauron’s spies came upon the hidden plans somehow, perhaps the Noldor stored them in Eregion. Sauron modified the entire design to target it to open the Door of Night. He has no silmarils, but he would require something with more energy regardless, and souls provide that. And their bodies would not be wasted, for they would form an undead army. Yet he seems to have overlooked the other aspect of Fëanor’s invention, one that seems to have been left out of these blueprints - that binding a fëa contained within a hröa of blond hair with one contained in a hröa of red hair would disable the entire mechanism and, I believe, free the souls from the Dead Marshes.”

“Are you certain this will work?”

He could only be honest. “No.”

“What occurs if it does not?”

“The souls used in the binding might be destroyed. Or sent to the Void with Morgoth. I am not sure which. And I am not certain what would happen to the souls already trapped. It is possible they could be destroyed, or perhaps turned into instruments of darkness in a different way.”

Morinehtar spoke immediately and swiftly in response. “Perhaps this is simply part of Sauron’s plan for you and I. We cannot destroy souls nor risk some different untoward destiny for the others. These means do not justify the end, not now, as it is clear Sauron has no desire to complete this tower activation and release Morgoth from the Void. Work on a different means to release these souls, but do not forget your other obligations.”

Morinehtar’s expression was a strange combination of being resigned and aghast, and Rómestámo knew a chasm had widened between them.

“Where, by the way, did you learn of this counter-enchantment? I have no knowledge of such a spell.”

Rómestámo looked at his kinsman closely. “Is it not obvious? From Maglor, easy enough to find as he wanders along the sea, assuming he wants to be found, of course.”

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Southeastern shore of Sea of Rhûn, Third Age 547

The Blue Wizards met in a small fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Rhûn, each having completed several years worth of traveling to nearby realms to continue their rallying against Sauron. Several of his chief allies in this part of the world were growing in number as more tribes joined the confederation of Wainriders, propelled by their recent defeat and loss of territory at the hands of King Ostoher and his son Rómendacil I. As their forces grew another attack on Gondor would be inevitable, but both Blue Wizards were attempting to turn this event of loss into one of opportunity.

In their hearts they both knew the Wainriders would be among the hardest to sway, but they certainly needed to make attempts to bolster anti-Sauron sentiment and mitigate the growing hatred of Gondor, however an uphill battle it seemed.

“The defeat is not assisting us in our purpose as we had thought it might.” Rómestámo drank his lukewarm coriander-laced beverage slowly, uncertain what their next efforts should be.

“I agree it has fueled their hatred of the West, exactly as Sauron would have hoped. I think he couldn’t have planned this better himself.” Morinehtar sat back in his chair, momentarily wishing he could rest his feet on the table between them, but that would surely be a show of poor manners. “We must continue on this path, for we have persuaded many away from Darkness.”

Rómestámo nodded, for he fully agreed.

“I want to disable it.” Rómestámo spoke clearly and firmly as he suddenly changed their topic of conversation, and Morinehtar knew exactly of what he spoke – the enchantment that held the souls in the Dead Marshes. “Sauron’s power grows, and I will not risk those consequences coming to pass, the loss of those souls, any preserved remnants of their physical form used to create an army of undead soldiers, the release of Morgoth….”

“Have you determined a more fail-safe enchantment that will not risk the souls of the participants or those held in the marshes?”

Rómestámo shook his head, for he had not. “But it does matter. Sauron himself need not activate it. It can be activated by any of Númenórean descent who knows the code words.”

“But we return to this: If Sauron is no longer motivated to use it, if he no longer desires Morgoth to return, which we both completely agree on, then it matters not.”

“Unless someone activates it accidentally. Or purposefully if they learn what it might do.”

Morinehtar was not sure what to say in reply to that.

Dorwinion, Third Age 1100

Morinehtar had waited for two days in the small village in the southern region of the Vales of the Anduin. It had been enjoyable thus far as he awaited his kinsman, for he was well-regarded in the area and he delighted in tasting the new and varied wines that were a product of ever-increasing creativity.

Rómestámo had summoned him from the far East via their method of scrying, noting that they had been granted assistance in their long-standing task from the Valar themselves, and while Morinehtar was curious what that assistance might be, he hypothesized he would be more reluctant to embrace it than his counterpart, for such was a key difference between them.
His hesitance faded when he laid eyes upon Rómestámo’s news, a wizard robed in white who clearly exceeded their own power. A more welcome sight he had never seen.

And so began Saruman’s eager education about the East, Sauron, the Rings of Power, and all of their other findings over their millennia in Middle-Earth, including all they knew of sorcery, light and dark.

Never would they have imagined the White Wizard would eventually end up corrupted and broken – and neither would have the White Wizard.

They all would have been better served to heed the lessons of the past, including that of the noble King Ulam-turned-Khamûl, for even the most clear spirit can be tainted over time.

Such was the nature of the marring of Arda, was it not?

Brown Hills, Southwestern Shore of Sea of Rhûn, Third Age 1248

The strategy propelling the invasion of the East under the helm of Gondor’s Regent, Minalcar, later King Rómendacil II, was understandable to the three Wizards in many ways, but it was also devastating to their cause. The soldiers of Gondor destroyed many Easterling settlements, including some that the Wizards knew with certainty did not support any cause for harm in the West. Gondor was merciless and swift in its invasion of the East, for decisive and clear action was needed to stop the Easterlings’s assault. The result was the establishment of Gondor’s rule beyond the Sea of Rhûn.

The relatively short span of the invasion had set their mission back centuries. For while the fear and devastation of this conquering war would hold many remaining realms in check for some time, it would simply serve as evidence of what Sauron’s core representatives had touted: The West was not to be trusted, and desired to subjugate, perhaps even destroy, those in the East.

South of the Red Mountains, Third Age 1406

“I know of one who may help us.” Rómestámo had thought through this for some time during his visit to the dwarven realms, but he knew his kinsmen would not react positively. He was glad he faced only Morinehtar, and not Saruman as well, for the White Wizard had little patience for Rómestámo’s interest in this topic, preferring to take it under his own wing entirely.

Morinehtar wondered what his kinsman had to say, but for once he was impatient to provide his counterpart with his own good news. “Saruman has visited Bashnya Zvezda repeatedly, forcing it empty and laying claim to it, and he is working to determine a way to undo the slight shifting of the stars here. He is spending much time studying the mechanism and Sauron as well. When he leaves the tower, he has been binding it closed with a spell.”

It was pleasant news to Rómestámo’s ears, for his worry about the Door of Night bordered on obsession. Yet he could not entirely shake his fear of Morgoth’s release or the destruction of the souls held in the Dead Marshes, and Morinehtar was willing to listen, for he agreed that it would be a horrendous consequence, even if they disagreed about its likelihood of coming to pass.

“So what were you going to say? Who might it be that would help us?” They had no allies in the West who would assume control of Orthanc or block it from being entered. Saruman had no plans to return Westward anytime soon to establish any of his own, for while they were sorely needed, his help was more critically needed in the East, particularly as rebellion against Gondor’s invasion and
allegiance with Sauron grew once again. And if he had his choice, the White Wizard currently had no desire to leave, for he had already learned much from them and hoped to learn far more, both of those who dwelt in Eastern lands and the sorcery with which the Blue Wizards had become adept.

“The mate of the Prince. The Prince of the Western forest of elves.”

Morinehtar smirked as he drew a pattern in his bowl with the sticks he used for eating. “They are not allies. Their King welcomed us when we arrived, but he did not want us to stay. He did not want to be associates.”

“But the Prince’s wife - she would be amenable.”

“It has been a long time, Rómestámo. Only Eru knows what she may think now.”

“I must try.”

“No. Leave it be. We have other things to focus on for now. Sauron’s power builds and we must focus our attention on dissuading those who would pledge allegiance to him.”

“Mark my words, he will accomplish this task. He has already trapped the souls, there is so little preventing their ultimate demise.”

Morinehtar could take it no longer, yet he remained calm and measured. “Well, let us think on that and return to it another day. For I have something important to disclose to you as well.” He leaned back in his chair, a smile of fierce pride on his face. “Those who I have wanted to meet for some time.”

“Who? The walking trees? Or the kinnara?”

“It has been two centuries since I last saw you, and in that time I traveled far, as did you. I encountered both.”

Ulford, Third Age 1856

It had only been a matter of time, though both Blue Wizards and their White kinsman were somewhat surprised it had not happened sooner. Perhaps their efforts had delayed the attack, but it had not prevented it, and they wondered what more they could have done.

The Wainriders invaded Gondor after a series of raids, killing the realm’s King and decimating those who lived east of the Anduin, enslaving many outside of Ithilien. Ongoing battle would continue over the next century, Khamûl’s previous realm subjecting many to terror in their onslaught, worsened when they brought the Haradrim and Variags of the South into battle.

The Wizards were bitterly happy when the Wainriders’ conceit proved their undoing nearly a century after the initial invasion, the Easterlings’ pause for a victory celebration leaving them undefended and vulnerable, and Morinehtar was filled with sorrow when he felt gladdened that they were gone from Arda.

Shénmì de Sēnlín, Third Age 2103

Morinehtar muttered as he strode around his tàilàn, summoning floating lights to turn on via spoken
commands. The elleth and her party studied his movements intently, declining his offer of food.

The elves had appeared in his forest in search of him. At first he had thought it was a group of Avari, as he and Rómestámo had overcome their wariness in the middle of the second age, and now they visited him occasionally in gestures of friendship, freely offering various items of elven make to assist in his battle against the darkness. Even his home was constructed by them, and the tàilàn had lasted for millennia thus far.

But these elves were not Avari. He knew that as soon as he saw them. He recognized their leader, he thought, and he knew then that Rómestámo had gone against his word.

He beckoned them to sit on his cushioned floor, pouring steaming drinks that he placed on the low table.

“Tell me,” he said softly, “what brings you East.” He feared to hear the answer.

She had no desire to dally, and was as straight and to the point as her impassable face would suggest she might be. “I have had dreams of late, beckoning me to seek you and your kinsman. I am certain that you can assist me in releasing the fëar of my kindred from the Dead Marshes.”

He sighed in resignation, seeing no reason to hide the truth from her. “That is not a wise idea. It requires the bonding of fëar, and those will be lost forever if the counterspell fails.”

The Elvenqueen looked at the Blue Wizard with a slight frown. “You mean they will join their counterparts in the Dead Marshes?”

“No.” He said calmly, intently, the force of his words and his expression conveying the seriousness of his message. “They will be forever destroyed. Eliminated. I do not know what would befall those already trapped if it failed.”

Her face whitened, and for a moment Morinehtar felt exactly what she did: Such a thing was unimaginable, so much worse than the mere destruction of bodies, and to hear it sent dread through the hröar of all gathered.

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Morinehtar quickly took pity on the elleth, for he couldn’t reconcile this battered elven fëa remaining within this still-living hröa. She did not tell him much of her story, but he knew enough to understand that she had made it her mission to undo the wrong of the Last Alliance.

Why she blamed herself for the fall of her people he did not understand.

Yet his pity led him to help her in ways that he could, bringing her under apprenticeship for what would end up being a very short span of time, teaching her spells that he thought would be of use to her, and facilitating her lore of native Eastern plants that would assist her. She particularly enjoyed the time they spent in his garden, for she was indeed a Wood-elf at heart, and he taught her all she might need to know of the luminescent plants he favored in his spells.

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Rómestámo came upon the elves from the West two weeks after their arrival, hiding his delight that his summoning had worked. On the first occasion his kinsman was otherwise occupied, he wasted no time in meeting with the one he had sent dreams to.

“If I do what you will suggest, the fëar of the elves from the Dead Marshes will be released to
Mandos. To find rest at last. Unless they do not seek to go to the far West, to Mandos, but even as unhoused spirits, they would be free.” She repeated, wanting to be clear.

Rómestámo paused, considering his words briefly. “If it is successful, yes.”

“And if it is not successful? Morinehtar told me that the feār used in the binding would be destroyed. And that you do not know what would happen to those feār already trapped.”

He fumbled with his staff, looking at her pensively. “Let me explain how I believe the entirety of it all can be undone, and that will help me explain what will occur if it does not succeed. I have studied how Sauron trapped souls there quite intensively.”

This she knew already. Not the mechanism, of course, but the end result.

“He cast a broad enchantment over the battlefield, a spell linked to a tower here in the East. It wasn’t simply to ensure the misery of those there, the torture of those souls.” He shuddered slightly, for those unwittingly trapped there were tormented to this day. “I believe he planned to use them for foul purposes, but after your kin were trapped, he changed his mind about the outcome.”

She raised an eyebrow. “An army of the undead?” For this was what was whispered.

He shook his head slowly. “Yes, but much more than that. To feed a mechanism that would open the Door of Night and release Morgoth from the Void. And other events might occur as well.”

This was worse than she had expected.

“There are two towers that, taken together, hold the mechanism. The unactivated one is south of your homeland. They each contain a hidden, intricate map of the stars. But it is a corrupted map.”

“Dol Goldur,” she whispered.

He crooked his head. “No. Orthanc. It was hidden in the Númenórean’s tower by a few who were allied with the Dark Lord’s cause. Only your tower remains inactive; as I said before the one in the East has been triggered. Fully activating the map - fully triggering the map in Orthanc - will pull the souls of those trapped in the Dead Marshes to the towers, using the energy gained to change the position of some of Lady Varda’s creations, in turn opening the Door of Night.”

“And the feār?” The Elvenqueen’s generally cold expression was painted with a combination disbelief and disgust.

“They are consumed by the process. Their destruction is what provides the energy needed.” He said it without emotion, for it still caused him great pain to think of such a horrible outcome for so many of Eru’s children.

“I believe the Dark Lord influenced Oropher and Amroth from afar, heightening their dislike for your Noldor kin and drawing them into early battle in which they would be more easily defeated. Somehow Gil-Galad was able to resist, but perhaps this was part of Sauron’s plan, to divide and conquer, as it were.”

“How?” The Elvenqueen wasn’t entirely certain she believed this was true, for Oropher had not acted alone. He had listened to the rational counsel of many.

Had she been influenced by Sauron as well? Her counsel had been the same as the others, aside from Thranduil. While it should have served to assuage her guilt, it did nothing of the sort, for even the Wizard’s words were accurate, it meant she had not been strong enough to withstand the thrall of
evil.

“I know not. I have long wondered if Gil-Galad had some means of resistance to sorcery. For a time I had thought it was…” and then he stopped, realizing it would be best not to speak of any rings of power. And beside that, it still did not make sense for the High King to travel with it so near to Sauron.

The Elvenqueen beckoned Rómestámo to expand on his statement, yet he shrugged the topic aside. “It is not important.”

The Elvenqueen sat impassively once more. This wizard was a bit exasperating, but at least not as much as Radagast.

“So if this chamber is activated, the fëar of my elves would be…” she could not continue. From the look on the Wizard's face they were held in a state of sheer horror, torture, and terror, and such release would mean their obliteration. She could not say it aloud.

“Yes, if the map of stars is properly activated, their souls will feed the mechanism and be destroyed, to create the energy to open the Door of Night.”

“Yet Sauron was defeated. Why would they still be held there?”

“The spell is independent of his life or death.” He did not add that his defeat had not been final, for that seemed to be more than this one would like to hear at the moment, that the sacrifice of her people had been in vain, indeed only served to further the plan of the Dark Lord. Yet that plan had shifted, and he knew that Sauron had no intent to open that Door now.

Not when he could rule Arda himself.

“And it cannot be undone without risking the destruction of souls?” She felt panicked now, wishing she had sought the Blue Wizards sooner.

“Correct.”

Her face calmed as a thought entered her mind. “Then I will do it. Let me be the one who risks my own fëa.”

It was as if he read her thoughts, for he placed a hand on hers. “You did not cause this. It is not your fault.” He sat back, tidying his robe. “Your fëa cannot be used in the counter-enchantment, for you are already bound. It requires the binding of souls.”

He looked at her closely. “Morinehtar utterly disagrees with me on this, I must tell you. He does not think any threat is worth the risk of the destruction of two souls.” He leaned more closely towards her. “But it certainly is worth it to prevent a possible fall into darkness. We must all do what we can.”

He leaned back, teetering on the precipice of what he was and what he might be. “You have a young son, do you not? One of golden hair? We simply need to ensure his binding to one of red tresses, that is an easy enough spell, and you have many such Silvans in your forest, I believe.”

And the Elvenqueen did not realize that he had worked his way into her mind and established influence over her decisions. It was something he exercised rarely, and he required vulnerability for it to work, but she had it in spades, as tattered as her personal torture was.

Would it be so terrible? Legolas would meet someone who loved him, they would be guaranteed to love one another for eternity. Even though their love would be influenced by a spell, they would
avoid all of the pain she had endured. The pain that Thranduil endured. It could be unlikely that the counter-enchantment would fail in its full purpose, yet if they were indeed sent to the Void or their fear obliterated…was it not their duty to serve their kingdom?

In that moment, she convinced herself that an enchantment was for the best, for then love could not be fickle. And the thought of all those her ion would save...

Rómestámo held her in his own thrall.

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“You cannot leave!” Rómestámo’s voice thundered through the air a mere week later, the counter-enchantment successfully cast. There was no need for these elves to stay, not truly, but his rage and spite overcame him, his desire for more and his taste of newly found power clouded his vision. “I forbid it! Your fair son, he will marry one with hair of red hue. Your Queen has offered it and ensured it, the holding of his heart. The incantation has been spoken, only the binding remains! And then what shall pass will be glorious. I foresee most, all your elves apprenticing to us, heeding my call!”

Yet Thranduil and his Queen escaped his grasp, even as the Blue Wizard sent scores of warriors born of enchantment to block them. The Elvenking’s warriors fought valiantly, each and every single one eventually perishing in the fight to permit the escape of their King and Queen. Thranduil had easily broken the Wizard’s hold on his Queen’s mind, yet he would not come to believe that she had not at least partially participated in the decisions made. The idea of such influence was foreign to him, for he had never experienced susceptibility to it. So while he rescued her for the love he bore her, that he would always bear for her, he knew he would never forgive her for offering their ion’s soul to possible destruction regardless of how utterly despondent she would become over what she had done.

And in the days that followed, Rómestámo still stood in the same place, his human form soiled with blood and more. Morinehtar had recovered from his kinsman’s spell of seizing and had countered with a far more powerful one of his own that would hold him frozen until he spoke words of release.

Morinehtar had been right, he finally realized, but whether his conclusion had been after years or decades or even centuries in this stasis he was not certain. His dabbling in the dark arts had seeped into his mind and led him to overextend his influence to one who was not truly willing, even as he grew to realize that there was less to be said of good and evil, right or wrong, and more to be said of the continuum in between.

Morinehtar did not know when he bound him in stasis that this had not been the first time Rómestámo had tried to influence the binding of souls, that he had obliterated other souls in his attempts to battle the Dark Lord. All of whom agreed to his experimentation because of his fluency with the dark arts of sorcery, his influence on their will and their minds.

It was Saruman who ordered his release after sufficient penance had been paid, after the White Wizard believed the Blue had learned from his errors.

Only in hindsight nearly 700 years later did Morinehtar realize Saruman’s counsel was not always wise, but here it had proven adequate, for Rómestámo seemed to truly regret what he had done. Yet was that enough?

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Sauron’s Fortress in the East, Third Age 2461
The Blue Wizards stood in the courtyard of the fortress, the strangely black-tinged fire that had 
ringed its entirety finally fading. “He was gone before we struck, that much is clear. I fear he has 
gone West again.”

“It seems so. But at least we have routed many of his forces. Aside from the Odan, but they may be 
swayed from him yet.” Saruman said in his ever-rational tone of voice as he approached, his white 
robes stained with blood and his hair disheveled, although less than their own even as he had 
contributed more to the battle by means of his sheer might.

His power seemed to have grown, and they could not have won this battle without him.

Morinehtar turned, his smile growing wide when he saw who approached them. “Ryoko!” He 
walked to her and held her in a warm embrace. “We could not have done this without you.”

She bowed, for such was her way with everyone. “It was our duty to assist in this. And we lost none 
of our Ryū-ningen, and for that I send praise. Ao no Mahōtsukai-sama, we request entry to this 
fortress, so that we may conduct a purification ceremony. This will ensure the Dark Lord may never 
return here again.”

“Of course.” Morinehtar nodded, gesturing with her hand to enter.

“If you could keep the others away…they do not understand us. True, they fear us, but they do not 
understand.”

Rómestámo raised his hand. “Consider it done. Saruman, you speak with the Emperor’s troops, and I 
will attend to the Warlords. Morinehtar can tend to the remainder.”

“And after that, I will take your leave.” Saruman looked at them sternly as he moved to his 
designated task. “Sauron has likely fled West again, perhaps to Dol Goldur once more, and the 
Westerlings will require my assistance.”

Morinehtar wondered at this, for Saruman had not pursued the forces of darkness Westward thus far, 
and his eagerness was strange and disconcerting. But who was he to question the head of his order?

The thought glimmered in his mind that the White Wizard might fall into misguided decisions as 
Rómestámo had. But Rómestámo had recovered, had he not? And as much as he disagreed with his 
kinsman’s actions, he did understand his point of view. The Elvenqueen’s appearance in the East had 
even led Morinehtar to decide that if they found fully willing participants, he might agree to the 
casting of another counter-spell.

For now he could only pray to Eru that Thranduil would heed his counsel and not allow Legolas to 
wed, for the Elvenking was unwilling to attempt a removal of the counter-spell. It seemed to have 
less to do with its own inherent risk than his distrust of wizardry, although he seemed to judge 
Morinehtar much less harshly than Rómestámo.

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Zhi-Bde, Third Age 2510

“The Odan have left as well. They have begun to migrate Westward.” Morinehtar studied the sunset 
as it danced across the horizon, enjoying the cool breeze as they sat on the walls that surrounded the 
perimeter of the emperor’s gardens.

“You think they followed Sauron.” It was a statement, not a question, presented by Rómestámo to 
his kinsman.
He said nothing, wondering if he could have done more to prevent their travel, knowing that Sauron’s hold over them was firm.

Regardless of the outcome of the Odan’s migration that was likely more than simple movement, they both knew that their efforts had been better served where they had been focused. For the hold of darkness in the East had not returned to the pinnacle it had reached while those with Rings ruled, and three quarters of Eastern kingdoms – for now - rejected the call of the Dark Lord, a number that would - surprisingly, in some ways – fall only to a slight majority even as Sauron’s pull became incredibly compelling.

But yet it was perhaps not so surprising, not when one considered the millennia of effort they had put forth. That, and the grace of Eru – and even, they knew, luck – that they had encountered.

Mirkwood, Third Age 2941

Radagast had returned to the heart of his forest with all-speed, intent on gathering what forces he could to assist in the battle that Gandalf had predicted would occur. He awaited the arrival of the Great Eagles to bear him hence when he discerned the presence of a strange creature in the distance - one unlike any he had ever seen.

Engrossed in his slow movements to approach the beast that stood in the distance, attempting to catch it unawares, he was stopped in his tracks by a hand upon his shoulder.

He turned slowly, his eyes wide and his heart pounding, and then sighed in relief.

"Morinehtar! What brings you to my woods?"

Morinehtar looked most grave. "I have been searching for you, Radagast, and it is a most grave situation. The forces of darkness have trapped in thrall a few of the Ryū-ningen, and I have been unable to rescue them, though I and a few others have tried to do so intently. They currently are tunneling through the mountains, to allow an army of orcs to attack the peoples of the region to your north. They may have already succeeded."

Radagast nodded as his own expression grew grave and his mind became flustered - this was worse than what Gandalf had predicted.

"My mount is wounded," the Blue Wizard said as he nodded at the creature in the distance.

"Not to worry," Radagast said as he gathered his wits about him, "I have summoned the Great Eagles, they will be here at any moment. Any would certainly allow you to travel astride their great wings."

Morinehtar sighed in relief. "Of course. So you planned to fly into battle with them? Good," he said at Radagast's smile of assent. "Yes, let us fly Northward and see what awaits us - and I will assist in this battle if needed....and then make another attempt to rescue the hostage Ryū-ningen."

"No," Radagast said. "If they are indeed in need of freeing, you must keep your attention there. Beside that, you desire to keep your presence unknown in the West for various reasons."

Morinehtar agreed that the Brown Wizard was indeed correct, and so they flew Northward at all speed with Beorn when the Eagles arrived, the Blue Wizard taking a separate course when they reached the all too lopsided battle.
And while the Eagles and Beorn were a key factor in turning the tide, it was too late for the Ryūningen. Morinehtar finally locating them - alone - as the battle raged outside the mountains, unable to release the sorcerous thrall that had been placed upon them no matter what he tried, unsuccessful even when Radagast attempted to assist him after the battle was won.

His heart broke when he had to deliver on his promise to Tatsuo - his solemn oath that if the Were-worms could not be freed from the dark magic that held their minds, he would provide them the honor of a clean death.

Dwarves, elves, and humans were not the only people of Middle-Earth who were mourned in the aftermath of that battle.

Shénmì de Sēnlín, Third Age 3018, Late Summer

Radagast sat in Morinehtar’s tàilàn in Shénmì de Sēnlín, sipping the tea he had been offered. “And still there are so many forces of darkness at play. Sauron holds so many in his thrall, even being so far away. Yet I am truly humbled by what you have done. You have swayed so many from his tight grip that would have been held by it, seemingly of free will but enslaved nonetheless.”

Morinehtar grimaced. “Millenia of poisonous devotion cannot be cleansed entirely, not while the Dark Lord walks Arda. There remain kingdoms that have enough devotion, or fear, or other motives to fight for him, and fight for him they shall. But we will continue to do what we can to rally against it.” He smirked slightly, a strange expression on this imposing figure, the power he held molded into the sharpest of forms by his millennia fighting darkness.

“Enough of me, however. What brings you here, my kinsman? For I have heard whispers that you have been more loathe than ever before to leave the forest you protect.”

“I did not dare send a message, and thankfully Gwaihir transported me here most stealthfully. I think it is as you had feared. Saruman was influenced by his pursuit of the Ring, and he has been conducting experiments in the tower.”

Morinehtar narrowed his eyes. “Does he suspect that you know?”

“No, not at all. I am able to hide myself well, partially because I am not taken seriously.” It was said with much bitterness.

The Blue Wizard frowned, for he wondered if something might be at play, something of Saruman’s design. Yet he could not sense anything of the sort.

“I need assistance, Morinehtar. I have learned of dragons gathering in the Withered Heath and Northern Waste, planning to attack the elves of my forest – and the peoples of the West beyond. I did not know who else to whom I might turn. Thranduil is too occupied by his own battles, as is Elrond. And I simply have not carved a relationship with men or dwarves, not as Gandalf has. None of the animals who would assist me could fight these foes.” He said the latter almost guiltily. "And the Eagles know that they would be overpowered nearly instantly by the sheer number of Worms that amass together."

Morinehtar mulled over the news. They both knew exactly who had hope of winning a potential war against these Worms. Yet it would be much to ask, particularly in light of the events of the battle a half century ago that saw the sorcerous entrapment of their kin and the subsequent vile speech that had continued to place them in the category of Morgoth's spawn.
Even Gandalf had no awareness of the true nature of the Were-worms of the Last Desert - an attitude that Radagast knew he could most easily correct - yet the Ryū-ningen refused to allow Radagast to speak of his knowledge of them. Perhaps they were convinced nothing would change minds and attitudes, but more centrally they were a secretive people, even more secretive than dwarves.

The Blue Wizard wondered if this brewing Worm-attack was a mere distraction facilitated by Saruman, for perhaps the Wizard had begun to suspect Radagast and the mission Morinehtar had tasked him with? Certainly an assault on the Brown Wizard’s beloved forest would be enough to distract his attention from his watchful eye on activities in Orthanc and his desire to prevent manipulation of what Saruman knew was hidden in the tower.

Finally Morinehtar spoke. “It will be Tatsuo's decision to make. I will ask him now.”

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Over a year later, when Morinehtar learned of the injury to Thranduil that was a unfortunate and unintended remote consequence of Radagast’s decisions during the war in the Withered Heath, the Blue Wizard was sympathetic, for he had learned long ago that no decision could be made with an ensured perfect outcome. Even the imprisonment of Saruman within Orthanc had not led to the ill outcome that he had feared, although Gandalf’s removal of the Wizard of Many Colors from their order had much to do with Saruman’s inability to proceed further with whatever he had planned within the impenetrable walls of the fortress.

Morinehtar had learned long ago to take events in stride, trying to control what he could and live with what he could not. Yet when Tatsuo came to him in utter despair over his bonded mate, he had no idea how to comfort his now-dear friend, and for the first time he felt completely helpless, having no idea what he might do to assist those who had been unwavering in the help they provided to him.

Aside from assuring Tatsuo that he himself would ensure that the wrong that had been done in Framsburg would be righted.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin Translations
fēa = soul (plural: fēar)
hrōa = body (plural : hrōar)
ion = son
el leth = female elf

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Japanese Translations (courtesy of Raelien)
Yamihorobashi = "Darkness Destroyer" (aka Darkness Slayer) = Morinehtar = Alatar the Maia
Kyokutō no Tetsudai = "Helper of the (far) East" = Rómestámo = Palladano
Chairo no Mahōtsukai = Brown Wizard
Ryū-ningen = Were-worm
Saigo no Sabaku = Last Desert
Ao no Mahōtsukai-sama = Noble Blue Wizard
Ryoko = Japanese name meaning dragon = Tatsuo’s bonded mate. She's the Were-worm who is attacked while sleeping in Worm-form in the tunnels under Framsburg by Glorfindel and Adlia
Khudzul Translations (Neo-Khudzul approximations via the Dwarrow Scholar)
Khaghol Zigrâl = Blue Wizard
Khaghol Zigrâlh = Blue Wizards
Dusnûlukhâl = Dark-defier = Morinehtar = Alatar the Maia
Nudnahubâl = East-supporter = Rómestámo = Palladano
Dushîn-zabad = Dark-Lord = Sauron

Other translations (via google translate, apologies if there are errors)
Shénmì de sēnlín = Mysterious Forest (Chinese)
Tàilàn = Talan (Chinese)
Bashnya Zvezda = Tower of Stars (Russian) = Númenórean-built fortress in the East
that holds a star map similar to the one in Orthanc

Places in the East = Note that the Sea of Rhûn, Dorwinion, the Red (Orocarni) Mountains, Sauron's Fortress in the East, and the Last Desert are canon place-names. I've made up the remainder.

Ulford = My made-up name for the region of the Wainriders in the Second and Third Age. Ulfang and his son Uldor are two Easterlings of the First Age who were (secretly) in league with Morgoth. They swore allegiance to Caranthir (Feanor’s son), but betrayed him and then in turn were betrayed by Morgoth. Their followers either fled East beyond the Sea of Rhûn or were held in Hithlum (northwestern Beleriand).

Odan = my made-up name for the Balchoth (Sindarin for “cruel people.”) They migrated westward and nearly defeated Gondor’s army (led by Cirion) in TA 2510 but were routed by Eorl and the Éothéod (from Framsburg) in the Battle of the Field of Celebrant (the Mark was founded afterward).

Bór = First Age Easterling chieftain. His people fought with the Eldar and Edain but were completely decimated in battle.

Kinnara = definition varies but often a half-bird, half-horse in India or half-bird in South-East Asia. (spelling varies between culture). Non-canon addition to this story (thank you Shapiro for noting this was confusing).

Sauron’s fortress in the East: Tolkien states that the Blue Wizards failed in their mission to locate it during the Watchful Peace (TA 2063 to 2460); I’m assuming they find it right after the Watchful Peace ends. (In TA 2063, Gandalf discovered Sauron was the presence in Dol Goldur and Sauron then fled Eastward.)

Saruman in the East: Saruman returned West by the time the Second White Council formed (TA 2463). He spent time in the archives of Minas Tirith, and offered to assist the defense of the West by assuming command of Isengard. He was likely searching for information about the One Ring as well as the palantiri, and this story assumes he may have been searching for more (i.e., the star map located in Orthanc).

Númenor: Established SA 32, fell under the Sea in SA 3319. Elros (Elrond's brother) was its first king. This large island was the Valar's reward to the Edain (mannish tribes in Beleriand) for their service during the First Age's War of Wrath (which resulted in Morgoth's imprisonment in the Void; Sauron was his chief lieutenant and he fled East). Númenor came to the rescue of Gil-Galad's troops in Eregion between S.A. 1693-1700 in the War of Elves and Sauron (after Annatar Sauron in his fair form had influenced
Celebrimbor to craft the Rings of Power). Numenoreans colonized Middle-Earth and in SA 3255 King Ar-Pharazôn captured Sauron & took him to Númenor as a prisoner. Sauron soon became his advisor, convincing most in Númenor to worship Morgoth; few remained faithful to Eru.

In 3319 King Ar-Pharazôn attacked Aman, and Eru removed the Undying Lands from the world while sinking Númenor. Elendil and his followers (the few "Faithful" Númenóreans) had foreseen this, and they had already sailed for Middle-Earth. They founded Armor and Gondor. Sauron's body was destroyed during the cataclysm and he could no longer assume a fair form. He (in bodiless form) fled back to Middle-Earth.

The War of the Last Alliance, in which Oropher charges early during the Battle of Dagorlad (SA 3434) ends with Gil-Galad & Elendil dying and Isildur taking the Ring and Sauron's spirit fleeing back East. Those who died during the Battle of Dagorlad were buried in/near the Dagorlad Plain (the others killed during the war may have been buried there also); this became the Dead Marshes.
Chapter Summary

In the Last Homely House, Glorfindel and Adlia learn the truth about the Worm they attacked in the tunnels below Framsburg. Bilbo realizes what he never had, yet lost all the same. In the Elvenking’s Halls, Galion grapples with decisions while Elrond and Faramir grapple with the strange Framsburg plants. Pippin grapples with little, determined as he is to assist the Elvenqueen. And in Shénmì de Sēnlín, Legolas and Gimli are on the verge of determining a possible solution to the enchantment that stands between them - but first they face other forms of sorcery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Radagast fidgeted with his namesake-colored robe as he nervously awaited the arrival of the Balrog-Slayer and his dwarrow friend. Erestor had shown the Brown Wizard and his travel companion, the Lady of Lothlórien, into one of the private, well-appointed rooms that Lord Elrond used for conferences, but that had been several hours ago. The master of flora and fauna began wondering at the delay, although he wanted for nothing given the welcoming hospitality of Imladris.

The idea that Glorfindel and his dwarf-comrade had killed Tatsuo’s mate…the Brown Wizard did not truly understand, though he had his suspicions. He knew Ryoko well enough to know that she would not have posed a threat to them. But they had apparently assumed just that, that she was a Worm who would somehow bring harm to them, even though she had been guarding them unobtrusively. How would they have even encountered her after her first pass beside them, the one in which he’d known, based on reports from Tatsuo’s troops, that she’d taken the form of a Long-worm to disguise her true identity? She would have strove to keep herself hidden after that, but she was obviously found. Why had they not recognized her own inherent nobility of spirit, the light that shone within her, crafted from her many centuries of battle against darkness and Sauron in particular? Radagast didn’t know much of the dwarf, but he certainly knew Glorfindel, and his fëa was both valiant and honorable.

Galadriel, seated nearby, wholeheartedly agreed, speaking to Radagast in his mind. Glorfindel’s heart wasn’t dark, nor was he careless. Yet she also knew that the pedestal he was placed on may well have been taller than Taniquetil, the mountain Manwë called home, and she respected the Lord of the Golden Flower all the more because he had never become lofty in turn.

After they’d done all they could for Tatsuo’s mate Ryoko in the Eagles’ Eyrie, the pair left Tatsuo with his fellow Ryū-ningen, bestowing upon the grieving Were-worm the privacy that he desired. As they departed, Galadriel paid her respects to Ryoko once more, troubled by the loss of this creature who was no more a creature of darkness than a hobbit was.

That was when she had a vision, an image flashing in her mind of Glorfindel and a dwarf, and she knew they needed to find them to solve this puzzle. It was likely he was involved, perhaps encountering whomever had slain Ryoko when he took his patrol on a wide circuit post-war, as she’d known Glorfindel had accompanied Elrond to Eryn Lasgalen following Thranduil’s injury.

It was only when they’d arrived in Imladris that she and Radagast realized, via Erestor, that the
Balrog-Slayer had been in the tunnels of Framsburg to assist Faramir with his betrothal quest, and that he and the dwarf had slain a Long-worm during their excursion. It didn’t require another vision to postulate that they had both erroneously concluded that Ryoko posed a threat.

As Glorfindel and Adlia walked into the room, Glorfindel took one look at Galadriel’s face and knew something was amiss, even as she appeared to be the picture of serenity. He’d suspected that this might not be a simple social call, as she rarely traveled here following Celebrian's passing over the sea, and certainly not when Elrond wasn’t in residence.

“Welcome to Imladris once more, Radagast, Galadriel. This is my friend, Master Adlia, a dwarf of Erebor.” Glorfindel spoke his brief introductions with a furrowed brow, wanting to get to the heart of the matter quickly.

For her part, Adlia was even more puzzled than Glorfindel. Erestor had told them as they walked from Bilbo’s chambers that Galadriel had traveled to Imladris with Radagast. The advisor seemed to know the purpose of the visit, at least vaguely, but said that he did not want to speak out of turn and would leave the discussion to the Brown Wizard and the Lady of Lothlórien.

The dwarrowdam could understand their wanting to meet with Glorfindel, for he knew them well, but why herself?

As she sat across from them, Glorfindel at her side, she realized two things. First, Radagast didn’t seem quite as addled as the rumors of him alluded to.

Second, Galadriel’s beauty held no candle to Glorfindel’s. This made the dwarrowdam momentarily excited to see Gimli again, for her crush made far more sense than his own. Foolish or not, she had better taste than her childhood friend.

She chuckled as she imagined Gimli’s reaction, Glorfindel leaning over to whisper his inquiry regarding what she found funny. She waved it off, and what was said next made her mood turn dour.

“What I must tell you is a secret. You cannot tell anyone of this.” Radagast looked at them pensively, exhaustion permeating from his entire frame.

Glorfindel nodded, as this wasn’t such an unusual request. Adlia was of a secretive people, so it certainly didn’t ruffle her beard.

Both of them were creatures of their word, of that Radagast was certain.

“There’s been a war. A war against dragons in the Withered Heath. We…”

“Say no more!” Adlia stood as she interrupted the Brown Wizard, the blaze in her eyes matching the ferocity of her tone. “We will certainly join your cause, won’t we, elf?”

Glorfindel nodded once more. He knew he would fight by her side anywhere. Especially against Morgoth’s spawn.

“Let me finish.” Radagast raised a hand, an understanding dawning about how the death of Ryoko had come about. Good intentions gone awry, he told himself as he cringed inwardly, and Galadriel nodded her head slightly in agreement. “I have been assisting in this war, as have some from the East.”

Dwarves, mused Adlia. Avari or the Blue Wizards, thought Glorfindel.

His next words surprised them both. “There are were-worms. Ryū-ningen, as they call themselves in
"Hmph!" Adlia interrupted. "And you seek our assistance in their destruction? Aha! Perhaps you would be interested to know that we smote a Long-worm who carved underneath the ruins of Framsburg! Do the Were-worms seek to burrow their huge monstrosities yet again, widening and worsening that which has been tunneled by the Long-worms? Indeed, surely you would not want to see a repeat of the destruction of the battle of Five Armies. Aye, we shall prevent the untoward misery of decimated stone, the loss of life...." She shook her head in disgust as the very thought of a repeat of those events a half century ago.

"Were you at that battle?" Glorfindel asked with a fond smile, not needing to wait for her response. "Of course you were."

"Hmph! Rather silly question, would you not say?" she grinned and shook her head slightly, the light blue beads of the braids in her beard swaying slightly with the movement.

"No," Galadriel interrupted firmly, yet softly. "This is not what you think." She motioned for Radagast to explain.

"The Ryū-ningen have assisted me selflessly in this war, even as they seek their own form of resolution for those who were lost to them half a century ago. They have a history of such affiliation with my kindred in the East. Those who tunneled in the Battle of Five Armies were held in the malicious thrall of dark sorcery."

Adlia grunted. "Dragons? Vulnerable to sorcery?" Perhaps this war of which he spoke had indeed gotten to the Brown Wizard - or perhaps his words were the result of excessive time spent talking to birds, rabbits, and squirrels, of insufficient communion with the solidness of the earth.

For his own part, Glorfindel was far from fully convinced by the tale itself - yet its messengers were those he could not easily disregard. While he knew Radagast well enough to trust his words, it was Galadriel's expression that swayed him, for they had been through much together, and while she was far from infallible, he somehow knew that this strange collaboration with Were-worms was an important one.

Radagast knew neither of them would be happy with what he had to say next. "They have assisted us in the War against the dragons of the Withered Heath, one that raged during the War of the Ring and is ongoing as we speak." He paused for a moment, contemplating how to say what must be said. "The Worm you attacked in the tunnels under Framsburg was their leader's bonded mate. I know him well, and trust him as much as I do any other."

Variants of disbelief and surprise intermingled with one another as the dwarrowdam and ellon considered his words.

If these Were-worms of the Last Desert were not Morgoth's Spawn, if they had played a role in the Ring-War equivalent to their own.....

Their unspoken question was clear, and Radagast answered it softly. "She has died."

Glorfindel shifted slightly in his chair while Adlia sat as still as the stone of her mountain.

The dwarrowdam knew neither the Brown Wizard nor the Lady of Lothlórien first-hand, and she wasn't certain she trusted them. Was Glorfindel following in their path of making some sort of error in judgment? Were the wizard and lady held in thrall by these dragons? Was it some sort of trap? Or a joke?
Did elves – and wizards that only spent time with elves – play such jokes on one another? She couldn’t see Tharkûn doing such a thing, but Radagast wasn’t Tharkûn.

Long moments passed while each sat pondering, and then Galadriel entered the conversation. “Her mate, Tatsuo, would like you to make amends for what you have done.”

“How?” Glorfindel asked as he looked at the elleth he had known for so long, his expression betraying none of his thoughts on the matter.

Radagast fidgeted with his staff nervously. “He would have you serve his cause until such time that he deems restitution has been made - assist him in the War in the Withered Heath and beyond.”

“And, Master Wizard, for how long would that be?” Adlia asked, still unsure what to make of this.

Radagast gazed at the dwarrowdam with a sympathy-tinged expression, and Adlia wasn’t sure what she thought about that. “I know not how long it would be, for Tatsuo would decide. It could be a certain short number of years, or it could be your lifetime, to atone for the loss of hers.” He paused to allow them to contemplate the seriousness of his words, that they could essentially be giving their lives - in service - as restitution. “So, what say you?”

Adlia certainly wanted to travel more, but not like this. And particularly not if they were pawns in some complex game played by dragons. Their powers of mind control were strong, though she didn’t know exactly how it worked. Perhaps they controlled this Lady of Light that Gimli was so enamored with, and the Lady’s brown-robed friend.

Where was the restitution paid by those who were kin to the Were-worms whose tunnels had allowed orcs to travel in secret to the vicinity of the Lonely Mountain during the Battle of Five Armies?

Yet her decision had been a choice, and if what the wizard said was true, that of those Worms had not been - indeed, their actions would have been the opposite of their desired ones.

She glanced at Glorfindel out of the corner of her eye, knowing one thing with certainty - she would not see the Balrog-Slayer pay such a price for a deed which had ultimately been hers.

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As soon as Erestor had summoned Glorfindel and Adlia from their impromptu gathering in Bilbo’s chambers, the hobbit made his way to Dwalin’s guest chambers, balancing himself carefully with his walking stick. It was far too dark for his elderly eyes in the dim evening hallways of the Last Homely House, and while Elrond had placed additional lighting in the walkways the hobbit used most frequently, Dwalin’s chambers were not on one of those paths.

He was slowly shuffling along when a hand on his shoulder startled him, absorbed as he was on not falling down.

“Careful, Master Baggins,” Bofur said fondly. “I certainly wouldn’t want to see you tumble.”

Bilbo grimaced, almost sarcastically, in Bofur’s opinion a strange expression for his dear hobbit. “I wouldn’t want to see it either!” Bilbo said lightheartedly. “Part of the downside of growing old, I suppose. I wish I was as long-lived as a dwarf.”

“Not all of us are so long-lived, dear Bilbo.” Bofur replied wistfully.

Bilbo nodded as they resumed walking. Neither were hobbits, something he knew all too well.
“So where are your feet leading you, Master Baggins? I would daresay that you were headed towards the quarters I share with Dwalin, though I certainly don’t want to be presumptuous in your seeking of our fine company.”

Bilbo glanced at his dark-haired friend. “Maintaining company with the Company, I cannot think of a better way to spend the evening.”

They talked quietly as they walked, Bofur pointing out aspects of the Last Homely House’s architecture that he found interesting, and when they entered the dwarves’ shared quarters, Dwalin’s eyes twinkled at the intensity of the discussion. “I see Bofur’s wasted no time in discussing his new hobby with you, Master Baggins.” At Bilbo’s puzzled look, he added, “Elven architecture.”

They sat down in the large sitting room, Bilbo enjoying the fire in the hearth that warmed his cold bones, and reminisced about old times.

“Speaking of Smaug’s treasure,” Bilbo eventually said when the conversation had turned in that direction, “I was wondering about this – Thorin gave it to me after we had outfitted ourselves in armor.” He pulled out the blue-toned mithril chain that Thorin had given him, the one he had thought had been found in the Smaug’s hoard, and now suspected otherwise as a result of his previous conversation with Adlia and Glorfindel.

Dwalin gasped, a sound Bilbo thought he might never have heard before from the warrior’s lips.

“What?” Bofur asked. “What is it?”

Dwalin stared at the chain as he ran his fingers along it, marveling at its craftsmanship and its meaning. “I was right, dear Bilbo, was I not? It’s Thorin’s courting necklace.”

Bofur’s eyes went wide….and Bilbo began to softly weep, uncharacteristically desolate about that which had been stolen from him in the reclaiming of the Lonely Mountain – his heart momentarily a scorched, barren wasteland as he thought of the One who should have been by his side, the love that should have been…..but would never be.

And he hated the Arkenstone-madness and dragon-sickness that had overtaken Thorin’s mind - all of their minds even if briefly - more than ever. All of the decisions that led to that Battle - he wondered, not for the first time, what could have been done to avoid it, and if he had done enough.

Some days later, Pippin sat on a stack of pillows at the Elvenqueen’s desk, pouring over his latest wedding plan modifications. He’d decided he quite liked her chair, especially with the pillows he’d added to it, and wondered if she might provide it to him as a gift one day, perhaps on her birthday – no, her begetting day, he quickly reminded himself. He certainly wouldn’t say no.

He looked up when he heard a knock on the study door, wondering who might be seeking him. It wouldn’t be Faramir or Lord Elrond or Galion – they were meeting with the Elvenqueen to discuss the plants from Framsburg and the results of their research thus far.

A beautiful elleth opened the door when he bid her to enter, her stunning red hair framing an equally stunning face. It was the very same elleth that the Elvenqueen had selected to marry Legolas prior to the agreement with Erebor, yet Pippin was completely unaware of that.

She looked startled to see the hobbit sitting where he did, for none of the realm’s elves would dare use the furnishings of the royal family – yet obviously this was no elf.
“Apologies, young one. I had thought I might find my Elvenqueen here.” The elleth studied Pippin closely. “Are you newly inducted into her service? One of Radagast’s folk? I have not seen the like of you before.”

He stood and bowed to her. “I am a hobbit. Peregrin Took, of the Shire. And Knight of Gondor. And yes, I am assisting the Elvenqueen.”

The elleth raised her eyebrows slightly, impressed by this list of titles, regardless of how little knew of them. “I see. My name is Elwen. You are mannish then?”

He shook his head. “I’d be happy to explain all of my heritage to you, if you’d care to join us for dinner later?”

Elwen looked at him curiously. “That sounds like a lovely invitation, Peregrin, but surely you know that I would require a summons from the Queen to dine with her.”

A summons? Then he shrugged his shoulders and smiled slightly. He didn’t need a summons. Perhaps the Elvenqueen did consider him her friend now, just as he considered her one of his.

One he needed to look out for, because she obviously didn’t have anyone else doing it.

No wonder she was so lonely. Not only did Thranduil reject her, but she had no friends, no one who would simply spend time with her.

At least she had him!

“Shall she be returning shortly?” Elwen interrupted his thoughts.

“I’m not sure. She’s meeting with Lord Elrond. Why?”

Her face seemed to become even more serious. “As her assistant, you may know. My Adar, Celdir, had brought a letter for her. But I haven’t had a response back. Can you let her know that I must discuss something with the Prince? I was hoping she could facilitate a meeting with him, as I have not seen him for some time and want to ensure that I follow her protocol.”

“Oh,” Pippin said, his eyes going wide and a guilty expression crossing his face. “I completely forgot about that letter. I’m sorry, I accidentally burned it.”

“Oh?” Her seriousness turned to slight surprise.

“Yes, I thought it might have a secret message on it, and I held it too close to the candlelight. It was the night we – meaning myself, Galion, and the Queen – had been taste-testing the different liquors Thorin sent for the wedding. Though she just watched.”

“I see,” Elwen replied, her face impassive as she wondered why the Queen had selected this Peregrin for her service. And tasting liquors? Even if she was simply watching them be tasted? Dwarven ones at that? That didn’t sound like her at all.

But it had been her Adar, Celdir, that Thranduil had entrusted to watch over the Elvenqueen when she essentially went into exile those years ago. She knew he unobtrusively kept watch over her even now, so Elwen trusted that if there was some sort of problem with the Elvenqueen, her Adar would have already brought it to Galion’s attention.

Pippin sat back down in his chair and offered Elwen a seat, but she politely declined. “What did you need again?” he asked. “To talk with Legolas?”
“Yes. I have something I need to review with him.”

“He’s unfortunately not here. He’s traveling. But he’ll be back in plenty of time for the wedding. Will you be attending?”

A strange look passed over her face. “I hope to be there, should I receive an invitation of course.

“Ah! You’re in luck! I’m managing the guest list. I can see that you’re added.” He rifled through his stack of papers to make himself a note.

“And you shall inform the Elvenqueen of my request to see the Prince?”

Pippin waved his hand. “Oh, she won’t mind if I set that up. Legolas is my friend. I’m sure he’ll meet with you. I’ll let him know when he returns. Here, I’ll even make myself a note.” He scribbled a reminder to himself on a large piece of parchment that served to hold such things.

Elwen looked a bit dubious, uncertain whether the reminder would end up serving its purpose, based on the untidy stacks of parchment everywhere. She decided she’d return to the Elvenking’s Halls to speak with the Prince upon his return. But she said no such thing, not wanting to insult the Elvenqueen’s assistant.

So instead she bid her leave, Pippin now feeling distracted and restless.

Perhaps he might join the meeting with the Elvenqueen. He might be able to assist somehow with the identification of the plants? Yet it sounded somewhat dull, especially compared to what he knew he’d rather do instead, but hadn’t yet had time for. Namely paying a visit to Thranduil.

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“And so you called this meeting to tell us you know nothing.” The Elvenqueen’s tone wasn’t accusatory, but rather completely matter of fact – as always.

“Indeed,” Lord Elrond said, tapping his fingers on the final tome they had found in the common library, its contents completely devoid of any information that might assist them in their efforts. They were no closer in determining the nature of the plants harvested from Framsburg than they had been when they started their research.

“Lord Elrond, what is your opinion regarding any potential risk they might pose? If we are unable to determine anything about them, I must make a decision about whether to utilize them for my wedding mead.” Faramir knew this was turning far more complicated than he had wanted it to – he needed to return to Gondor soon, but more importantly did not want to overuse Elrond’s time. Yet he also knew he needn’t worry about either, especially the latter, as the Lord of Imladris quite enjoyed puzzles, and he hadn’t encountered one related to flora in an age or more.

“I am just not certain. My counsel would be to not utilize them if we can determine nothing further. The risk would not be worth it.” He turned his mind to attempting to determine if there would be any useful books he could request from Imladris, as his library was far more extensive, although the Elvenking seemed to have just as many, if not more, tomes that related to plants and trees. But then he had another, perhaps better, idea. “Radagast! He may have some ideas. Perhaps we should send for him.”

The Elvenqueen nodded – that seemed reasonable enough. Even she had grown quite curious about the mystery.

Elrond then noticed the strange expression on Galion’s face – if he didn’t know better, he’d say the
butler seemed to\textit{ not} want to call for the Brown Wizard. During the research he and Faramir had conducted over the past days, Elrond had suspected that Galion knew more than he was divulging, yet the Lord of Imladris said nothing. He knew that whatever it might be would come to his ears if the butler deemed it appropriate, and he obviously had decided it was not.

For Galion’s part, he did indeed know something of the origin of the plants – they resembled the ones the Elvenqueen had brought back from the East after Thranduil had rescued her. He knew that they could be used in magic spells, and he was also certain that they would not harm any who consumed them in mead, for such brewing would negate their properties, based on what the Elvenqueen had told them prior to the spell-based wiping of her memory.

Galion struggled with his internal conflict. From his first sighting of the plants, his knowledge that Thranduil would want to know they were in his kingdom battled his desire not to upset his Lord. One moment he'd decide to tell him, but back away from it when opportunities arose. Knowing of these plants would enrage him, of that Galion was certain.

Yet if he thought about Radagast, about the chance he'd had taken up similar sorcery...No, he knew him too well to expect that. But perhaps one of the Blue Wizards was in the vicinity, attempting to gain access to the Elvenqueen once more?

Galion knew then that he had to stand firm and inform Thranduil. He just hoped it wouldn’t drive the Elvenking to declining health or moods - or worse.

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Pippin was surprised to see the Elvenking in a slightly elevated position in his bed, studying the intricate wedding ring that adorned his right index finger. Elrond had initially been surprised when the King first awakened, his immediate response one of agitation that his jewelry had been removed. Thranduil demanded the replacement of his wedding ring, and Elrond had been a bit perplexed by that. The King obviously held no fond feelings for his hervess, seeming to prefer ignoring the fact that she existed – even Elrond had heard rumors in the past that she had died – yet the Elvenking wouldn’t relinquish the ring that symbolized their vows.

Thranduil turned when he saw the hobbit, his brow furrowing as it had when he’d first seen Pippin. “Who are you? How did you get past the guards?” And then he peered closer, as close as he was able to, given the great effort it took to move his head. “Are you a sprite of some sort from Yavanna’s gardens?” Yet he was certain he wasn’t in a state of reverie, so he sat back and waited patiently, not sensing any harm would come from the small creature before him.

“No, I’m Pippin – Peregrin Took – of the Shire. Remember?” And then Pippin grimaced, realizing he had forgotten about the King’s memory loss and ongoing inability to recall anything since the time Legolas had departed for Laketown with Tauriel – an inability that extended to any current events or experiences. “Oh, of course you wouldn’t remember. I…”

“Excuse me, Master Pergerin.” Pippin turned, seeing that Galion had entered the room, carrying a small box. “I must speak with my King.”

Pippin bowed. “Of course.” He tried to peek inside the box when he walked past the butler, but couldn’t see inside. Even with the extra height he had added to his frame following his time with Merry in Fangorn during the Quest couldn’t aid him here – almost, but not quite.

“Galion. Have you sent anyone to track Legolas? I want him back from Laketown. As well as Tauriel. If they bind while they are gone…” He knew he had forbidden Tauriel, claiming her station was insufficient – the primary method he’d used with any elleth or ellon that caught Legolas’ interest.
But she’d disobeyed him by following Thorin after his escape, and now he wasn’t certain if he could trust her. And Legolas was much too besotted with her for his liking.

He grew angry as he thought about the entire situation, his thoughts traveling as they often did to Thorin’s grandsire Thror – that insufferable dwarf, keeping what was his, the necklace and accompanying gems that were the only known way that Legolas might be able to escape the horrific enchantment the Elvenqueen had placed upon him, even if Thror knew it not, for he had never been informed of its true value. Thranduil wished he had never entrusted the dwarven king with its crafting in the first place. Even informing the dwarf that it belonged to his hervess had no effect.....he had thought dwarves valued and revered such things above all others, revering jewelry related to love, and particularly necklaces, beads, or other ornamentation worn on the body, and would never dream of keeping such a thing.

He’d thought wrong.

He tried, as he always did, to calm himself by thinking of Thror’s gold-sickness, infused as it was by the presence of the Arkenstone, but it did not produce full empathy in the best of times, and did little to calm him now as his mind was little capable of calm thought.

Galion easily saw his shift in mood, and sought to reduce his ire. While he didn’t know exactly what the Elvenking was thinking, he knew it related to his firm command that Legolas not wed Tauriel.

“My Lord, I assure you that will not happen. Tauriel and Legolas will not bind. I guarantee it. This I may swear with Eru was my witness.”

The Elvenking seemed to relax somewhat, for he trusted Galion to be completely honest with him. Yet that did not mean he understood how such a statement was possible. “How can you make such a pledge?”

Galion sighed. He was an elf of near endless patience, yet as Thranduil’s moods had improved over the past two days his need for constant sedation had been reduced, and the endless questions had returned. There was no end in sight to his memory loss.

“Sire, you were injured in a battle. You have difficulty forming memories, and the explanation would be too complex for you right now. Please trust me when I say that there is absolutely no way that Tauriel can wed Legolas. There is another matter I must bring to your attention.”

He pulled out one of the plants, and Thranduil’s eyes went wide.

“This forest is strange, Gimli. It is ancient, older than Fangorn. And the stories of the trees seem more ominous.” Legolas stood with Gimli by his side at the western edge of Shénmì de Sēnlín, waiting for Elladan and Elrohir to return from their scouting.

Nergüi and Éowyn soon joined them in their silent visual inspection of the dense, enormously tall woods before them, having refilled their waterskins from the nearby river. Few sources currently ran clear in the East, but both Dhruv and Nergüi knew methods of cleansing the water, although Nergüi’s was most efficient.

Nergüi’s nervousness was clear as he stared at the forest and made a gesture to ward against ill-meaning spirits. “I never thought I would view these trees first-hand. If those who reside within do know black magic as well as the legends say, I fear for what may happen to us when we cross its threshold.”
“Fear not! I, for one, am excited to meet this wizard of my order. A Blue, no less.” Gandalf’s eyes twinkled as he tried to lighten the mood. But then he returned to scanning the forest, attempting to determine what might lie within.

They’d traveled on horseback for days after leaving the Sea of Rhûn, following a route – Jingshên zhī lù – that was known by Dhruv to be rarely traveled, precisely because it was known to be an enchanted path that led only to Shénmì de Sēnlín. Finding the forest and the Spirit Road had been easy enough, for it was a place avoided by most who dwelt in the East – and, as was the case with anything, it could only be bypassed if its location was known. Tales of the road spoke of spirits who would possess the bodies and minds of any unwelcome travelers, driving them towards madness and unwanted ends. The forest itself was an area of strange occurrences, rumored to welcome unhoused spirits to dwell there forevermore, the other occupants within being expert manipulators of the forces of nature in all manners of ways.

And then there were the warriors said to serve as its living guard, skilled beyond most in martial arts, able to sever the steel of a sword with bare hands.

All were said to protect the Blue Wizard within from the forces of darkness. And so it was that the one who brought hope to willing hearts in the East filled the very same hearts with trepidation at the very idea of seeking him. The Blue Wizard who could not be accessed unless he wanted to be, and the tales of what could happen if a seeker was misidentified as aligned with Darkness were terrifying. Or so the legends said.

Gandalf’s presence alone had lessened the growing hesitation of the group’s Easterling guides as they traversed the dim, winding road that led to Shénmì de Sēnlín – especially the reluctance of Nergüi, who was clearly the more wary of the two. Sorcery and spirits were feared in his culture more than most, even his very name serving to ward them away. Yet the white-robed spell-caster that he often walked directly behind brought him some degree of comfort, for he knew that the White Wizard meant him no harm. Indeed, he was certain that Gandalf would protect him from an ill-begotten fate.

For the group as a whole, the journey had been uneventful yet entirely unsettling. Each grew to sense, albeit with different degrees of speed, that they weren’t alone on the road’s path, and without the elves’ oft-calming words, their horses would have bolted. For all but Gandalf the pervading sense was one of barely escaping from some perverse fate, even in the face of the wizard assuring them that all that surrounded them simply served to facilitate their travel unharmed.

And now they faced these strange trees, the like of which none of the Westerlings had ever seen. “Daylight will fade soon enough,” Elladan said, cutting through the silence and gloom as he and Elrohir approached the group, having found nothing that might threaten them beyond the current intermingling peril of what seemed to be sorcery and unseen guards – hazards that were not realized as of yet and, Eru willing, would not be. “Shall we make camp and proceed on the morrow? Or cross the boundary of the forest line now?”

Éowyn shivered internally, certainly not the only one who had some degree of reluctance as they contemplated that which lay before them. “The road here was disconcerting enough, yet this forest makes it seem a safe haven unlike no other. But nothing ill occurred, just as you said, Gandalf. So perhaps we should not assume the worst regardless of the murmurs of unease that our hearts now speak?” Her words served to buttress her own courage.

“Aye,” Gimli’s voice was firm even as he felt some of the foreboding and hesitation he had experienced at certain harrowing points during the Ring Quest. “If this is the next step on our journey, let us take it! At least these trees don’t move – that is far worse to my mind!” Yet the fond
glance Legolas sent his way did much to quell his fears – at least for now.

Nergüi looked at the dwarf with wide eyes. “Have you seen them yourself? The living trees?” He’d assumed the tales were just that – stories for children – and for a moment found himself entirely distracted from his fear of the woods before them.

“Aye, Ents.” Gimli stood with his legs firmly planted on the ground, determined not to let this forest rattle his mind, drawing strength from his betrothed standing before him. “I shall tell you of them when we stop for the night.”

Dhruv stared at the dwarf, still unable to believe that he had brought about the downfall of one of the Áhi, one of Devá’s revered creatures. Yet he had reconciled it for the time being by telling himself that the dwarf had not directly injured the creature.

Had it been otherwise, he knew he would have left to return to Minas Tirith. Such would be as terrible as learning the dwarf had slain one of the gaja that had been led into battle. Gaja were just as revered amongst his people as the Áhi, and he knew their pure spirits had been twisted to participate in war. But King Elessar had spoken of this dwarf’s honor, of his loyalty and courage.

And so he stayed, hesitant, nervous, yet also intrigued to see what would occur when they came face to face with the noble Váñaspáti of legend.

Legolas grew restless with the hedging of the group, the should we – shouldn’t we taking far longer than he liked. His own anxiety began to grow about what lay beyond – entirely different from the others, for instead of unseen threats he worried about something broader, that they would locate this Blue Wizard and he wouldn’t be able to help him achieve his heart’s desire.

Then he shook off the web of uncertainty, determined to find the solution that lay within the forest – and if it was not here, then he would search elsewhere. This combined with his desire to show his One that trees themselves were nothing to fear led him to move forward, touching his hand to the trunk of what he determined must be a some type of fir tree. But he was thwarted in his study as soon as his fingertips made contact with the deep furrows of the bark, his sudden foreboding and Gandalf’s hastily uttered stop! both too slow to prevent all from suddenly going dark.

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Gimli woke to a throbbing headache, worse than any he’d ever experienced before. He squinted in the dim light, thinking for a moment that Adlia’s comrades had outdone themselves once more in their quest to partake of the strongest spirits in the Lonely Mountain. Surely he was more hungover than he’d ever been.

But then he realized he was lying down on a wooden floor in some wide structure – in a tree. Was this Lothlórien?

Then he heard Tharkûn, and the dwarf knew he couldn’t be Lady Galadriel’s forest – Tharkûn had been lost in Moria.

Hadn’t he?

He’d never felt so strange before, not knowing what was reality and what was not. Even when he traversed his typical dwarrow dreamscapes, he was firmly grounded in the earth.

“Ah,” Tharkûn’s voice wafted through the air, and the dwarf grew even more disconcerted when he could almost touch the sound of his words as they floated by – touch them, that is, if his body would move, which it couldn’t. “Gimli begins to stir. That was certainly a strong ward you set at your
borders, and I am doubly impressed that I could not detect it until just before Legolas triggered it.”

Legolas! Where was Legolas? The panic that ripped through his heart was more forceful than any tremor that had ever shook Mount Doom – yet surely Tharkûn wouldn’t see the One he loved more than any other come to harm?

“The dwarrow seems to have had an easier time of this than the others, as I would expect.” An unfamiliar voice, one he couldn’t place, yet the words wafted by all the same. Now Gimli’s mood shifted suddenly, feeling entirely gleeful and wishing he could reach out and touch the sentence-sounds that drifted past his nose.

“Well, let’s hope that Legolas is recovered before he awakens fully, or I imagine you’ll have a raging Longbeard warrior on your hands.” Tharkûn’s voice again, and this time the words began wafting by like the scents of flowers that grew near the Iron Hills.

“In that case, let’s hope that I can provide my apology to him before that occurs, as I surely have no desire for battle at the moment.” The stranger’s voice traversed around his head like birds circling their nest before landing.

Tharkûn chuckled. “No, I suppose you would not. And he’d best save his strength, for he has a wedding to prepare for. And a necklace to find. I am certain he will embrace the Quest with great vigor.”

Necklace? Did they speak of the crystal one that he had crafted for his beloved elf following their excursion to the Glittering Caves? Or his courting necklace, which he had bestowed upon his elf after their betrothal ceremony? Had both been lost? Was Legolas missing? Did something happen to him after he touched that tree? Gimli couldn’t remember what had happened after that, and he began to struggle in his moment of panic.

“Here, apply this salve near his nose and on his wrists. It will relax him, as well as hasten his recovery from the wards against trespass that the Prince released.”

Tharkûn’s prompt adherence to those instructions served to make Gimli drowsy, and he soon fell asleep, even as he struggled to awaken and ensure his elf was safe.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin Translations
hervess = wife
ellon = male elf
elleth = female elf

Japanese Translations (courtesy of Raelien)
Ryū-ningen = Were-worm

Sanskrit Translations
Devá = Eru
Āhi = Dragon
Gaja = Elephant, similar to Mûmakil or Oliphaunt
Vánaspáti = Forest Lord aka Morihetnar (Alatar), one of the Blue Wizards
Other translations (via google translate, apologies if there are errors)
Shénmì de sēnlín = Mysterious Forest (Chinese)
Jīngshén zhī lù = Spirit Road (Chinese)
Chapter Summary

A more-calm Elvenking studies the plants retrieved from Framsburg. Decisions are made about Tatsuo’s request of servitude as compensation for the loss of his bonded mate. And in the East, Gimli learns of the white gems that are capable of breaking the enchantment placed upon their potential binding – and why they may not permit him to vow with Legolas after all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“From whence did that come?” Thranduil asked Galion coolly as he lay propped upon the silk-covered pillows that were piled at the head of his expansive bed, staring at the luminescent plant in his butler’s hand.

Thranduil had no recollection of his butler presenting this plant to him a day prior, his short term memory remaining as broken as his recollection of the last several decades. Strangely, the Elvenking's reaction to Galion's initial presentation of the unusual Framsburg-vicinity greenery had been different. The Elvenking had been shocked into wordlessness and nearly fell into one of his ever-present states of rage. For his part, Galion had instantly regretted his choice to inform Thranduil of this unexpected discovery, believing he had instigated yet another setback in Thranduil’s battle to recover. Yet somehow the Elvenking was able to maintain his tenuous hold on the small improvements he had seen in the past days and requested time to think, for his mind was slow and sluggish, his emotions improved yet continuing to be very difficult to render calm.

Now Galion stood before his King once more, hesitating in his uncertainty about how to proceed now that this moment was before him yet again. He worried that the Elvenking’s reaction would be stormy, potentially negating his slow progress and returning him to his unsettled, disregulated, uncontrolled state of mind. Yet the butler’s promise of unceasing loyalty overcame his anxiety – it had to.

Particularly if this strange greenery posed an as-yet undetermined threat to the kingdom. Galion knew only that this was the type of flora used in enchantments of the sort that the Elvenqueen had learned of during her journey East – and surely Thranduil would not think such a finding to be benign.

“This plant came from Worm-burrowed tunnels under the ruins of Framsburg, my Lord. There is a large subterranean cavern in which these grow. I have several that have been harvested.”

Thranduil stared straight ahead, lost for some moments in a distant memory. “I see,” he eventually said. “Do you suspect the Queen’s involvement in this?”

“Not whatsoever.” Galion replied in a most adamant tone. “She knows not what these plants are. Her recollection of them remains completely nonexistent.”

“Good,” the Elvenking said softly as he slowly rearranged the silk blanket that lay across his still-broken hröa, staring yet again at nothing in particular for long moments. “We must keep it that way.”
Thranduil turned his still-cool gaze to Galion. “Bring her to me. I trust only myself to keep her safe from a repeat of whatever sorcery may surround our forest – and to keep my forest safe from her. She cannot dwell on the outskirts and be put at risk, nor do I want to see her put our kingdom at risk yet again. And send a messenger to retrieve Legolas from Laketown, for I most certainly did not permit his travel with Tauriel.” He closed his eyes slowly. “She is not to return to my Halls.”

“My Lord?” Galion asked even as he had no desire to reenact a repeat of this decades-old discussion.

“She disobeyed me, Galion. I no longer trust her.”

“My Lord, Tauriel is not….”

An icy glare cut his words short, and the butler grimaced as he quietly exited Thranduil’s bedchamber, marveling at the similarity of the Elvenking’s decisions as he relived situations from a past that he erroneously believed was the present day.

Galion knew that the Elvenking in his current state, which could very well change upon the morrow – memory-impaired yet more aware and more in control of his still-fluctuating emotions – could be even just as much of a challenge than the recently easily-enraged one. Perhaps even more, for his powers of cognition were returning.

Left to his own thoughts after his butler had departed, the Elvenking pondered his order to banish Tauriel to the outskirts of the realm, his mind stuck as it was in the time prior to the Battle of Five Armies. He certainly did not recall that she no longer walked Middle-Earth, her overwhelming grief over the death of the young dwarf prompting her to sail to the Undying Lands.

His captain – his own captain! – had directly disobeyed his order to remain in his Halls, instead choosing to assist a dwarf whose uncle would spitefully rejected his request to return of his white gems and necklace, jewels which were surely mere baubles to Thorin Oakenshield’s eye.

In the absence of the return of those gems and necklace - the necklace that Thrór had crafted for him yet never returned, the gems that held pure starlight and enabled the spell held within the jewelry – nothing would protect his son’s fëa if he bound with another. Nor would Tauriel’s be protected, for she was the one the Prince would surely choose to bind himself to.

Should she decide to vow with Legolas, an outcome that Thranduil knew his son desired more than anything he had ever coveted before….Thranduil felt his heart race wildly at the thought that Legolas would be unable to keep his promise to seek his King’s permission before binding, triggering the culmination of the enchantment placed upon his son, potentially resulting in his death and that of his mate. The necklace and its remaining loose gems could prevent such an untoward end - should it work as it had been designed to - but it was rather irrelevant if it was not in his hands.

And that was not all, for there was no true relief to be found in the hope of the return of said jewels. Thranduil's mind came to the same point it had so many times thus far - he could not risk telling his too-brash son and the Captain of his Guard of the enchantment. For if they knew, they would believe it their duty to bind such that they would release the trapped fëar of their forebears from the Dead Marshes – or perish in the attempt and set in motion a chain of events that would ensure an even worse fate for all involved.

The Elvenking would take no such chances. No, his only viable option at this juncture was to stand behind his decision to banish Tauriel to the outskirts of Mirkwood until a better solution could be found, particularly in light of her disobedience, for his trust in her faltered, cracked, broke.

His resolve was firm - such would not be the first said banishment, for he had essentially done so
with his Queen, sending her to a remote part of the forest to ensure both her safety and that of his people. He would not see either Legolas or Tauriel perish. He had witnessed far too much death over his long centuries, and he would not see them fall into theirs by actions that could be stayed by his own hand. That guilt would surely crush him more than anything.

Ensuring beyond any shadow of doubt that they were kept separate was the only option that lay before him.

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Galion returned a short time thereafter, the Elvenqueen following behind, and for one short moment, Eryn Lasgalen’s erstwhile butler thought he saw glimmers of trepidation in the Queen’s sapphire eyes.

For his part, Thranduil could no longer recall the reason as to the summoning of his Queen, nor that it had been at his order, yet Galion was able to speedily rectify that by returning to the King’s view the luminiscent plants that had been found beneath Framsburg.

“This is your doing?” He asked his Queen coldly, thinking she had returned to her practice of sorcery even as he wondered why the memory erasure spell had failed, for they had both understood it should permanently erase her memories of wizardry – and more, protecting her from any further entrapment with the wizards of Middle-Earth – or worse, the dark magic of Sauron and his minions. Even as he still did not quite understand her decision, knowing it came at the cost of losing her memories of Legolas….

She frowned slightly, not understanding why Thranduil would think her to be involved, and her words interrupted the Elvenking’s meandering thoughts. “I have simply helped to identify their origin and suitability for ingestion, but we have come up with naught.”

Thranduil could see the bewilderment in her eyes, and a calm realization that she spoke the truth settled within. Yet it was soon overcome by worry that the Blue Wizard Rómestámo sought her once more for further sorcerous ends.

“Have your dreams of summoning returned?” the Elvenking asked as her bewilderment worsened, and his relief was palpable. “Or, should I say, have you had any strange dreams of late? Visions?”

The Elvenqueen looked to Galion, wondering if Thranduil was of sound mind, for she had no recollection of any such thing as a result of her own requested memory erasure.

“If I may,” Galion interrupted, knowing that a discussion of this sort between King and Queen had the potential to meander in circles for a near-eternity, “the issue is this: The Steward of Gondor sought a plant from Framsburg as part of a Quest for his betrothed, and he and his fellow questers discovered these. The Queen had no prior knowledge of them.”

The ways of mortals were indeed strange, Thranduil mused, yet he had little opportunity to linger on such thoughts, for the presence of these plants was most worrisome to his mind. “What else did they discover when they traveled there? Did they see the minder of these plants?”

“I do not think so, my Lord, but the Steward is here, and he would welcome answering any such questions.”

Thranduil agreed with the summoning, and as Galion departed the King and Queen found themselves alone, awkward silence filling the air.

Awkward, that is, until a small voice piped up from behind the Elvenqueen. “Oh, surely you realize
this is silly! You are vowed, certainly now is as good a time as any to overcome whatever lies between you!”

The Elvenqueen turned, surprised to see Pippin emerge from where he had stood unnoticed behind her.

“Who is this?” Thranduil asked. “I do not know you.”

“Oh, you most certainly do, you just don’t remember,” Pippin tapped his head several times in reference, and the Elvenqueen gasped at his brazenness. “Your memory isn’t working so well, but you have trouble remembering that sometimes,” he giggled as he said the latter.

“I’m the Elvenqueen’s assistant,” Pippin continued proudly, and before Thranduil could ask how in Elbereth’s name such a thing came to pass, Pippin continued talking with his characteristic eagerness. “Now then,” he said with a solemn tone that the Elvenqueen had not quite heard from him yet, “Tell me why you don’t get along.”

As the Elvenking and Queen stared at him in near-incredulity, Galion returned with Faramir. Pippin looked utterly disappointed, yet he bore the interruption well, for he was quite curious to discover what lay behind the mystery of the Framsburg plants.

Galion wondered at the expression of wide-eyed surprise upon Thranduil’s face, for seeing his King in such a state was rare. Yet Faramir kept the conversation from stagnating, introducing himself simply as the Steward of Gondor upon Elrond’s advice, aware that mention of his name would sidetrack Thranduil into discussions of his memory loss once more.

“Your Highness,” Faramir said solemnly as he bowed, “These plants grew without sunlight beneath the ruins of Framsburg, where I had traveled to fulfill a betrothal quest involving retrieval of an ingredient for mead. We harvested the few specimens that we thought might be candidates, and left behind a number of other varieties.”

“And did you see anyone there?” the Elvenking asked.

“No, your Highness,” Faramir began, and then corrected himself. “There was a Long-worm, one that had carved the tunnels in which we traveled.”

“Tunnels?” The Elvenking asked with a frown upon his face.

“Yes, and they were filled with urns filled with strange mixtures.”

Thranduil’s eyes widened. “Tell me more.”

Faramir described the urns to the best of his recollection, as well as the foul-smelling substance contained therein.

It was indeed wizardry, Thranduil knew, for the urns resembled those he had seen in his own journey East. But for what purpose? This one did not seem particularly untoward, for he knew little of such things – yet he knew who would know.

“Send for Radagast,” he said. “He will be able to determine the cause of this. When he arrives, provide him a party of my best warriors to accompany him. And he will be able to render judgment, I think,” he said in some distaste, crinking his nose at the thought of mead made from the flora that had been harvested, “on whether these plants are edible for this mead you need brew. Perhaps you would rather try some wine?”
“Absolutely he would,” Pippin cut in. “Count me in! And then,” he lowered his voice to a whisper, such that only the Elvenking and Elvenqueen could hear him, speaking near-conspiratorially, “we shall talk further.”

Once more Thranduil was rendered speechless, and he felt a weariness overcome him that mirrored the brittle agedness of his heart.

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“Bah! I will not have one of my warriors serve an unknown host for indeterminable years, especially for what was at worst an error and at best an honorable service to the West as a whole! Or do you want orcs infesting your forest through their foul secret passages, crafted by enormous worms who have no respect for the sanctity of stone?!” Dwalin glared at Radagast, his patience stretched to its limit, his generally reserved manner having fled from the room. He had listened most carefully as Radagast and Galadriel explained the Framsburg slaying of Ryoko, mate of Tatsuo, leader of the Ryū-ningen. And his reaction was much the same as Adlia’s – disbelief, wonder, queries of dragon-thrall, and later, growing consideration that this might be true.

The erstwhile warrior took a deep breath, warding off Glorfindel’s forthcoming words with a wave of his hand. “Even if this is true, that my dwarf and this elf killed an ally of ours, albeit with such an affiliation unbeknownst to them,” he spat it out, for a brief moment blaming the gold-tressed warrior for this mess, “how in Durin’s name does it differ from the occurrences of the Battle of Five Armies? Their kin tunneled through the mountains, such that orcs could catch us unawares and kill my folk!”

Dwalin crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair, eyes blazing fiercely, while Bofur nodded his agreement.

They sat in one of Elrond’s conference rooms the day after learning of the purpose of Radagast and Galadriel’s travel to Imladris. Both the Longbeard and Broadbeam of Thorin Oakenshield’s company refused to see the younger dwarrowdam pay penance in servitude for an error, even one that the Brown Wizard and Lady of Light considered unfortunate yet grievous.

“We were all there,” Merry said softly. “We should all go.”

The dwarves of the Lonely Mountain turned their heads to stare at the hobbit, surprised by his words, but no more so than the two elves and wizard who sat in the room.

Merry continued speaking, his tone solemn. “We stood by as it happened, and I am certain that if one of my family or friends had been killed like that……If I was married, I would see her memory given the justice it was due. I don’t think he asks too much of us. And even if those Were-worms had acted of their own accord during the Battle of Five Armies and helped the orcs, why should all of them be held in judgment for it? Surely we wouldn’t do the same for ourselves. We haven’t asked Radagast or Gandalf to make amends for Saruman’s misdeeds, or for Aragorn to pay for the errors of all humans, or Galadriel for all elves.”

He grew even more thoughtful. “Pippin swore allegiance to Gondor to honor Boromir’s sacrifice – surely what this Dragon-person asks is not too much?”

Adlia pondered his words, as did all of the others in the room. “Aye, Master Hobbit, you have a strong point.” She knew that he did, for if the situation were reversed, she would surely expect
compensation, albeit of a different form. “Yet you have no need to pay restitution, for you were the only one who spoke of concerns, of holding back. Regardless, this is not your burden to bear.”

She looked at those seated, studying Glorfindel’s face in particular, and then Dwalin’s. “It was I who dealt the killing blow. It is I who will meet with this Were-worm to discuss recompense, perhaps in the form of a weregild, if not direct servitude……if you will travel with me to assist with parley.” She addressed the last to Radagast, feeling the need for the protection his apparent relationship with the Were-worms would offer.

“Of course,” Radagast said, “I must return to the Withered Heath regardless. And your suggested recompense seems reasonable enough, although I know not how Tatsuo will react to it. I…”

“What?!” Glorfindel interrupted, nearly furious. “Do you forget, Master Dwarf, that I dealt blows as well? I will not have you pay a full price for that in which you owe only a part!”

Adlia met his gaze, appreciating his words, wanting him by her side in this – yet her sense of stubborn responsibility and obligation surmounted all else. “Nay, Master Elf. This ultimately falls upon my own shoulders.”

Glorfindel sent his own fiery gaze her way. “I will not stand by in this matter.” His words were particularly firm as he recalled the flash of foresight he’d had of her, standing alone amidst apparent foes in a sea of sand – a vision that now made more sense if Worms of the Last Desert were involved.

The dwarrowdam nodded once, eyes slipping downward to study her broad hands, and the planning of their travel to the Withered Heath began.

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Late that night Merry found little rest, his mind troubled by what had occurred under the ruins of Framsburg, his unsettled thoughts traveling to the death he both witnessed and dealt over the course of the Quest and Ring-War.

He decided to walk to the Last Homely House’s kitchens, knowing a snack might help distract his mind and assist him in finding sleep. Lost in his contemplation of the relative merits of the late-night options that would be available to him – for this was not his first such trip there – he barely noticed the trio who seemed to be preparing their own after-hours meal.

“Dwalin! Adlia! Bofur!” he said happily, pleased they would be able to join him in his partaking of the ever-available amenities of Rivendell. Even if the cooking wasn’t quite to his taste, he surely enjoyed it enough to keep himself very well-fed.

He gazed at what they had gathered, shaking his head at their choices. “Here, let’s try the leftovers from dinner this evening – the cooks always leave some for me, right over here……”

When they were silent in response he looked at them more closely, puzzled for a short time, then quickly realized their intent. “You’re leaving. You’re packing rations for the trip. Without Glorfindel – or me.”

Adlia smiled fondly at the hobbit. “Aye, Master Hobbit, you owe no debt. You have no need to travel there.”

“Yes I do, I was part of it. And so was Glorfindel.” Not to mention Faramir and Gimli, but they were otherwise occupied.
She shook her head. “Nay, Master Meriadoc. Dwalin, and Bofur will travel with myself and Radagast, and with Thorin III Stonehelm’s leave, we shall offer a weregild as compensation for this Were-worm’s death.”

His brow furrowed, still not understanding what they meant.

“Gold, jewels, payment for the loss. It would need to be sizable, given her status as mate of the leader of these Were-worms, but Thorin will be able to provide that.”

“But what if they refuse?” Merry asked. “What if this dragon still wants actual service?” What if Adlia’s concern was true, that the Were-worms held Radagast and Galadriel in dragon thrall and this was some sort of trap?

He wished Gandalf was here – Gandalf would know what to do.

“Harumph! That is why we are traveling with her, Master Meriadoc. To assess the situation. Master Radagast has given his word that he will protect Adlia from harm.” Dwalin sensed no evil hold over the Brown Wizard, and somehow knew in his heart that this tale was a true one.

“Well, you’re not leaving without me!” Merry crossed his arms over his chest, huffing indignantly. “I refuse!”

“Will you stow away under one of the creatures Radagast will use to fly us to our Mountain?” Bofur chuckled.

“Perhaps I will!” Merry glared at the dwarf, his expression nearly irate.

“Peace, Master Hobbit. I meant no harm.” Bofur placed a hand on Merry’s shoulder as he sent a questioning glance toward his companions.

Adlia curtly nodded her head. “If you are so bent on traveling with us, Master Meriadoc, I will not say no. But,” and she wagged a finger at him in warning, “If servitude is required and agreed upon, you are not to pay a debt that you do not owe.”

“Agreed,” Merry said, nearly rolling his eyes in his mind. For a people so focused upon infinite iterations of detailed contracts of all types, that statement surely left many holes. “And what of Glorfindel?”

Bofur and Dwalin sent contemplative inquiries in Adlia’s direction, the dwarrowdam ignoring them as she moved to finish readying provisions. Bofur finally spoke for her, knowing her mind on the matter had not changed. “Adlia has decided that she will repay this debt, not he.”

“Um, I don’t think Glorfindel will be very pleased with that.” Merry offered somewhat meekly.

Adlia didn’t look up from her task, her packing becoming even more focused and intense. How did this hobbit, this one who loved to tell various tales of vegetable thievery, become her conscience? “Aye, Master Hobbit, he may not – he will not, I would wager – but this is what is right, and it is for the best. This is my debt, not his.”

Merry sighed, knowing there was no point in arguing. “So,” he said, trying to brighten the mood, “You said we would be flying? On Eagles, then?”

Bofur laced the ties of his rucksack, filled to the brim with provisions. The flight would be relatively short, much more rapid than traveling by a land-based steed, but if this hobbit was to accompany them, being overprepared was a wise idea. “Nay. Apparently these are like no creature we have ever
Merry frowned, not certain what the dwarf meant – what creature could they possibly be speaking of? – but then he grew excited – this would be something Pippin would be most jealous of.

A few hours later, standing in the darkness beside the Fenghuang that had been summoned to Rivendell by Radagast, Adlia lost her resolve.

“I cannot do this,” she said softly to Radagast.

He turned sharply, wondering at her change of heart. “I assure you, good dwarf, there is nothing to fear of the Ryū-ningen. They are noble and fair.”

“It is not that,” she sighed. “I cannot take my leave of Glorfindel by sneaking away in the dimness of a cold, clouded night. I must tell him of my plans. I am not one who hides from a fellow warrior under the cover of darkness.” She groaned, knowing in her heart that nothing would prevent Glorfindel's choice to travel with her, no more than she could prevent Merry, even if she truly believed the blame lay upon her shoulders and not theirs. “And if he so chooses to accompany me of his own free will, I am not certain how to ensure he would reconsider.”

“Well said, Master Dwarf,” came a sternly melodious voice from behind her. She had no need to turn to view the one to whom the words belonged, even as a hand touched the still-green braid that banded around her arm, an ever-present reminder of the now-tainted visit to Framsburg and her warrior-bond with the Lord of the Golden Flower. “I trust this sort of potential misunderstanding shall not occur again?”

She smirked, turning to see Glorfindel smiling as he stood with Erestor, the Lord of the Golden Flower nodding toward Elrond’s long-time Chief Advisor. “My dear friend has a gifted tongue, so I deem that he may assist us in our parley with the Ryū-ningen and offering this weregild of yours.”

“Hmph! What, how do you learn of…” she stuttered.

He placed a hand upon her shoulder and whispered to her. “Should you leave my guest room in the midst of the night after a conference such as the one we had today, surely I might guess what might be at play.” He straightened in triumph. "And do not doubt the eavesdropping skills of dear Mr. Baggins."

She frowned and conceded defeat. “Hmph! But do not think yourself the winner at this game of wits, Master Elf. I shall best you yet.”

Glorfindel crossed his arms and studied her intently in the dimness. “Somehow I worry what that shall look like.”

“Or perhaps we should worry about time ticking into the fifth age as the two of you attempt to match your ill wits! Come, let us embark upon this journey!” Dwalin bellowed. “Master Erestor, you may ride with me, for you are well-mannered and will not make my head ache as we travel!”

No one saw the gesture of gratitude that Dwalin sent in the direction of the terrace on which Bilbo currently stood.
Gimli awoke in the darkness with a start, sitting up so quickly that he regretted it instantly, for sudden movement with a pounding headache was surely not wise.

He looked around, his eyes adjusting to the blackness quickly, realizing he was in what seemed to be a talan, the leaves above him thick and strange.

This must be Shénmì de Sēnlín, he thought, and then he remembered the burst of light that had occurred as they stood outside the forest. Trickery of wizards, he mused to himself, instantly worried when he realized his axe was nowhere in sight, his trepidation co-mingling with the relief that flowed through him when he sighted Éoywn and Legolas ensconced in peaceful slumber nearby.

He moved as quietly as he could toward Legolas, attempting to wake his beloved, but nothing he tried would rouse him, and he dared not do anything that could draw attention from others - others who may wish them ill or be holding them prisoner.

And so the ginger-haired dwarf moved to the edge of the talan, attempting to see what he might spy in the vicinity of this tree, and the sight caught him off guard entirely. In the distance was a glade with incredibly large birds unlike anything he had ever seen, tended to by elves whose physical appearance seemed to be a study in complete contrast with Legolas’, aside from the similarly pointed ears, length of hair, and slender forms.

His sigh of relief when he spotted Gandalf reclining in some sort of floating chair was so audible that faces turned towards him – and he instantly regretted it, for a floating chair was not a normal sight. Perhaps it meant Gandalf himself was in the thrall of the Wizard of this forest, a wizard who might have as much goodwill towards them as Saruman had.

“No need to worry, Master Dwarf,” the White Wizard said as though he read Gimli’s mind, moving the chair to float towards the talan. “Ingenious, is it not? Crafted by my kinsman who knows far more than I of the profession of enchantments.”

His chuckle was met by the striding forward of said kinsman, a wizard robed in sea-tinted blue, his light grey hair – but not his darker-grey, unkempt beard – braided in what Gimli was certain was the style of the Blacklocks of the Red Mountains. “Ah, I do not surpass the head of my Order. Master Gimli,” and he firmly hit his head and then his chest with a clenched fist, “May Mahal smile upon you.”

Gimli bowed, his replied “at your service” firmly spoken, for any who knew the traditional greeting of the Stonefoots and wore the braids of the Blacklocks must be trustworthy in their own right.

“I may add the Longbeard greeting to my repertoire, then. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Morinehtar. Yamihorobashi to some who live near me, Dusnûlukhâl to others.” He smiled widely. “I understand you have traveled here for the love you bear your elven prince. I surely would not have envisioned a dwarf and elf of the West desiring to vow without seeing it for myself.”

“Aye, and we desire to undo the enchantment that has been placed upon him. Or upon us.” Prior to laying eyes upon the blue-robed figure that stood before him, Gimli would not have phrased the cause of their travel in such a manner, but in the here and now, he experienced his first true sense of foreboding that the enchantment might be an actuality that could prevent his binding to the One he loved.

“Gandalf has explained as such. Come, it will be some time before your companions awaken, as you were least affected by the border wards I placed at the edge of my forest.”

Gimli looked at Morinehtar, standing as he was on the ground some distance downward, and then
scanned the vicinity to locate a ladder or set of stairs. Yet there was none, and Gandalf floated close enough to extend a hand for Gimli to join him upon his floating chair.

“Hmph! I am not getting on that contraption! Riding in a boat or upon a horse is enough time away from solid earth for me!” Let alone sitting upon the White Wizard’s lap!

Morinehtar motioned for a method of exit to be brought forth, and soon Gimli was climbing downward via a surprisingly sturdy rope ladder, one he postulated might be enchanted, as everything in this forest seemed to be.

He had no desire to think about how he must have been taken into the talan via one of those floating chairs.

They made their way to Morinehtar’s abode in the trees nearby. *This is truly the home of a Wizard,* Gimli thought as he walked through the tailán, gazing upon the many bottles and vials stored in various locations. It reminded him of the vastness of Lord Elrond’s library, albeit with an entirely different type of collection.

Once seated upon surprisingly comfortable floor cushions near a low table, the Blue Wizard described the history of Sauron’s enchantment that trapped souls in the Dead Marshes at the time of the Last Alliance, an elaborate spell that modified a plan of Fëanor’s. Gimli wasn’t expecting whatsoever to hear how the Númenórean towers of Orthanc and Bashnya Zvezda would harness the energy released by the destruction of those trapped spirits to release Morgoth from the Void, and perhaps even create an undead army from preserved bodies within the Marshes. The Blue Wizard spoke of Rómestámo’s counter-enchantment, developed with Maglor’s assistance in the hope of freeing those tortured souls via Legolas’ binding with one of red hair.

It was much to take in, and Gimli felt near-exhausted by the end.

“So,” Morinehtar said, “Is there a difficulty with the white gems? Did they not work? Thranduil had that concern, but I must say I did not.”

Gandalf and Gimli frowned in near unison.

Morinehtar stroked his beard thoughtfully, twisting his braids. “I take it you do not know of what I speak?”

No response was needed, for it was clear they did not.

“Well then, the first task is simple. When the Prince awakens, we must determine what he knows of the white gems that will protect your souls during binding, or of the necklace Thranduil was to have had crafted with the special stones. Gandalf is unfortunately unaware of their current location.” A growing awareness grew in Gimli’s mind, memory of talk of such gems and necklace Under the Mountain, but he knew nothing more of it, and knew Legolas would - or so he hoped.

“Mind you,” Morinehtar, gazing thoughtfully at the hopeful expression of the dwarf directly seated across from him, “King Thranduil is aware that they could be used instead to free the souls trapped within the Dead Marshes, and you must be aware of that as well.”

“It is one or the other, then?” Gandalf asked, confused and slightly daunted as Gimli’s heart sank into his boots. “But if the souls are freed, would Legolas and Gimli not be able to bind freely, given that the threat of soul destruction of which you speak would be entirely removed? Their binding would become irrelevant.”

Morinehtar shook his head. “Their own souls would still be bound by the enchantment, for they were
cast separately and the spells are powerful. Freeing the souls trapped within the Dead Marshes does not negate all of the sorcery involved. I do not know for certain, but I believe that Orthanc would remain a threat, that Legolas and Gimli’s souls may very well still feed its star map mechanism upon binding, even if it would not harness enough energy to release Morgoth from the Void.”

“It would simply destroy their souls, producing no other effect.” Gandalf said in growing understanding.

Morinehtar nodded. “Gimli and the Prince must choose whether to bind under the protection of the white gems of pure starlight or to use those gems to free the souls trapped in the Dead Marshes.” His eyes, careworn and aged, looked at Gimli intently – he had witnessed far more darkness than Gandalf had in his time on Middle-Earth, his task had been far more trying, and it showed. “The Elvenking had no desire to make the decision for his son, though based upon my discussion with Gandalf, it appears he presented none of the information to Legolas.” He wondered for a moment as to why that would be. He knew that Thranduil had been reluctant to inform his son of the enchantment, knowing the Prince would choose to bind and risk his own fëa to free those of others, driven by a sense of duty to his kingdom. But when Maglor and Rómestámo had conjured the white gems that might accomplish the same end, why had the Prince not been informed at that juncture?

Perhaps Thranduil feared what would actually occur, not entirely trusting in the negation of the enchantment. Morinehtar could not really blame him, not based upon his own experience with Rómestámo to this point.

“I must send an urgent message to Aragorn,” Gandalf said as he stood to leave, “to ensure that he does not activate the Star Map in Orthanc.” The White Wizard was most relieved that King Elessar had no plans to travel to Orthanc until after the turn of the year – giving him more than enough time to bring this unintended danger to his attention, for one of Númenórean descent speaking the Adûnaic words that would activate the star map would trigger the destruction of the Dead Marshes’ trapped souls.

“Any of those outside may assist you with that, Gandalf.” The Blue Wizard then realized the dwarf was staring at him with a near-forlorn, yet determined expression. “Fear not, Àirén Dàshí. There are always other options, though neither Rómestámo nor I have had time to explore them given the discord and darkness we have faced throughout the East. Unfortunately there is just as much to mend now as there was before Sauron was defeated, and I cannot spare time to search for what I may need to assist you, not right now. But perhaps your traveling companions would be willing to help in attempting to locate another solution to the enchantment, for if you can do the legwork, I can do the casting. And that would solve your problem of the Prince who would apparently choose duty over his kingdom to binding with you. Though I cannot guarantee that the components will be found, or that the dissolution spell will work.”

“Aye,” Gimli said, leaning his forearms upon the low table to study this Wizard who was so similar yet so different from Gandalf, knowing Legolas would want these answers as well just as certainly as he knew that what Morinehtar said about his beloved’s probable choice was true. “And what would those potential solutions be?”

The Blue Wizard admired the practical, problem-confronting nature of this dwarf, so similar to those he knew well within the Red Mountains.

Those who might be able to assist him.

“One is to seek Maglor yet again, to determine if he has additional means to create dissolution mechanisms.” And then Morinehtar smiled. “The other would require the assistance of your kin in the Orocarni range.”
“Hmph!” Gimli said smugly. “What are we waiting for, then? I shall go wake my elf, and we shall plan these journeys!”

“He must awake of his own accord, Āirén Dāshī. Let me review my ideas with you, and we shall determine a plan for you and your companions to follow.”

Gimli sighed in relief. Perhaps all was not lost after all.

Morinehtar’s own countenance grew concerned. “Faith in outcome is most welcome and indeed wise, but please be aware that I cannot guarantee what will occur.”

“Aye, I understand,” Gimli replied quietly, yet his hope was not quite dimmed, for he knew Mahal stood beside him in this task, a task that now seemed to have a much greater purpose than the well-being of himself and his One.

“First then,” Morinehtar said, attempting to lighten the mood, “We shall begin with the route you would follow to the Red Mountains.” He moved to search through a nearby case that was filled with such maps, easily finding what he sought and laying it upon the table they shared. “This is the path I follow there. It is a tunnel that friends of mine crafted for me long ago, and it is maintained safe by wards placed within.”

Gimli raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “The dwarves of the Red Mountains allowed you to tunnel to their mansions?”

Morinehtar smiled softly, his face wistful. “They took pity upon their aged Dusnûlukhâl and the danger of his travels – and travails – and sought to relieve his burden. I have spent many an eve in the hospitality of those mansions, and some of your kin certainly have tried to ply me with far too much ale!”

“And did they succeed?” Gimli asked with a grin.

“Certainly not,” Morinehtar said with ease, “for I am a Wizard!” while Gimli chuckled, wondering if he had ever witnessed Gandalf’s inebriation, wishing he could, for he thought it would prove to be a most entertaining sight. “Now then,” the Blue Wizard continued, “you would follow this path to the southern range, and to pass by the wards at that juncture, you must….”

And so they continued for several hours, Gimli most excited for yet another adventure, one that he was certain would produce success, Morinehtar appreciative of the momentary diversion these visitors brought to his tending to the unending ravaging the East had suffered at Sauron’s hand.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin Translations (I’ve put in hover translations as well)
fēa = soul / fēar (plural)
hrōa = body / hrōar (plural)
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Japanese Translations (courtesy of Raelien)
Yamihorobashi = "Darkness Destroyer" in Japanese (aka Darkness Slayer) =
Morinehtar = Alatar the Maia
Ryū-ningen = Were-worm
Ryoko = Japanese name meaning dragon
Weregild. (source: Ask Middle Earth blog) A weregild is an ancient German tradition that prevents feuds “in which a murder victim’s family was essentially compensated [with goods or money] for their relative’s death, generally determined based on rank.” In Tolkien's work, after the other dwarf houses assisted the Longbeards in the War of Dwarves and Orcs (the war that Thrain II declared to avenge Thror’s death), Thrain encouraged the non-Longbeard dwarves to continue the fight by reclaiming Moria, to which the other clans responded (quoting Tolkien): “Khazad-dûm was not our Fathers' house. What is it to us, unless a hope of treasure? But now, if we must go without the rewards and the weregilds that are owed to us, the sooner we return to our own lands the better pleased we shall be.”

The blog-author continues in a different vein: “[Tolkien's writing] sounds almost as if the dwarves had hoped to take some of Moria’s treasure as recompense for the dwarves that died in battle (i.e., of Dwarves and Orcs). … It could have been that, while the dwarves were known to come to each other’s aid in times of need, this practice was based on the cultural understanding that such actions would be rewarded later on, whether with treasure, or with favors owed.”

Were-worms in BOFA. I (finally!) saw BOFA and made some brief edits to the story to this point to account for the Were-worms showing up in it (as an aside, I think that's one of the few things I'll take from the movie). In BOFA, Were-worms are basically huge tunneling worms, and in this story, they're shapeshifters, able to assume various worm-forms. Each Were-worm in my head-canon can assume at least one traditional dragon form (some can fly, some not) as well as at least one long-worm form. Tatsuo, leader of the Were-worms, can assume a powerful fire-breathing dragon form.

Brief Review of the Enchantment. Only Thranduil, Radagast, and the Blue Wizards are currently aware of it. If Legolas binds with Gimli (or anyone with red hair, really), their binding could release the souls trapped in the Dead Marshes – or it could fail and end up sending both Legolas and Gimli to the Void. The souls trapped in the Dead Marshes were part of Sauron’s abandoned plan to release Morgoth from the Void via the energy created by their destruction (and this would happen if Aragorn or any other of Númenórean descent spoke the Adûnaic word Gimilnîr (meaning star-kindler or Elbereth) while in Orthanc, because Sauron’s Númenórean allies hid the second mechanism for this within the tower - the one in the East has already been activated).
Prelude as Interlude III: Shadows Within and Without

Chapter Summary

The shadows of the Last Alliance and subsequent shadows of Darkness deepen those found between the royal couple and within their hearts.

Chapter Notes

Note: Thrain, Thorin, and Dain appear in the middle of this chapter and are the line of dwarven kings that are the ancestors of their namesakes from the Hobbit (though Thorin Oakenshield and Dain II appear briefly at the end of this chapter).

Some lines near the end of this chapter reproduced from the Hobbit (novel), with occasional additions to Tolkien's text.

*Third Age 1, Emin Duir, Eryn Galen*

“My King,” Galion said with a bow, “The Queen has not exited her chambers for three cycles of Ithil. She does not eat the food I deliver, she simply stares at the book that is ever-present before her, yet even that she does not truly process.”

Upon their return from Dagorlad, the Elvenqueen had wordlessly moved into another entirely different set of chambers in the Royal Wing, only exiting when she had been summoned by Thranduil to attend specific functions within the realm. She was wan and wordless, suffering Arda’s weight in guilt, some of it deserved, most of it not. She spent her days dwelling endlessly upon her wrongs – her support of Oropher’s distrust of the Noldor over the long centuries of the Second Age, the withholding of her binding to another from Thranduil, even the loss of her sister in childbirth only two years prior, the latter being her fault not whatsoever. And her evenings were spent revisiting the horrors of the battlefield in ever-restless reverie.

The Elvenking fared little better, the decimation of his people in the Battle of the Last Alliance piling upon his own battered fëa, already withered from his learning of the Elvenqueen’s binding with another – a human! – after their betrothal vows so many centuries ago. The remembrance intertwined with his own immense guilt and the many new burdens that laid upon him, creating a darkness in his heart that crushed even the slightest spark of desire to reconcile with her, though it did not diminish his love.

And so the newly-crowned Elvenking of Eyn Galen rotely conducted his royal duties, the Elvenqueen barely so, the gulf between them so large that Galion was uncertain what might mend it. The Elvenking’s coldness towards her in the century and a half before Dagorlad had been nonsensical to the long-serving royal attendant, for Thranduil had dearly loved Gwíneth for so very long, and she had clearly grown to love him in equal measure. At the moment, Galion was one of the few elves of the kingdom who paid any heed to their now-obvious tattered relationship – in the aftermath of Dagorlad, many had their own broken hearts to envelop their minds in the wake of lives lost in Oropher and Amrod’s ill-fated assault.
Yet it was not an attempt to mend royal relations that currently brought Galion hence – he knew better than to interfere in the personal matters of the royal pair. Rather, his concern for the Elvenqueen’s welfare had grown to a point that he could remain silent no longer.

Thranduil looked over towards Galion as he spoke of his concerns, his expression striking the butler as colder than the barren North. “I am certain she can take care of herself,” he said, turning his attention back to his work, “I will not be party to her attempts to seek sympathy. She seeks to manipulate you.”

“My Lord, with all due respect, I do not agree. Rather, I think she is beside herself with grief and guilt, not to mention…”

Thranduil raised a hand to quiet him. For an instant, his heart ached at the thought of her sorrow, but he quickly stealed himself against it, his immense grief and even larger sense of failure misleading him, leading him to believe he could not trust her motives. “Ensure the best amidst our healers attend to her more thoroughly, Galion. I will request aid from Elrond if need be.”

The butler knew better than to argue any further, leaving the room silently to investigate what else the realm’s healers might be able to do for the Queen.

For his part, Thranduil stared at the wall of Oropher’s study, convinced that the Elvenqueen’s state was not a sign of heartbreak similar to his own, but simply yet another proof of her falsity towards him. She no longer had any need to hide the true nature of her feelings, not now that she had obtained the rule that she must have always sought.

He could not suffer the heart-breaking pain of her presence any longer.

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*Third Age 2, Emin Duir, Eryn Galen*

Elwen stood patiently at the door to the Elvenqueen’s chambers. She’d provided training in the healing arts to both Gwíneth and her sister Cóleth over the past several centuries, and had served alongside Gwíneth in Dagorlad. The now-Elvenqueen’s duties did not permit her to focus on study of healing as much as her now-deceased sister had, and Gwíneth’s Naneth, renowned healer in her own right, had sailed after Coleth had died during childbirth.

Elwen had been selected by Galion to serve as the Elvenqueen’s chief healer, for she was both skilled and known to the Queen, and Gwíneth would suffer the company of very few elves in the wake of the immense losses of the battlefield.

While the Elvenqueen’s manner in the century and a half leading to Dagorlad had hinted of fëa-sickness, it was entirely apparent now, and Elwen was uncertain she could rectify it.

After no entry was granted, she quietly made her way into the expansive chambers, her need to check on the Queen’s status outweighing her desire for privacy.

They were sparsely decorated, the Elvenqueen as much a true child of the forest as Thranduil was, yet without his penchant for finery in dress and decorations.

Elwen spotted her easily, sitting motionless in a chair made of finely-woven beech branches, her
silver hair in the same braids that Elwen had placed them in the day before, her sapphire eyes staring through the airy window into the forest beyond.

“Your Highness?” she spoke softly as she ensured her footfalls were audible, knowing that loud words would startle her Queen and send her into a near-panic.

A slight glance turned in Elwen’s direction as the Queen acknowledged her healer, and then returned to gazing out the window.

“My Queen, perhaps it would assist you if you talked to me of the matters that occupy your thoughts.” And your heart, Elwen thought to herself.

“There is nothing to say,” the Elvenqueen eventually said, and Elwen nearly shivered as she stood in the path of the cold gaze that was directed her way. “But perhaps you are correct in your underlying inference, that I do no good for our Kingdom by wallowing as I do.”

“I do not suggest…” Elwen began, not wanting the Elvenqueen to believe for even a moment that she was judging her in some way.

“I understand, yet there is no need.” Gwíneth looked at her healer with an entirely neutral expression, and Elwen thought for a moment that she seemed as though she was a statue. “But I should make myself of use; surely our elves deserve that of me.” And surely there must be something I will not destroy, she added to herself.

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*Third Age 247, Emin Duir, Eryn Galen*

Galion set the Elvenqueen’s tea on her desk and then stood patiently, waiting for her to acknowledge his presence. The butler knew that Thranduil pined for her still, yet for two and a half centuries she had been naught but cold and distant, and the Elvenking was convinced that she had never held him in her heart.

“Yes, Galion?” the Elvenqueen asked, wondering what the butler wanted, for Galion was rarely so reluctant to say something that was obviously on his mind.

“My Queen, I was simply thinking…”

“Yes?” The Elvenqueen asked, growing impatient.

“Ah, I am uncertain how to say this without being offensive, my Lady.”

“Fear not, Galion.” She straightened in her chair, her face impassive, studying this elf who had dedicated his long life to unyielding service of the throne.

“Very well. I know, my Lady, that our King loves you, even if he knows not how to express it to you. The war took such a toll on all of us, and you both suffer. And we both know that his stubborn pride will permit no action on his part – he will wait for three millennia until he realizes that he should attempt to try with you once more. Surely you do not want to wait that long.”

“Enough, Galion. I do not want to hear it.” She returned to her work, unable to tolerate the idea of
laying her heart bare in such a manner.

A few moments passed as Galion pondered whether to push the Elvenqueen further, yet she spoke before Galion had worked through his options. “Is there anything else, Galion?” she asked, not looking up from her work, work she had never taken interest in before Dagorlad, for she was a true elf of the wood, happiest in the trees, not an elf who sat at a desk from sunrise to far past sunset.

_They act as though they are elflings!_ he thought in frustration, opening his mouth and then closing it quickly before he would say something he would regret.

The Elvenqueen’s eyes narrowed as she briefly glanced upward, guessing the content of the butler’s thoughts, and she dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

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_Third Age 262, Emin Duir, Eryn Galen_

Thranduil’s begetting day feast was much welcomed amidst the elves of his forest, for the joy found in such revelry provided solace and light amidst the glum darkness that the shadows of Dagorlad cast across his kingdom’s densely packed trees and flowering meadows.

The Elvenking sat in a throne crafted in the lower branches of a large spruce tree, its limbs gently coaxed by Ororpher’s staff many years ago. The dancing warmed his heart – or perhaps it was his intake of copious amounts of wine, much more than he would typically permit himself at such a public gathering. He spotted one of his advisors nearby, one of the most keen of the many elves who sat upon his council, and uncharacteristically motioned for her to join him with a warm smile.

“Laigien,” he said warmly, admiring the finely woven ribbons she had braided into her hair, “It is certainly much nicer to see you here than in the council chambers, spending hours debating the benefits of storing walnuts in this or that container over the winter months.”

“Surely so,” the elleth said as she smiled, bowing to the Elvenking, her heart fluttering with the intensity of his gaze, emboldening her to ask what she might not have otherwise. “Would you do me the honor of a turn in the glade, my King?”

A shadow passed across his eyes, and he looked about to refuse, yet then just as quickly seemed to change his mind, sweeping to the center of the revelry with his advisor.

The Elvenqueen stood back amidst the dense cloak of trees surrounding the feasting glade, sorrow permeating her entire being. She removed herself back to her chambers, losing the intent she had finally mustered via Galion’s near-constant prodding, deciding she could not bear to be rejected should she request her own dance with Thranduil this eve.

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_Third Age 523, Emin Duir, Eryn Galen_
“Surely you are aware that rumors flow of you and Laigien, my Lord.” Galion notched another arrow in his bow as they practiced their aim in the royal archery field, dutifully ignoring yet another ill-targeted release on the part of his King. Skill with a bow was certainly not the Elvenking’s strength.

Thranduil had been puzzled as to the reason his butler frowned upon the idea of his planned travel to Imladris with a small group of advisors that included the elleth, yet with Galion’s words, it now made sense.

“You have no reason to fear,” he said as he smoothed the fletching on an arrow. “I would never break my vows. Ever. Ignore the rumors Galion, for they will flow evermore, and perhaps at times they may play to the throne’s advantage, even if it seems not.”

The emphasis Thranduil placed upon his words left Galion narrowing his eyes. “Do you suggest that our Queen has been untrue?” It would certainly explain the distance between them. Or had such actions resulted from it?

“If you suggest she has been with another since our vowing, certainly not.” Thranduil vehemently said. “Yet not everything is always what it seems to be, Galion.”

Thranduil’s tendency to keep his personal matters entirely to himself was exasperating, Galion thought, and he knew not what to say, beyond the refrain he had used with increasing frequency in recent years. “Regardless of what you mean, I am certain she loves you, my Lord, and I am also certain that she awaits you to show her so in turn.”

The cold glare that was sent his way led the butler to curtly return to his own target practice. Yet perhaps Galion had a point, Thranduil thought, for King and Queen did not best serve their kingdom by maintaining relatively complete distance from one another.

And so the next day he summoned the Elvenqueen to join him for afternoon tea, intent to form some semblance of a working relationship with her, regardless of the loss of their more intimate one. Even a return to speaking of mundane items, a rarity between them in the recent centuries, would be an improvement from the stark silence that defined all they now were.

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Third Age 1087, Emin Duir, Eryn Galen

“It is indeed a pity to see the Shadow take root in what was once our home.” Thranduil pondered the changes wrought upon Amon Lanc as he sipped his wine, a newly discovered Dorwinion vintage that he’d obtained from the tradespeople who sought passage through his forest on their way from the northern mannish settlements to those located west of the Blue Mountains.

The Elvenqueen and Galion sat across from him, knowing that Thranduil and his council had decided that it was time to relocate once more. A set of caves had been scouted that would provide the added security that they currently found lacking.

“I will maintain the elves that would wish to stay, given your leave, my Lord.” The Elvenqueen offered impassively. “There are those who do not want to leave.”

“And do you wish to stay as well?” Thranduil asked in a most neutral manner.
The Elvenqueen stared at the floor for long moments. “No,” she said finally, her emotions unreadable to her King as she decided she would be honest, even if Thranduil had no desire to hear her words. If she did not, surely Galion would lecture each of them about their relationship yet again, for he had grown much bolder and firmer after his first tentative attempts at bridging the chasm between them those centuries ago. “I would like to go with you.”

He nodded in his most formal manner, and then stood to sweep off the dias, beckoning her to follow him with a wave of his ring-decked hand, his motivation much the same as hers. “So it shall be. And perhaps you can work on convincing those others to join us, for I do not think it in our best interest to split our population.” She nodded as he continued. “Come, I have ideas for the delving of these caverns that I would show you.”

And so it was that even as the shadow of Dol Goldur took root, the Elvenking dared to begin to hope that perhaps, just perhaps, that which he had buried in the depths of his heart could be coaxed to shed its dead weight and begin to grow, much like a withered sapling fighting to shed the blight of Darkness.

Third Age 1101, Elvenking’s Halls, Mirkwood

The building of the Halls in the northeast quadrant of the forest had proceeded in a notably straightforward manner, Thranduil impressed with the assistance he received from nearby dwarf houses in the delving – the dwarves, in turn, most satisfied with the generous compensation they received for a well-loved task.

Thranduil was not his father, and held no particular degree of enmity towards Aulë's children, even as some other elves of his forest did.

One morning after his wood’s elves had settled in his new Halls, Thranduil was interrupted in his review of recent council documents by a soft knock upon the door of his private study.

It was Laigien, the advisor of whom rumors continued to murmur, carrying a routine missive from the kingdom’s dwarven contractors. “I hardly think it was necessary for you to deliver this to my chambers,” Thranduil frowned at the elleth before him. “Surely it could have waited until our council meeting.”

She cleared her throat. “Well yes, my King, yet as always I strive to act in a manner that shall bring you the most convenience. May I take a moment of your time, and review with you these designs for the Dagorlad remembrance hall?”

Thranduil bid her to enter, and they sat on opposite sides of his desk, the Elvenking perusing the plans.

Time had faded the kingdom-wide horror of all that was lost in that charge to a keen sense of pride in their sacrifice. Many had come to the conclusion that the ill-fated advance was not so ill-fated whatsoever, Sauron’s equivalent number of losses permitting Gil-Galad’s forces to succeed where Oropher and Amrod had not.

Eventually Thranduil pushed the plans to the side. “Those are fine,” he said curtly. “You may proceed with these, after we review in council, of course.”
She did not rise to leave, as he would have expected her to, and so he sent a questioning look in her direction. “Is there something else?”

She cleared her throat, choosing her words from several well-practiced speeches, knowing there was no need to be indirect, for Thranduil had little patience for such things. “My King, I am keenly aware of the loneliness that encompasses you, that has followed you these many years.”

He responded only with a raised brow.

She grew bold enough to say what she had wanted to for so many centuries. “And I would seek to relieve it for you.”

He had not been expecting that, for while he was not unaware of her desires, he had thought they were something she would never plant to act upon, not truly. Yet for once he was caught off guard, her lips tasting his before he had even realized what was occurring.

She drew back to attempt to judge his expression, but it was infinitely challenging to read. “I would serve you, my Lord, in whatever way you desire,” she said somewhat breathlessly, and before he could respond, she kissed him again.

He quickly came to his senses and pushed her away, demanding an explanation.

“I only wish to serve you my Lord, I meant no offense.”

“And being a breaker of vows is not an offense to you?” He asked quizzically, not comprehending her manner of thought.

“Perhaps your vows are already broken, my King, for should your Queen not serve you in all ways? Since she is unwilling, perhaps you may look to those who are?”

His eyes widened at her boldness, and he insisted that she leave the room, going to great lengths to ensure distance between them for some time hence.

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**Third Age 1607, Elvenking’s Halls, Mirkwood**

“And to what do I owe this pleasure, Radagast?” Thranduil asked the Brown Wizard, glancing at his grey-clad companion.

“First,” Radagast responded excitedly, “let me tell you that I have removed the shadow of blight from three acres of the wood several leagues from Dol Goldur. Second, I have brought you a gift!”

Thranduil could not hide his appreciative pleasure, for Radagast’s gifts tended to be ones that he and his elves viewed as grand. They generally took the form of saplings or clippings of plants from the perimeter of the previous center of their kingdom, flora that they had thought was lost forever to the ever-encroaching darkness.

“Very well, but first, would you introduce me to your companion?” the Elvenking asked, tone formal as ever but eyes belying his curiosity.

“Oh, of course,” Radagast said apologetically. “This is Gandalf. He is one of my order. A most fine
wizard, and indeed a friend to your kingdom.”

Thranduil nodded formally in welcome, having heard of this wizard via a communication from Elrond.

“So,” said Radagast after niceties were exchanged, “Let us go and look at the gift I brought you.”

Gandalf began to chuckle, and Thranduil sent a questioning expression his way.

“Surely you are a tender of animals as well as the woods, for not only flora must escape the darkness of Dol Goldur?” the Grey Wizard asked with mirth filling his entire being.

“Animals?” Thranduil asked, his ever-dim mood slightly lifted by these two – odd - companions.

“Why yes,” Radagast said. “I’ve brought you a herd of elk.”

Third Age 1977, northwestern boundary of Mirkwood

The Elvenqueen’s dreamscapes had grown restless of late, images of well-preserved faces floating in the Dead Marshes moving from her time in reverie to become intrusions in her waking world as well. And so she had traveled with her healer, Elwen, to the Western boundary of Mirkwood, hoping that a meditative retreat would assist her in the same way such things used to in the millennia gone by.

It was not just her nightmares she sought to escape, but the voice of an elderly human robed in blue, whispering to her of fëar trapped within the Marshes and her ability to save them, and she had finally reached the point where she thought she would go mad.

Elwen and the Elvenqueen sat in a talan amidst several others at the edge of the forest, built for the use of the border patrol when they were in the vicinity but now occupied by the royal guard that had accompanied her on her sojourn.

The Queen and her Healer sat and gazed at the midday sun, having finished morning meditations and their midday meal. “Do you think it is true?” Gwíneth asked as she twisted a leaf between her fingers.

“That your dreams reflect reality, that there are fëar trapped in the Dead Marshes, tortured souls that you could somehow release?” Elwen had grown close to the Queen over the near-two millennia she had served at her side, and she knew that the Queen appreciated honesty above all else. “No, I do not. I think it is your guilt – your unwarranted guilt – that leads your mind to suggest that this has come to pass. Those fëar traveled to Mandos – or remain, should some have refused Mandos’ call.”

Gwíneth shook her head slightly, her generally impassive face cracking for a moment, showing a storm of emotions underneath. “I am well-aware of your view on my dreams. No, I mean the Elvenking. And Laigien. Do you think the rumors are true? That they dally with one another?”

Elwen had been preparing herself to answer such a question for centuries, dreading the time when it would come, yet somehow she had hoped it would not come to pass, for she truly did not know how to answer. There were rumors, but as was the case with all gossip, it was a challenge in itself to know what was true and what was false. “I know not, my Queen.”
She would want it to be so, that is clear. She would take my place at his side if she could, and perhaps he wishes it would be so as well.” For even though she was his Queen by name, she was not by his side, not truly.

Even the mild thawing of the royal relationship had only produced daily formal discussion – it had not gone any further than that, and Gwíneth had begun to wonder at the cause. Thranduil had seemed to come to a point of peace about her binding with her mannish love, forgiven her even, yet he made no attempt to move things beyond casual discourse.

For years – centuries – she had ignored the rumors, but as Thranduil’s attitude towards her changed, she wondered if they were indeed true, for that would certainly explain why he seemed to have no desire take their relationship beyond a casual acquaintance.

“Yet our Elvenking does not shirk from what lays before him, my Queen,” Elwen said thoughtfully. “I think if he had chosen such a path, he would have told you so, or sought your agreement. No, I think he is not untrue to you, even if it seems he might be.”

Gwíneth was somewhat heartened by Elwen’s words, and turned her gaze to the land beyond the forest once more, finding some solace in the constant murmurings of the wood and plains beyond.

“My Queen,” the voice of the Captain of the Royal Guard drifted from the ground below, interrupting her near-reverie, “the border patrol has reported the travel of a large group of humans from the south.”

“Are they armed?” she asked coolly.

“No, my Lady. They seem to be migrating, should that be something humans do.”

The Elvenqueen smiled faintly. “Surely so, for if we do, others of Middle-Earth would as well.”

“Yes, my Lady. I think it may be the humans who fought against the forces of the East in the Battle of the Plains two decades ago. Do you wish us to make our presence known?”

She shook her head, seeing no need, and as Frumgar of the Éothéod led his people to the land north of Mirkwood, where he would found Framsburg, she was struck by memories unbidden, for these humans looked so different than her long-lost mannish love, yet so similar.

Perhaps Eru had intended that she only bind with her mannish love, and her lack of abidance by his wishes was the cause of her current state of blunted pain.

And if Thranduil was indeed seeking favors from another, perhaps it was simply a just lesson served to her in the most painful way the Valar could devise.

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Third Age 1984, Elvenking’s Halls, Mirkwood

The party of dwarves was led through the forest by Thranduil’s border guard, exhausted from their travel, some near-heartbroken from the loss of their life’s work in Khazad-Dûm three years earlier, deemed lost to the annals of history when Durin’s Bane was awoken.
The horror was near too much to bear, for as much as stories of the defeat of Morgoth’s lieutenants spanned the ages, the destruction wrought by flame and fire was at times forgotten.

“And how do these ones fare?” Thranduil asked Galion, his gaze keen as he awaited the arrival of the most recent group of refugees.

“Worse than the last group, my Lord, for the losses within their families were keen, and they tarried due to their need to heal wounds before travel North could be undertaken.”

The approaching group could now be seen in the distance, a large party of dwarves that showed little sign of any exhaustion, and soon enough Thranduil found himself face-to-face with their leader.

“Thráin, at your service.” The dwarrow bowed in the characteristic way of Durin’s folk.

“You are young, are you not?” Thranduil noted, for he knew that dwarves of age grew beards, and this one had little but stubble.

Thráin feigned offense even as he snickered, for such directness was one thing a dwarf appreciated, and this King appeared to have it in spades. “And you, King of the Wood, have something to learn of manners.”

At first Thranduil’s face was impassive, Galion holding his breath as he wondered if this banter would produce an untoward diplomatic event, but soon enough the Elvenking began to smile. “You, I think I shall like. Follow me, for I would like to hear tell of your wanderings and plans for the future.” Thranduil turned to Galion. “See to it that all are well-fed, replacement clothes provided, and shown to the accommodations we have set aside for them.” His Halls were vast, and there was more than enough room for many a visitor to stay.

Thranduil was more than familiar with what it was like to lose a large portion of his people to the forces of Darkness. Regardless of the enmity towards dwarves within his kingdom, enmity that was born on long-ago resentments that had little to do with his folk, he had decided help these folk regain their footing, Longbeards, Broadbeams, and Firebeards of Moria reuniting in his forest and determining their next step. For as much as Galadriel and Celeborn might turn their eyes the other way for now, he would not.

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Third Age 1999, Under the Mountain

“This is an impressive kingdom,” Thranduil said diplomatically. It had far too much stone and not nearly enough natural flow of roots and plants. But aesthetically, he supposed, it was impressive. If one liked things that dwarves liked.

There was certainly one dwarrow love that Thranduil shared – and in that shared love of gemstones and gold, amidst the joint loss of so many of their respective folk to the forces of Darkness, Thranduil had developed a strange yet strong alliance with the now-King Under the Mountain.

“Aye,” Thráin said. “And I know you think this realm is not nearly as lovely as your quaint caverns, but there is much treasure to be mined here, my friend. You should see what we have discovered thus far, even with so few of my kin joining me and so many traveling forth to the Grey Mountains!”
“Oh?” Thranduil said, attempting to appear disinterested, yet the dwarven king knew his counterpart too well to be fooled – although he was filled with a grudging approval of the Elvenking’s ability to manage his facial expressions in such a manner.

“Come, I will show you!” He led the Elvenking to a storage area at the bottom of the Lonely Mountain, and Thranduil had to admit he was amazed at the sight, unable to hide his appreciative delight.

“You have mined all of this already?”

“Aye, we have. And look at this,” he said near-reverently as he carefully lifted a large gemstone that was quite unlike anything Thranduil had ever seen.

Thranduil reached to touch it, drawn by its glowing light more than any gemstone he had ever encountered, yet Thráin protectively drew it out of his reach, admitting as much. “I am possessive of this one, my friend. I think it shall become the stone of my House. The Arkenstone, I am considering naming it.”

I see,” the Elvenking said, and it was true, for he could both understand the desire to safeguard such a wondrous jewel, part of his mind whispering that he might want to possess it for himself as though the gem itself may have been speaking.

“Now, tell me how things are with your Love.” Thráin slapped the Elvenking on the back in his friendly manner, wanting to change the topic of their conversation. Thráin looked at the King of the Woodland Realm thoughtfully. “Why you take no formal action in your romantic life, that I will never understand. You allow countless rumors to circulate around your forest without being driven to any sort of action. While it is certainly very different, you were not passive when negative words were flung in my direction.”

“That is different, Thráin, for rumors of the goings-on of the royal bedroom persist regardless of the one it is or is not shared with.”

Thráin pretended not to see the expression of longing that briefly crossed Thranduil’s face as he spoke. “Again, while it is different, the vitriolic comments about my race within your realm and vice versa persist as well. I know you are not fooled into thinking all is well in that regard and that nonmanagement is the best course, so I reject your point.” He returned to sorting his treasures, pulling out a chest of sapphires and emeralds, intent on trying a different tactic. “I will wager you these that you do not approach your Love and take needed steps within the next year.”

“And if I lose?” Thranduil stared at the gems, delighted by their apparent perfect quality.

Thráin shrugged. “Then you will not receive these gems from me. And I know that you would want to have them. I will even have them set into a mithril crown for you by my best smith, a crown of your own design, of course.”

Thranduil sighed as Thráin smiled, the dwarven king knowing the elven one could not resist such a prize, especially if it might yield an even greater one at the end, an eternity with the one he knew was his true heart’s desire, however much he had tried to suppress the need to act more firmly.

“Now let me show you this,” Thráin continued, opening a chest filled with diamonds. “I am going to craft these into jewelry for my one, for nothing expresses our love for one another more than something worn on the body such as this.” He looked thoughtfully at the Elvenking. “Perhaps we should have you craft something for your Love. To court her. A matching set, for the pair of you to wear.”
“She is a wood-elf – like most of my people, she cares little for finery.”

“Bah!” Thráin barked. “She would not appreciate a visible sign of your regard? I do not believe it. Come, choose some gemstones and metal from this pile over here – it is my own harvesting of the best of this Mountain – and we shall go to my workshop.”

“I do need to return to Mirkwood within three turns of the sun,” Thranduil noted hesitantly.

“Aye, but such crafting will take even a lesser amount of time. Or do you balk at the challenge, embarrassed to demonstrate your novice skills in my presence? Fear not! Every craftsman needs to start from the point at which they are at.”

A finely raised eyebrow greeted the King Under the Mountain. “I am no dwarf.”

“Aye, but you could stand to learn from us. Or at least from my words.”

Thranduil knew in his heart that Thráin was correct on that point. His skill in gem- and metal-work? That, he was not at all certain of, suspecting it would be on par with his archery skills.

Third Age 1999, Elvenking’s Halls, Mirkwook, several months later

“My Queen, are you certain you will not come to the feast? The stars light the glade most majestically this eve, the scents of the forest are keen – surely you do not want to miss such a wondrous night as this.”

The Elvenqueen looked to Galion as she sat on the floor of her sparse talan, an airy structure that permitted oneness with the tree that held her close to its heart and provided solace that she could not find elsewhere. “No, I think I prefer to stay here.”

“Yet the King would request that you attend, my Lady.”

“He has not missed my presence for many past events, Galion, I certainly do not see how this would be different.” She sighed, wishing her words had not sounded so bitter, for she and Thranduil had painstakingly carved an amicable if emotionally distant relationship. Yet she knew there was no joy to be found in watching Thranduil dancing with Laigien, the advisor who seemed to watch his every step.

“As you wish,” Galion eventually murmured as he took his leave, wishing there was more that he could do to heal all that was wrong with the sad, broken creature that sat before him. Yet she had healed somewhat, he had to admit, and if she found solace where she sat now, ever-apart from others as she typically was, could he truly argue with that?

Gwíneth found the stars particularly entrancing on this night, and for hours she watched them trace their slow paths in the sky as she listened to the background song of the forest she so loved.

The sound of an elf entering her talan yet again came to her ears, and she did not turn to see who it was, for it could only be Galion or Elwen, and Elwen was not one to interfere in her activities. “Galion, if you bring more mint tea, I shall surely partake of it, but my refusal to accompany you to the glade still stands.” She spoke fondly, smiling as she thought of the lengths the butler had gone to
in his attempt to see to her happiness.

“I bring no tea, nor do I seek to bring you to the glade.” Thranduil’s voice wafted towards her, and she froze, for it was entirely unexpected.

“My King,” she said as she gathered her wits about her and stood to acknowledge him, “what brings you to my talan?”

He looked at her with an unreadable expression. “I have not seen you for two turns of Ithil, and I wondered as to how you were.”

“I am well, my Lord.”

He took a breath, preparing himself to speak his next words. “I am bound to seek you and ask for your leave.”

Her heart sank, wondering if this was finally her moment of reckoning, the time when he would dissolve their vows and seek to bind himself to Laigien, the elleth who had pursued him for so long, the one that rumors spoke of gracing his bed.

Her pride flared then, and she became uncharacteristically rash in a vain attempt to hide her pain. “I will not hold you to a false promise, as you deem it, so my leave is granted.”

He frowned, not understanding her meaning.

“If you desire another, I am not to stand in your way, for such is not my place. You are King of this forest, and you may do as you will. Not even the Valar may stand in your way.”

His frown deepened, and his cheeks grew red, the shame he’d felt at Thràin’s words about his lack of action regarding rumors of his supposed bedchamber companion returning tenfold.

“I assure you, I have not been untrue to our vows, not in any manner, even if gossip amidst the forest suggests otherwise. Our binding cannot be undone.”

A brief flash of hope flared in her chest, quickly dimmed by his unreadable expression and the mitigating sorrow that forever cloaked her being.

“And so you seek my leave to dally with another?” she asked coldly.

He said nothing, simply pulling a velvet-wrapped package out of his voluminous robes, handing it to her wordlessly.

Was it some decree that he would have her assent to with her signature, written in the contractual manner of that dwarf he had taken an inexplicable liking to?

She pulled the ribbon that tied the package closed, peeling back the layer of velvet, and within were a pair of simple, somewhat crudely designed necklaces of mithril, small leaf-shaped amethysts forming the matching pendants.

“I would court you anew,” Thranduil said softly. “If you would have me.”

She touched one of the jewels with a shaking finger, having difficulty finding words. “I would.”

It would not be easy, they both knew, but perhaps if they truly tried, they might have a chance to forge something anew.
“Surely the punishment was a bit harsh.” Thranduil sat in the chair Thráin had crafted for him, one carved to the tall Elvenking’s specifications.

Thráin smoothed the braids of his beard, woven intricately with elaborate designs of jewels and fine metals. “Surely the kingdoms of men would do no differently. They would find such action entirely fitting.”

Thranduil shuddered slightly, not quite understanding this way of mortals, the taking of lives as metered justice for crimes committed.

“You banish elves to the outskirts of your forest – surely that is similar?” Thráin asked most seriously. “Especially if being away from their wood and their kin can wound their souls?”

“Perhaps,” Thranduil said reluctantly, and then the Elvenking raised his chin defiantly. “No, I think it is not. None have withered such as you describe. Yet surely the interests of the Crown must be foremost in our minds.”

Yet his still did not quite understand the need for such deathly retaliation against Fram, Lord of the Éothéod, for his keeping of all dwarven treasure mined by Thráin's kin. Yet Fram kept the entire hoard that had been gained by Scatha in the dragon’s attack in the Grey Mountains two decades prior, and battle between mannish and dwarven realms had resulted.

He had forgotten any lessons learned across history of dragon-thrall infesting treasure hoards.

Galion paced restlessly in the hallway that led to the royal chambers, awaiting news.

The Elvenqueen’s sister had passed away in childbirth, and such was rare amongst elves. All in the kingdom waited with bated anticipation – and most harbored worry as to potential outcome.

Yet his worry was for naught, as he was the first of Thranduil’s subjects to be summoned to gaze upon the gift that had been granted to the now-reconciled royal pair, a tiny, perfect elfling that they named Legolas.

The near-century of the royal couple’s complicated reconciliation had been marked with both highs and lows. Yet it seemed that whatever had driven them apart was no longer a wedge between them. Never had this been more clear than now, Thranduil tenderly embracing his Queen as she held their elfling with an expression of uncomplicated love, a sight the butler had truly given up on ever seeing.

He had never been more gladdened to be proven wrong.
“Your reverie grows restless of late,” Thranduil said with concern etched upon his face, gently touching the brow of his Queen as they lay in bed, the stillness of a cold winter night settled around them. “Do you dream of the Last Alliance again?”

He thought he might never forgive himself for not standing by her side during that time, his eyes closing briefly as he rued how he had worsened her pain.

“No,” she said with such trepidation that he was fearful to hear what would come next. “I think I had another vision. Of the Blue Wizard summoning me East, to free the fëar held within the Dead Marshes.”

“Should I call for Elwen?” he asked, not knowing what else to do, having no desire to start yet another argument about the veracity of what she was experiencing.

He attributed all of it to the trauma of the Last Alliance while she attributed it to reality, and they could find no common ground.

She simply shook her head, wanting to tell him that she would resist for his sake but knowing she would not, not again, for she had no desire to crack the tenuous foundation of their renewed relationship.

They sat in uneasy silence until her hand caressed his face. “Perhaps you should distract me, my Lord,” she said as she began to unbutton his night-tunic.

He was more than happy to oblige, and vowed to himself that nothing would part them again.

The passage of Thranduil and his small band of warriors to Shénmì de Sěnlín was relatively uneventful, particularly as a good portion of the journey was made via river ride, a favor granted to the Elvenking by the Dorwinion traders with whom his kingdom did much business.

He sought his Queen, knowing she had succumbed to the visions that haunted her and had traveled East, searching for the Blue Wizards in her misguided hope that they would provide information about the path to releasing the fëar of the elves trapped in the Dead Marshes.

None in the kingdom aside from her believed such a thing to be true, yet somehow she had rallied a small group of elves to travel in secret with her. None of the elves of his forest knew of the reason for her departure, nor, perhaps, that she had even gone.

It was the leaving of Legolas that made no sense to him, for his Queen’s love for their elfling was endless, rivaled only by his own. Traveling away from young ones simply wasn’t done in their
realm, not unless the need was dire.

Yet she apparently believed just such a thing, and he knew why. Upon their reconciliation, her fëa had simply not recovered as his had, for her self-blame for the losses suffered during the Last Alliance was nonsensical yet unmatched, and of late it seemed the only thing that might heal her soul and mind would be righting the wrongs done.

Hence her belief – mistaken on two counts – that she could free trapped souls.

And so he traveled with a band of warriors Eastward, intent to bring her back home.

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“You cannot leave!” Rómestámo’s voice thundered through the air a mere week later, the counter-enchantment successfully cast. There was no need for these elves to stay, not truly, but his rage and spite overcame him, his desire for more clouded his vision. “I forbid it!”

Yet Thranduil and his Queen escaped his grasp, even as the Blue Wizard sent scores of warriors born of enchantment to block them. The Elvenking’s warriors fought valiantly, each and every single one eventually perishing in the fight to permit the escape of their King and Queen. Thranduil had easily broken the Wizard’s hold on his Queen’s mind, yet he would not come to believe that she had not at least partially participated in the decisions made. The idea of such influence was foreign to him, for he had never experienced susceptibility to it. So while he rescued her for the love he bore her, that he would always bear for her, he knew he would never forgive her for offering her son’s soul to destruction regardless of how utterly despondent she would become over what she had done.

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Third Age 2104, Mirkwood

“You would forsake your memory of your son? Of us?” Thranduil could hardly believe what he was hearing. He had not forgiven her for what had occurred, yet he could not bear to lose her once more. What she wanted to do– it was simply unfathomable to him.

Yet his Queen sat before him, wringing her hands, her mind more unquiet that it had ever been, her fëa filled with a shadow that grew by the day, and he knew not else what to do, for the thought of losing her to Mandos was worse still.

She looked at him with a fierceness that replaced the now-typical vacant expression. “I cannot sail West, I cannot. And I cannot live with my guilt or this torment any longer.” He knew that was true, for she literally clung to life as it was, and not even Elrond’s suggestions had succeeded in ridding her of her tormenting thoughts and ever-worse reverie.

She grasped Thranduil’s hands as tears streamed down her face. “Surely love cannot be erased by a spell? Memories may be wiped clean, but the bonding of our fëar would survive. We would survive. And even if I remember nothing of Legolas, my bond with him would not be erased. It would endure.” The hope in her eyes was heart-breaking, but it simply reminded him of what had brought them to this juncture.

“Yet I would remember,” he said tonelessly, and then his ire grew. “I would remember that your actions, your choices, risk our son’s soul traveling to the Void. The Void, Gwîneth! With Morgoth!”
“And so do you not see why I must do this?” she whispered in agony, and even as he would choose differently, he could not think of an alternative, and he would not submit her to a repeat of the endless shame she had experienced after Dagorlad, for if that nearly broke her, this surely would.

And so the Elvenqueen gave a small chest for Elwen to safeguard, with specific instructions to present it to Legolas if he betrothed, for she would ensure that he would be aware of what had occurred and the risk that binding would present to him – and that he would know of her regret and love.

The memory-erasing spell was successful, erasing her recollections of her travel East, her dealings with the Blue Wizards, and so very much more – so potent that it spread throughout the river by which the casting was done and wiped memories of those who came in contact with it, its water now flowing as black as the magic which infiltrated it.

Yet it did not heal her in quite the manner that she had hoped for, and instead her heart quickly hardened beyond recognition. Not even Radagast’s assistance could melt it.

And so Thranduil sent her to live in a remote area of the forest under the guise of protecting her from the Blue whom he believed sought her still. But in truth it was to protect himself and his son, for neither of them could bear her cold rejection, regardless of whether he could forgive her or not.

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Third Age 2190, Under the Mountain

Thranduil nodded once in acknowledgement of the new King Under the Mountain, struck by the similarity in appearance between the now-deceased elder dwarf and his son.

“King Thranduil, I am pleased to see you pay your respects. My father was quite fond of you.” Thorin held no great love for the Elvenking, finding their cultural differences too great, and he had certainly never quite understood why his Adad had developed his casual camaraderie with one who seemed so stiff and formal – and an elf, at that.

Yet the relationship had dimmed in recent years, Thráin becoming more possessive of the Arkenstone and the treasure Under the Mountain, at times convinced the Elvenking wanted it all for himself.

Yet Thorin knew none of those thoughts that Thráin had held within his own mind, and as he heard more of the greater wealth held within the Grey Mountains being mined by his folk, he moved his kingdom, the Lonely Mountain alone once more.

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Third Age 2351, Elvenking’s Halls

“What brings you here?” Thranduil asked in his most formal manner, ignoring the leap in his chest as he gazed upon his One.
The Elvenqueen glanced coolly at the advisors seated around the council table.

“I would speak with you alone, my King,” she said firmly.

He looked at her for some moments. “Leave us,” he said, and his advisors smoothly rose and exited the room without looking back.

All but Laigien, the elleth placing a comforting hand on Thranduil’s shoulder as she walked past him, and the Elvenqueen raised a brow at the sight.

“So the rumors are true? You have taken a consort?” She asked, her voice dripping frost.

He would not dignify the question with a response, he decided, for she knew him not at all to think he break their vows, no matter how shattered they were. And so he simply responded with a query of his own, his tone belying his frustration, “What brings you here?”

“As you know, my guards rescued an elfling in the forest. She has grown quite attached to me, and would not travel here without me at her side.”

He nodded, for the small party that had been attacked by orcs had been a shocking event in the kingdom. Travel had been safe in the past three centuries, Gandalf’s freeing of Dol Goldur from the Shadow of Darkness producing a well-appreciated peace within and without the forested kingdom.

Since then, no others had let their guard down in such a way. It had been a difficult lesson to learn.

“While my region of the forest is perfectly safe, indeed safer than yours in some ways, I think it is not the ideal location for the raising on an elfling.”

“So you would have someone here raise her?” He asked, searching his memory for the young one’s name.

She responded before he found what he sought. “Yes. Her name is Tauriel.”

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Third Age 2462, Elvenking’s Halls

“The council will be held early next year, and Galadriel and Celeborn would like you to attend.” Radagast and Gandalf had traveled to the Elvenking’s Halls, hoping their joint presence would persuade an inexplicably reluctant Thranduil to attend.

They knew not of his travel Easterward and encounter with the Blue Wizards, nothing of the enchantment that had been cast upon Legolas. And he would not tell them, for while he knew the both of them well, he was uncertain he could trust either of them.

Not after what had happened with the wizardry-gone-wrong under Eastern skies.

And so Thranduil smiled slightly, his countenance as coolly royal as ever, wearing well the mask that only dropped when he spent time with his heir. “I will consider it, but do not count on my presence.”

“Surely your intimate knowledge of the growing threat of Dol Goldur would be of much value to the council – and much value to your realm. This council cannot succeed without you, Thranduil.”
Gandalf spoke firmly, and Thranduil wondered what sort of trickery was at play, for with every word he felt himself being persuaded further.

“And another of our order will be there,” Radagast said. “He has much to offer in the discussion, for his knowledge is expansive and his wisdom clear.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow. “And who would this be?”

“Saruman the White, Head of our Order. He has returned from the East, where he has studied ways to battle the darkness for many centuries.”

The Elvenking studied the fine rings decorating his fingers, hiding the smirk that had been born upon his lips. “The Head of your Order, you say. Returned from the East? Dare I say he studied with the Blue Wizards?” Thranduil knew it was so, but was curious of the extent of the knowledge of this pair.

“We have not talked much with him yet, so I am not certain, but I would assume so.” Radagast answered.

“Well,” Thranduil said, “I shall give you my answer before the council adjourns.”

He already knew what that answer would be, and not even Elrond could persuade him otherwise. For nothing would lead him to have dealings with this White Wizard who had been associated with the Blue. Not when he knew what wizard-thrall could do to an elf, a thrall that the others were under, or would be very soon.

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Third Age 2569, Elvenking’s Halls

Thranduil sat in his favored arboretum, the scent of irises a welcome counterpoint to his growing ill mood. Radagast’s messenger bird had conveyed his imminent return – nearly eight months ago. While he knew the Brown Wizard was one prone to distraction, the Elvenking had grown worried that it was not a sidetracking interest in flora or fauna that had produced this delay in his return to the forest.

Perhaps something untoward had befallen Radagast’s journey Eastward in search of a means to break the enchantment rendered upon Legolas. Thranduil sighed as he absentmindedly stroked the richly hued petals that stood before him, wondering if he should have refused the Brown Wizard’s offer of assistance.

It was not the first time he entertained such thoughts, not was it the first time he was distracted from them by an interruption. Yet this one was most welcome, for when Galion told him a visitor had arrived and requested audience, Thranduil was most relieved to lay eyes upon him.

“Did you learn of anything?” The Elvenking asked almost breathlessly, his heart racing in his chest, seeing no purpose in delaying what he most wanted to know.

“Not only learned,” Radagast said, waving a finger in the air, “but got!” He placed a package upon the floor, and began rummaging through it. Countless items were pulled out – stones of various types, none valuable to Thranduil’s eyes, pressed leaves, strange greenery, pieces of lembas bread.
“Ah!” he said after the pile had grown impossibly large. “Look!” The Brown Wizard held a simple chest in his hands. “You may need to close your eyes, for it is bright!”

He opened the lid, and the glimmer was indeed blinding. Entranced, Thranduil moved his hand toward the marvelous white gems that sat within the chest, small in size yet seemingly countless in number. “No! Don’t touch them!” Radagast squealed, and the Elvenking quickly pulled his hand away.

“They are enchanted, and Rómestámo said it would be best that they not be touched by elven hands, at least for long periods of time, for he is not entirely certain that it would be a benign event.”

“Of what do you speak, exactly?” He was not entirely pleased that the Blue Wizard who had cast the enchantment was the one who played a role in negating it, for he trusted Radagast’s other Blue kinsman far more.

“These are white gems of starlight, and believe me, Rómestámo and Maglor went to great lengths to craft them, for capturing the light within them was no easy task. That very light contains the power to break the enchantment upon your son.”

Thranduil closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief, tears nearly coming to his eyes. He did not trust Rómestámo, and he trusted Maglor even less, given his past deeds, yet he knew with certainty that Radagast would not mislead him. If the Brown Wizard believed in this solution, he would as well.

“We simply need to have a dwarf craft these into a necklace….”

“What?” Thranduil interrupted, his eyes flashing open.

“Oh, it need not be a necklace, it could be a bracelet, a circlet, an anklet…I suppose they could be held within one’s pockets, but that seems a tad difficult if it is a binding of which we speak, as I imagine clothes would be taken off, well at least most clothes…”

“No, no, no, that is not what I refer to. Why the dwarf?” And then he recalled Radagast’s words about the gems being touched, and knew the answer, at least in part.

“Dwarves craft such jewelry well – and they are more resistant to spells. They will not seep the light from them with repeated handling.”

For a moment, Thranduil was struck by how it made perfect sense – and how this situation seemed entirely nonsensical.

“There is one thing, however,” Radagast began softly.

“A certain type of metal must be used?” Thranduil ventured.

“Well, that as well – mithril, they said. No, I refer to the use of the gems.” Radagast hesitated, and in that instant Thranduil knew this solution would not be a simple one.

“Your son can use the gems and crafted jewelry in a very specific manner during his binding, to protect his fëa and that of his partner, and the enchantment will be broken – his joining of souls with another will not trigger the release of your trapped kindred in the Dead Marshes into the horrific mechanism contained within Orthanc.”

“And?”
“Well, it is an or, actually. Or the white gems can be used to free the souls from the Dead Marshes. To travel unto Mandos’ Halls, or wander Middle-Earth.”

Thranduil released the breath he had been holding. “The latter option sounds perfect. If the souls are released, his future binding would have no disastrous consequence.”

“Well, it is not entirely so. They are concerned that his binding would set events in motion, yet only his soul and that of his partner would be vulnerable.”

It was almost too ludicrous to be believed, although Thranduil had learned that suspension of belief was the best course of action when Wizards were concerned.

“So we will split the gems, then,” he offered, and from the resulting look upon Radagast’s face, he knew that option was not a possibility.

“No, they would not have enough power then. Not to worry, though! We have this option, and they will surely continue to research others. Although the East is a … smidge overrun by darkness, so it may be some time….”

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Third Age 2569, Grey Mountains

“I will happily have one of my folk craft these into a necklace for you, as the tales of your kinship with Thráin the Old, grandsire of my own great-grandsire, have wafted to my ears.” King Dáin stood before the Elvenking, gazing at the glittering gems held within the wooden chest that the Elvenking held in his hands. “Do you have any design specifications?”

Thranduil pulled a drawing from his robe, and Dáin chuckled at the sight. It was as crude as one that a young dwarrowling would produce, and sweet all the same.

“It shall be ready within the year,” Dáin said, “perhaps two. I shall have my son Thrór craft it himself, for his skill exceeds any of my other smiths. I will send word when it is ready.”

Yet such word did not come, for the next year the cold-drakes of the North attacked the dwarven stronghold, the resulting siege making all aside from survival irrelevant.

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Third Age 2589, Grey Mountains

“Their war has raged for nineteen years, my King,” Thranduil’s Captain of the Guard said emotionlessly. “The dwarves must surrender their locale to the dragons which beleaguer them. There is no purpose in assisting them, for we could not overcome what they are.”

Dain had requested aid from the Kingdom, for his supplies grew ever more difficult to replenish and the will of his people to withstand the siege had grown ever-thinner.
Yet Thranduil knew he could not stand by and refuse aid, knowing it was not requested lightly. And he was also well-aware that his priceless necklace and white gems lay within the dwarves halls – he would not see them fall into a dragon’s hoard. And so the Elvenking Thranduil disregarded the advice of his Captain and marched upon the Grey Mountains, the great host of elves taking the cold-drakes by surprise, joined in attack by those who would not yield their home to Morgoth’s spawn.

Yet a battle against Worms is not the same as one fought against orcs and goblins, and the alliance found themselves facing drake-upon-drake as the tide of the battle turned. Thranduil’s own face was burned with the ice of drake breath, and as he lay unconscious his Captains ordered a full retreat.

“Fly with us!” one of them yelled to Thrór, where he commanded the left flank of dwarves.

“Nay!” Thrór screamed back. “We will defend what is ours! Stay your flight and fight with us! Winning is within our grasp!”

“We cannot! Our commander has ordered our retreat! Come, he bids you flee with us!”

Yet Thrór was no deserter, and he understood not whatsoever why the elves retreated from the battlefield. The dwarves were overwhelmed, and he cared not whether this outcome may have occurred even had the elves stayed.

Any regard he held for Thranduil and his people was lost on the battlefield when he found the battered bodies of King Dáin and his younger brother Frór.

Later, Thrór cursed the Elvenking and his folk for their desertion.

But now he and his people had to flee, homeless and possession-less once more, save for what could be taken in their flight.

He nearly left the chest with the Elvenking’s necklace and white gems behind, for if the Elvenking wanted to reclaim it, he could fight himself through dragons to do so. But at the last moment he changed his mind, knowing he could take other steps to ensure that the reclaiming would only come if deserved.

Over time the treasure collected Under the Mountain grew to unfathomable size. The thrall of the Arkenstone upon throne and the Ring upon his finger convinced Thrór that he should part with none of it, particularly not for this elf who had teased his people with his given-then-retracted aid. He knew nothing of the severity of the Elvenking’s wounding and the subsequent panic that had spread through his people, for many had fought in Mordor those millennia ago and saw Oropher and most of their kin fall upon the blades of Sauron’s forces.

Yet Thrór knew nothing of this – or if he did, the thrall of all held within his mountain made him care not – and so he teased Thranduil in turn when the blond elf paid homage to him, taunting him with the chest of glowing white gems that remained held within.

He had crafted the necklace for Thranduil, he had saved it from the drakes of the north, and he would keep it.

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“And what brings you to my woods once more, Mithrandir?” Thranduil asked as he poured wine for himself and his unexpected guest.

“There are rumors of a dragon who covets the treasures of the Lonely Mountain, the imminent attack of a fire-breathing worm who will burn those within.” Gandalf said, looking near-flustered, and Thranduil narrowed his eyes as he studied the Grey Wizard.

“And?” the Elvenking prompted.

“You have assisted them before, surely you would do so again?” Gandalf implored.

“You would have me shed more blood in the defense of those who will not return what is mine? Simply because they are obsessed with treasure?” Thranduil sipped his wine, hardly believing this wizard would ask such a thing of him.

Gandalf sighed, refraining from commenting on the Elvenking’s own admiration of mined stones, nor voicing his thoughts about this elf’s immense ability to hold grudges.

They were interrupted by a frantic message. “Smaug has attacked the mountain,” the courier from Thranduil’s northeastern patrol said near-breathlessly.

“What of those within?” Gandalf asked even as Thranduil was held speechless, both of them holding their breath.

“Thousands of dwarves and hundreds of humans of Dale have been killed.”

“Do what you need with what we can offer, Mithrandir,” Thranduil said softly as he closed his eyes and rued his complacency.

The Elvenking sat unmoving for hours, his hand upon his brow. His necklace and gems were lost, yet that paled in comparison to the lives that had been decimated by dragon fire.

Thrór refused Gandalf’s offer of housing in Mirkwood, most of his kin traveling to the Iron Hills even as those closest to him planned to eventually reclaim what was theirs and theirs alone.

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Third Age 2941, pre-Battle of Five Armies

And these were the white gems of starlight that the Elvenking so desired, Thorin Oakenshield thought as he filtered the glowing stones through his hands, gazing upon the necklace held within as he removed it from its nest of baubles and held it in front of him.

The elf who had teased his folk with the assistance of his people, not once but twice, his taunting even worse in the Battle of Dwarves and Orcs than it had been in the war against the dragons, for in the former he rode up on his great elk with his great host and simply left.

Thorin saw in his mind’s eye the scene that day years ago, his grandfather’s taunting of the Elvenking with this very chest prior to Erebor’s fall. If the Elvenking’s actions in the battle against the cold-drakes had been even close to what had he himself had seen on the steps of Mount Gungabad, Thorin knew he could not truly blame Thrór.
Any shred of compassion that he held for Thranduil was wiped clean by the Arkenstone and swept out by the taint of dragon thrall upon the gems before him.

And so he split the gems, for if the Elvenking decided to earn them back, he would need to earn them at least twice over.

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**Third Age 2941, post-Battle of Five Armies**

After laying Orcrist upon Thorin Oakenshield’s chest, the Elvenking followed the to-be-crowned King Under the Mountain to Erebor’s throne. The ceremony that followed was somber and solemn ceremony, for in the crowning of one the tragedy of another and his kin could not be forgotten.

Soon afterward the treasure hoard was divided, shares given to the members of the Company as had been planned, with an additional share given to Bard. To the Elvenking the newly-crowned Dain II Ironfoot gave the Emeralds of Girion, Thranduil not having the heart to demand the return of his necklace and white gems of starlight at this moment, nor the need. There would be ample time for that later.

The Elvenking now knew with certainty – grave as the knowledge had come to pass in the heartbreaking finality of mortal death – that Tauriel would not bind with his son, for her being belonged to another, vowed or not.

And so the elven host departed for Mirkwood, Legolas declining to return to his homeland, his heart weary and broken when he gazed upon Tauriel, the elleth’s own fëa shattered by the loss of One. Gandalf and Bilbo riding behind the Elvenking, and beside them strode Beorn, returned to mannish form, and he laughed and sang in a loud voice upon the road.

So they went on until they drew near to the borders of Mirkwood, to the north of the place where the Forest River ran out. Then they halted to rest, for the wizard and Bilbo would not enter the wood, even though the king bade them stay a while in his halls. They intended to go along the edge of the forest, and round its northern end in the waste that lay between it and the beginning of the Grey Mountains. It was a long and cheerless road, but now that the goblins were crushed, it seemed safer to them than the dreadful pathways under the trees. Moreover Beorn was going that way too.

"Farewell, King Thranduil," said Gandalf. "Merry be the Greenwood, while the world is yet young! And merry be all your folk!"

Thranduil nodded in acknowledgment, bidding his own goodbye with a smile. "May you ever appear where you are most needed and least expected! The oftener you appear in my Halls the better shall I be pleased!" In his dealings with the colors of Gandalf’s order, he had come to see their differences, his mistrust of them in their entirety long shed. He had known without a doubt that the Brown held his interests at heart, and he now knew the Grey could be trusted in equal measure.

"Thranduil," Bilbo then said, “may I have a word?”

The Elvenking nodded, and they went to a private copse of trees nearby as the others cleared the rest area and readied to depart. “I beg of you,” said Bilbo, stammering and standing on one foot, ”to accept this gift!” and he brought out a chest, one that Thranduil instantly recognized, that contained a necklace of silver and pearls – embedded with white gems – that Dain had given him at their parting,
encased amidst similar colorless gems.

Thranduil gasped, his good fortune entirely unexpected and most welcome.

"And what have I done to earn such a fine gift, Master Hobbit?" Thranduil knew in this moment that the fates smiled upon him, finding his hands trembling at the thought of reclaiming what was entirely priceless beyond measure.

"Well, I thought, don't you know," said Bilbo rather confused, "that, hmm, some little return should be made for your…hospitality. I should say that even a burglar has his feelings, and I have drunk much of your wine and eaten much of your bread."

The hobbit could have said most anything and Thranduil would have smiled, for Bilbo’s words were simply a blur as the relief that passed through him sunk into the depths of his body. "I will certainly accept your gift." said the Elvenking gravely as Bilbo passed him the chest. "And I name you friend of my woodland realm."

They returned to the main rest site, the Elvenking carrying and keeping hidden what he could scarcely believe had been returned to him, the sorrow of loss mixing with the bittersweet joy of victory.

In his gratitude and excitement, he did not notice that some of the glowing gems were missing.

And so it was that the elves turned towards Mirkwood, Thranduil’s heart carrying hope that it had not since the events with the Blue Wizards in the East, and Bilbo started on his long road home.

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Third Age 2941, Mirkwood

The Elvenqueen straightened the clasps on her tunic, hiding her nervousness well. When Thranduil had rode off to battle, she was reminded of the horrors of the dragon-wounding, the long nights she had spent by his side, and her slipping away when he regained consciousness, for she knew he would have no desire to see her.

“You are well, my Lord!” Laigien ran up to Thranduil as soon as he dismounted, the elleth appearing from amidst the mass of those elves that had gathered, and the Elvenqueen closed her eyes at the sight.

A hand upon her shoulder startled her, and before her stood Tauriel, her eyes wide with grief. “What has happened? Has something happened to Legolas?” she asked the red-haired elleth softly, a momentary flitting of emotion seeping through them, then returning to the ever-cold gaze, one that Tauriel was entirely accustomed to and had learned to disregard, unlike the other elves of their forest.

“No, my Queen, he is well. I however, am not.” Tauriel said, her eyes full of sorrow.

“Are you injured? Shall I summon a healer?” the Elvenqueen studied her once-ward, though none who looked upon it would think there was any degree of closeness on her part.

Her eyes narrowed. “It is a pain of your heart, is it not?”
Tauriel nodded and began crying softly, and the Elvenqueen put an awkward hand upon her shoulder. “Come, you may tell me, and I will help you decide what to do.” Her voice was cold, her manner entirely rational, yet somehow Tauriel found solace in it as she always did, the Elvenqueen’s lack of heart tempering her own fullness of same.

Thranduil stood beside Laigien, viewing the entire scene though knowing not what had passed between them, his eyes briefly meeting his Queen’s as she viewed her king and his ever-present advisor, raising a brow before she swept away with Tauriel.

A small piece of his heart wanted to drive his hröa towards her, his hopeful mood expanding – perhaps her heart had warmed somewhat if she offered comfort in her way to Tauriel……

But when his eyes met hers, it reminded him of why he kept his distance. He could not trust her, nor could he forgive her, not yet, not until what had been placed upon Legolas was removed.

He drew closer to that goal with what Bilbo had returned to him. Though his Queen seemed further away than she ever had, and he from her.

Their love had been reduced to embers the day he had found out about her deceit with the man to whom she had bound, turned to ash at Dagorlad, and was blown away in the winds the accompanied the wake of her travel East, perhaps never to return.

But perhaps, just perhaps, the winds could shift. Yet he put the thought out of his mind as soon as it entered, for it seemed to be utter folly.

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Third Age 3019, Mirkwood

“The palace has received word that your son is safe in Gondor, my lady.” Elwen bowed to the Elvenqueen as she moved to her Queen’s side in the makeshift healing tent on the outskirts of the forest, one of the few remnants of the Battle Under the Trees.

The Elvenqueen nodded but said nothing, no part of her being betraying her relief that Legolas was safe. Their relationship was complicated and distant, full of resentment and distaste on Legolas’ side, envy of Thranduil, complete lack of direction, and protective closure on the Elvenqueen’s part.

She finished checking the bandages of the elf who lay before her, then moved to clean her hands. “And our King will proceed with this meeting with Celeborn?”

“Yes,” Elwen replied, unable to hide her disappointment.

“Very well,” the Elvenqueen murmured. “Let us return then to our part of the forest. Perhaps eventually Thranduil will come crawling to us when he realizes what a disastrous mistake this is. He has never sought alliance with the Noldor – why now?”

Elwen had no answers.

“No matter,” the Elvenqueen sighed. “He is our King, and we must follow his rule, even as we disagree. At least he has guaranteed that Celeborn will have no influence over our forest, and we do not have to interact with those of his wood.” There were so many reasons why the Elvenqueen, like
many of her forest, had little desire to ally with Galadriel’s elves. Yet they must do as their King required.

As much as the Elvenqueen might disagree with her King’s decisions, she had no desire to rule their forest, no matter what he thought on the matter.

Third Age 3019, Eryn Lasgalen, post-Second Battle Under the Trees

Neither Thranduil nor his Captains had understood how such a massive force of orcs has assembled in the seemingly peaceful aftermath of the Ring-War. Yet the elves of Eryn Lasgalen rode the tide of victory of recent victory against the forces of Sauron, fighting with vigor and moving the battle swiftly.

It was nearly won when the Elvenking was injured, and all who witnessed it knew it ranked as one of the most horrific set of injuries they had ever seen.

As he lay amidst the trees of his forest, his hröa seemingly battered beyond repair, his fëa clutching to his physical form by a mere thread, he stared unseeing at the leaves above him, wondering if this would be the last time he would gaze upon them, knowing it likely would be.

He knew he must survive to save Legolas from the cursed enchantment that placed him at risk, for he had grown too certain of his eternal life, leaving too little information for his son to combat it should he need to fight it alone.

He must survive to save his Queen, for it was she the orcs seemed to seek, yet there had been no time to tell his advisors of the secrets only he knew – nor had there seemed to be need, for he had never thought this would be the means in which he would meet his end.

Yet that was not the only way in which the expectation of endless years before him had led him astray. His heart ached at the thought of never seeing his Queen again. He knew in this moment he had become his father long ago, obstinate and stubborn, his relationship with his beloved broken beyond repair.
The Beginning of Amends

“And that,” Pippin said with a flourish, hiccupsing, motioning wildly with his hands, and hiccupsing some more, “is the tale of Bandobras Took’s slaying of Golfimbul in the battle of Mt. Gram!”

“Well told!” Faramir said, raising his goblet to toast the hobbit. Then he glanced at the Elvenking, the blond elven lord seeming to grow more tired by the moment, though certainly not due to lack of apparent interest. “I have been honored that you have hosted me during your convalescence, and will respectfully take my leave for the evening.” He placed a hand on Pippin’s shoulder, discretely motioning that it was time to depart the Elvenking’s chambers, yet the hobbit stood firm.

“Oh, I have some plans to discuss with the king and queen. I’ll find you later, and we can try playing that strategy game of yours again! For a prize this time, I think!” Pippin said it smugly, most certain he would win.

Faramir sent a glance in Galion’s direction, the butler indicating that he would monitor the situation henceforth as he bid the Steward goodbye.

Pippin stared pointedly at Galion, waiting for him to take his leave as well.

The Elvenqueen sighed, knowing this hobbit well enough by now to realize something was afoot—though she dared not demonstrate that she was curious as to what it might be. “You may leave as well, Galion.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow, yet said nothing, curious himself about this small creature, for he had not interacted often with hobbits and was pleased to meet this one, as though his presence triggered some distant feeling that he simply could not place.

“So,” Pippin said as the bedchamber had cleared, “did Bilbo ever tell you…” and then he stopped himself as he remembered that Thranduil would not recall the hobbit due to his memory loss. “Never mind, we wanted to give you this.”

He pulled out a small package for the Elvenking, placing it in his weakened hand. “It’s a gift from myself and your Queen.”

Thranduil’s eyes opened in distrusting surprise, glancing briefly at the Elvenqueen, who started to speak her denial but was stopped by the hobbit’s gentle stomping on her foot. She smiled slightly at his audacity, appreciating how he eased her loneliness and he stood by her side, and so she permitted his actions as she would not from any other.

A small part of her heart dared to hope that this might kindle some degree of positive regard toward her within Thranduil’s heart—a hope she had not dared to entertain for so very long.

When the Elvenking unwrapped the gift, his eyes widened once more, this time his surprise warm, for the present took him off guard, crafting an ever-tiny crack in the hardened recess of his heart.

It was a pair of roughly crafted necklaces, a set that he held most dear and had not seen since she had moved to the remote area of her forest after returning from her fateful trip to the Blue Wizards in the East.

“You would give me this?” he murmured. And then his brow furrowed as he looked upon Pippin. “But why is it gifted from you as well?”
The hobbit grasped the sides of his tunic in hands, holding smugly. “Because she is too fearful to do it alone. She would make amends for the hurts she has caused you, for she loves you with all her heart but is unable to speak of it.”

“But….” The Elvenqueen began to stammer, caught off guard as well, knowing the hobbit’s words were true, even if she had had no part in this and wondered how on Arda the hobbit had learned of the value of these crudely crafted amethyst pendants upon mithril chains – and found them, no less.

Vegetables were apparently not the only thing he pilfered, yet she could not hold it against him, for she saw a softness in Thranduil’s eyes that she had not viewed since Legolas was a mere few years old.

“Leave us please,” Thranduil said as he glanced at Pippin, and the hobbit nervously obeyed – sort of, keeping himself around the corner – *just in case* they diverted from the course he had started them upon, for these two surely could not mend this on their own.

If it could be mended at all. Yet if he could assist in the defeat of Sauron, surely he could assist with this?

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Thorin III Stonehelm stood before his throne, hardly believing what had been conveyed thus far in the private audience he had granted to those who stood before him. It wasn’t the slaying of the Worm in the tunnels beneath Framsburg that struck him; no, it was the proposed settlement.

“Nay, I cannot permit such a thing, neither weregild nor servitude,” he said firmly, his strength of resolve clear. “There was nothing untoward about what occurred – certainly the Were-worms leader will understand that if our only experience with his kin is as an enemy during war, Adlia and Glorfindel’s action is a logical one. Unfortunate as it is, of course.”

Radagast shifted on his feet uncomfortably.

“I think it would be prudent to consider the consequences of not doing so,” Erestor said from where he stood beside the Lord of the Golden Flower. “At most such a refusal could produce direct retaliation, at least the abandonment of their offense in the Withered Heath. Surely our lands cannot bear to be overrun by Worms.”

“They would do neither,” Radagast said quickly. “They would not strike against you, nor would they retaliate by abandoning the battle.”

Thorin nodded slowly. “I see. So if there is no such consequence, this only involves a sense of honor. Yet I think Erestor has a good point – we cannot be certain of their reaction. Tell me,” the King Under the Mountain said as he looked pointedly at the Brown Wizard, “how do we know that you are not held within their thrall? That you are not part of some plan for this Were-worm to take Smaug’s place within my kingdom?”

“Harumph! He does not act as one under such thrall would. For I have witnessed it directly, and see no such thing here.” Dwalin stood with his head tilted slightly to the side. While he was entirely uncertain as to the best course of action, he would brook no comparisons such as the one his King had just made.
“Perhaps we might assist them in fighting these dragons,” Merry chimed in.

“That is a noble idea, young hobbit,” Thorin said, “but it does not sound as though our assistance is desired.” Nor would he see his warriors fall into a decades-long siege such as the one that occurred during the War of Dwarves and Dragons, not when his joint kingdom was recovering from the losses suffered during the Ring-War.

“This is all well and good,” Adlia said pensively, “yet if this leader of Worms desires recompense, I would request permission to parley with him about it.”

Thorin sighed. “Because the custom is similar to our own?”

“Aye,” she said. “And because our kingdom cannot bear an attack from dragons, not now. If the leader of the Were-worms does not follow his tradition, I would imagine he may lead his own warriors less well, he could fight this war less effectively – and that places us at risk. Avoiding this would have consequences.” Her tone became somber, her voice nearly a whisper. “Surely we have seen such with our own Houses.”

Thorin III Stonehelm looked at his warrior with an unreadable expression, and then glanced quickly at the remainder of those gathered. “Aye, another good argument. Very well. Ultimately this was your action, and if you must offer a weregild, I will not stand in your way.”

Thorin and Adlia traveled into the depths of the Mountain and worked their way to the royal treasury, sorting items that the Were-worms might find of value. Given that they were not entirely certain what those might be, they simply chose items that had great value.

“Ah,” Thorin said, pulling down a box from the top shelf. “Let us add this as well to the weregild. I found it hidden within the depths of the lower stores the other day.” He opened the box, and Adlia marveled at the glowing white gems held within.

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Many leagues away in Shénmì de Sēnlín, Legolas blinked slowly as he woke, disoriented and dizzy. A gentle hand upon his forehead was calming, and his eyes focused on the one sat beside him.

“Éowyn,” he whispered, his throat dry, the energy sapped from his body.

“Legolas,” she said with a large smile. “It is good to see you awake! We are safe, in the Blue Wizard’s forest. The spell-blast at the edge of this wood hit you hardest, and you are the last of us to awaken. Do you remember triggering the ward on the tree that you touched?”

He did not, nor did it matter to him, only caring that they were close to their journey’s target, soon to meet the one who could assist him in learning more of the enchantment upon him.

“How are the others?” he asked as he looked about the tàilân.

“Elladan, Elrohir, Dhruv, and Nergüi have gone with some of the elves of this forest to scout the next stage of our journey.” At Legolas’ lifted brow, she smiled even further. “There seem to be at least two options that may break this enchantment upon you, and likely more. I will leave it for the Blue Wizard to explain to you. Suffice it to say, I am much heartened. Yet surely it is not my face you wish to gaze upon. I sent Gimli to gain some rest; I will go awaken him for you.”
With that, she exited the tàllàn, Gandalf soon taking her place.

“How, you have exited your long slumber at last! How do you feel?” he asked with a near-fatherly look upon his face.

“Fatigue seeps through my very bones, Mithrandir,” the elf responded. “And my throat is parched. Other than that, I am well.” His smile grew as he gazed upon the White Wizard in relief.

“Good that I procured this, then!” Gandalf pulled out a light green flask, covered with runes the likes of which Legolas had never seen. “Do not worry,” the White Wizard said as the prince hesitated to drink, “I assure you it is perfectly safe, and actually quite good. It will assist you in feeling more like yourself.”

“And what have you learned?” Legolas asked between sips, his heart remaining as hopeful as it had upon hearing Êowyn’s words.

“Ah, well, the dwarves of the Red Mountains may be able to assist us, and a group of us will travel there. The remainder will search for Maglor, for he may be able to help as well, albeit in a different manner. But Legolas,” Gandalf asked with a furrow in his brow, even as the Prince was somewhat dumbfounded by the potential source of a solution at the hands of Fëanor’s son, “what do you recall of white gems and a necklace, one that your father had crafted by Durín’s Folk?”

Legolas frowned as he searched his memories, but he could not locate any recollection of such a thing. “I know not of what you speak, Mithrandir.”

Gandalf nodded. “I had suspected as much. Apparently Maglor and Rómestámo conjured a partial solution to the enchantment upon you, but your father withheld it from your knowledge, wanting to find a better solution as time passed, I would wager.”

Anger rose in Legolas’ chest, for the secrets of his Elvenking were beginning to wear thin. “Why would he do such a thing?”

“Do not lay blame upon him,” a gruff voice said from the entrance to the tàllàn, “the choice is not an easy one to make, and I for one would not want you to have to make it.”

“Gimli!” Legolas said happily, too disoriented to stand, yet it did not matter, for his dwarf quickly reached his side and drew him into his arms, placing a soft kiss upon his cheek.

Gandalf stood. “I shall take my leave, and we can discuss this further when you have fully recovered, which will be shortly. For now, rest, and know that there is much hope before you.”

While both elf and dwarf much appreciated the assistance the White Wizard had provided them thus far, they were most glad to see him exit the structure, giving them time to themselves, Gimli simply holding Legolas in his arms and stroking his hair. “It seems elves cannot outlast dwarves when it comes to wards blasting them at the edge of a forest,” Gimli eventually said with a chuckle.

“There may be more wards to come with which to test your hypothesis – I would not get ahead of yourself yet,” Legolas responded with a fond smile as he began weaving additional tiny braids into his beloved’s beard. “So, you have met the Blue Wizard that we sought?”

“Aye, Morinehtar, and while he is not the Blue one who cast the enchantment, he is able to assist us enough with ideas and planning of what may undo it.” He gazed fondly at the slower-than-typical elven hands playing within his beard.

“And what are they?” Legolas asked.
“Well, my elf, you and I will travel to the Red Mountains, for my kin within may be able to devise a solution. It is a welcome option, for this necklace and set of gems of your father will either allow us to bind or release those souls trapped in the Dead Marshes.”

“Oh,” Legolas eventually said, feeling disheartened, for if such a choice was to be made, he knew instantly what his would be.

“Do not fret, my elf. I felt the same when I learned of it, but all of us are more than hopeful that a different solution will be found. It will simply take an additional journey, one that I am greatly looking forward to, for the mansions held within the Orocarni are a sight to be seen. My kin there may be able to assist us with all of it, including disabling this map of the stars in Orthanc.”

“What?” Legolas wondered with a furrowed brow.

“Aye, that star map in Orthanc is part of Sauron’s abandoned plan. But fear not, for Aragorn should be receiving Gandalf’s warning about it at any moment now. Thank Mahal that he did not plan to travel there until the turn of the year.”

The Prince of Eryn Galen wanted to learn more of what Gimli spoke of, but not really at this moment, knowing it could wait.

“And then?” Legolas asked, Gimli easily reading his expression.

“And then,” Gimli said with an utterly enchanting and endearing look upon his face, “we will free these souls trapped in the Dead Marshes, and you and I will bind as One. We cannot fail Peregrin Took, for he is putting much time and toil into the planning of our vows.”

“Surely we cannot,” Legolas said as he gazed into his dwarf’s eyes, for a moment forgetting his fatigue, holding his breath without realizing he did so as he waited for his beloved to kiss him. Anticipation mingled with the reality of this forest, the thought of enchantments and spells kindling his thought-to-be-distant insecurity and hesitancy.

Kiss his elf he did, knowing exactly what flowed through the Prince's being, and when Gimli drew back, he looked into those beloved sapphire eyes and held the betrothal band that adorned Legolas’ finger. “How could you even consider pondering that my love for you is the product of an enchantment? Had I not chased those silly thoughts from your mind?”

Legolas smiled near-wickedly. “I think they need more chasing.”

Gimli stroked the ever-smooth skin of his elf’s face, knowing he would happily do so for all of his days, wishing he could do so for all eternity.

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Aragorn and Éomer, along with a small guard, stood at the entrance to Orthanc, ready to recover Éomer’s family treasures. King Elessar had decided to travel earlier than he had planned, prompted by Arwen to take a brief sojourn, something she would continue to do regularly over the years to come, for the ranger within him was easily wearied by court life even as his One True Love was invigorated by it.

“Do you plan to fully search the tower?” Éomer asked him curiously. “For if you do, I shall like to
assist you. I am more than displeased with the pillaging of the barrows of my forefathers at Grima Wormtongue’s hand, and I should like to determine what Saruman was attempting to accomplish.”

Aragorn rubbed the stubble on his face, wishing he hadn’t shaved quite so closely. It became too itchy this way, too distracting. “I am not certain if we should, my friend. Perhaps we should wait until Gandalf returns, or even have Lord Elrond examine what we find inside.”

Éomer studied his counterpart closely, willing to defer to his judgment on the matter. “So you think I should not remove the artifacts of my house?”

“I wish I had discussed it with Gandalf further. It makes me uneasy, for surely Saruman did not simply collect them. He must have done something to them, though what I am at a loss to say, but surely it would be something sorcerous. Even moving them in certain ways may trigger a spell. Let us look upon what we find and decide then.” He turned, a glint in his eye. “At the very least, I can see this star map Legolas went on and on about. Somehow, however, I doubt it will live up to its billing, for neither of us are elves easily enthralled by the stars.”

Éomer smiled widely. “Let us not speak too quickly. It may indeed be majestic enough for royal eyes. Come,” he said as he began to walk the stairs to Orthanc’s door, “Let us look upon this glory of which Legolas spoke, one that will only be enhanced by its Númenórean son returning to gaze upon it and speaking its activating words.”

Aragorn hesitated, wondering for a moment if this map of the stars might be some type of trap as well. Then he was drawn out of his thoughts when Éomer beckoned him once more to follow, even as at that very moment in Minas Tirith, Arwen received the message from Gandalf warning of the danger held within Saruman’s former stronghold.
“Hoom-hom!” Quickbeam strode through the Treegarth of Orthanc with deliberate steps. “Where is your King, young ones?” the Ent asked as he gazed upon the small contingent of warriors standing amidst their camp in the orchards that he and his kin tended.

“Well met!” the head of Elessar’s royal guard replied as he moved toward this creature of legend. “King Elessar and Éomer-King have gone inside the fortress, per the missive they sent to Treebeard.”

“Hoom! That is what brings me hence. Recall them from the tower, for I have a missive of my own. Straight from the mouth of Gandalf the White, it comes!”

Quickbeam settled his branches and trunk in place as he watched the guard depart for the stairs that led into Saruman’s prior stronghold.

“My Lords,” the guard called as he crossed the threshold, uncertain of the pair’s exact location, “There is an urgent message from Gandalf, delivered by one of the Ents!”

Aragorn and Éomer were within the heart of the fortress, for their passage through Orthanc had proceeded with ease. Gandalf’s prior entry with Legolas had cleared the protective wards Saruman had placed throughout his stronghold. Yet it had not been without foreboding that Aragorn had moved closer to the room that contained the hidden map of the stars, and as he heard the voice wafting towards them, he stopped short, Éomer needing no command to follow his lead.

Firm footsteps sounded a path towards them, and they retraced their steps in turn, soon finding themselves outside, face-to-trunk with the Ent-turned-messenger.

“Bregalad,” Aragorn said to Quickbeam, calling him by his Sindarin name, “my captain has told me that you bring word from Mithrandir?”

“Hoom! I do. He asks you refrain from activating Isengard’s map of the stars, for it brings great peril!”

Aragorn frowned as he turned to look at Éomer, the King of the Mark answering his gaze with a questioning expression of his own. “Bregalad, do you know any more of the danger therein?”

“Hoom! I do not. The message was short, too short even for my taste. It makes no sense to my ears, in truth. Hoom-hom!”

Aragorn frowned as he turned to look at Éomer, the King of the Mark answering his gaze with a questioning expression of his own. “Bregalad, do you know any more of the danger therein?”

“How was the missive brought to you, Master Ent?” Éomer asked with determination. “For I would like to send one to Gandalf in reply.”

“It was a bird flying with all speed, flying so fast I did not realize it nested upon me until it pecked at me to respond. Hoom-hom! I was not impressed by its manners.”

“Indeed not,” Éomer said wryly, and then he turned to Aragorn. “Perhaps we should turn our attention to recovery of what was stolen by Saruman and Wormtongue from Meduseld…” and he could barely contain his rage at his next thought… “as well as from the barrows of my elders. Gandalf sent no warning regarding that. What say you?”
“Hoom!” Quickbeam shook his branches in agitation. “If such was stolen by those tree-destroyers, I say you take it back!”

Aragorn was uncertain how to respond, confused about what dangers they truly faced within Saruman’s tower.

Yet it was true that Gandalf had sent no warning about the barrow-thefted items – weapons and horse-bones and more, and all deserved to be returned to their rightful resting place.

“Let us return inside, Éomer, and look upon them as we had planned. If they seem to be free of Saruman’s spells, we shall return them to your homeland.”

Éomer nodded his assent, and they returned to the enormous inner chamber that held the stolen relics of the Riddermark, and the pilfering of the barrows of the Mark’s deceased Kings.

The tidy piles in which Gandalf had sorted Rohirric weapons, treasures, heirlooms, and more remained from his recent visit to Orthanc with Legolas. Éomer took Goldwine’s bow, holding it reverently, and then set it back down. “For what purpose did Saruman gather these, Aragorn? What are your thoughts?”

Aragorn looked up from his own gentle inspection of the treasures that lay before them, meeting Éomer’s eyes, and knew in that instant they had a similar breadth of ideas on the matter. “Perhaps it was simply his ill-intentioned mind, collecting artifacts from the realms that he sought dominion over.” He paused, considering the Many-Coloured Wizard’s cunning and skill. "Or perhaps he planned some sort of sorcery….”

“Or cast a spell upon them already.” Éomer finished the statement.

“Yet Gandalf would have sensed such a thing, I think,” Aragorn said softly.

“He did not sense this distant enchantment laid within this map of the stars.” Éomer pointed out. “Perhaps Saruman did something to prevent Gandalf from detecting his wizardry.” Aragorn nodded, for this was entirely possible. "Gandalf thought there may be more of the Riddermark's treasures hidden in this tower. Perhaps we should search for them, and in finding them we may also discover clues that would assist us - and Gandalf, when he returns - in determining Saruman's intentions with what he stole from my homeland.”

“A wise idea, my friend.” He clasped Éomer on the shoulder. “Yet let us be cautious, for if relics remain, traps may remain as well. Although I am grateful that Mithrandir did as much clearing of them as he did.”

And so they set off into the depths of Isengard, searching for what else Saruman may have left hidden.

The Framsburg questors reached the outskirts of the Withered Heath under the cloak of that night’s chill darkness. Soon after finalizing the weregild, they had departed from Erebor upon their waiting Fenghuang steeds. Travel was swift, the great Eastern birds covering the short northward distance from the Lonely Mountain with incredible speed – arriving so soon that all felt unprepared to address what lay before them.

All, that is, except Erestor, who had sat astride the steed that Radagast and Adlia shared, finalizing their plan for parley.
They were guided to their landing by a pair of tall, slender men who stood on a rugged outcropping high upon one of the tallest mountains amidst the Grey range. As the Ryū-ningen tended to their mounts, an equally tall woman greeted the Brown Wizard and his party.

"Chairo no Mahōtsukai. Okaeri." She looked in a most reserved manner at those who stood behind Radagast, and then held a short conversation with him, confirming what she suspected – that the Brown Wizard had brought those who would provide restitution to Tastuo.

"Tsuitekite kudasai," she said, leading the Framsburg questors into the mountain. The twists and turns were so frequent that all except Radagast became uncertain about how to exit.

"Look," Merry whispered to Bofur as they walked, pointing at the objects that lay within the tunnels. Seated at varying points were light green urns similar to the ones they had seen under the tunnels of Framsburg, filled with a similarly ill-odored mixture.

“They are wards,” Radagast said, briefly turning around from where he walked before them. “They limit the movements of the Worms of the Heath. We have woven them through the mountains we have won from them and in some of the lands beyond. It prevents them from entering these tunnels and the others that we have cleared of their foul presence – and prohibits them from passing to the realms south of the Grey Mountain range.”

They walked silently in dim torchlight, Adlia, Bofur, and Dwalin sharing a strong sense of pride, for this mountain range had been home to their kin in times past, and all dreamed of one day winning back what had been rightfully theirs.

In that moment, the Longbeards and Broadbeam knew that their choice had been the correct one, for if these Were-worms would clear Morgoth’s spawn from this previous home range of Durin’s Folk, it would bring them much closer to their once-distant vision of inhabiting the wealth-strewn mountains once more.

The walls of the tunnels of this particular mountain reinforced that vision – rich with metal, ore, and potential gems. If all were half as rich as this one, there were lifetimes upon lifetimes of mining left to be done.

All too soon their guide brought them to a stop at the entrance to a large cavern. “You may rest here,” she said. “I will summon Tatsuo, but he will not arrive until sunrise, for he has been scouting the northern fields.” She departed with a formal inclination of her head, leaving Radagast to settle his companions in the cavern, for he was no stranger to this temporary housing of the Were-worms.

“Hmph. I am not certain if I view this as a reprieve or an unfortunate delay,” Adlia murmured, uncharacteristically nervous and wanting to end the uncertainty about the leader of the Ryū-ningen’s potential reactions to their proposed weregild, for so many possibilities flooded her mind that she had some difficulty tolerating them.

“Well, this is most unfortunate,” Erestor murmured, sharing the portion of her mood that sought to parley at once with the leader of the Ryū-ningen.

“Let us take this as an opportunity to plan further, Master Dwarf,” Erestor said softly, settling himself by Adlia’s side, his ever-composed demeanor helping her to settle her own, something she rarely required assistance with. They talked in whispers, attempting to allow the others to rest, but there was no respite to be had in the anxious anticipation of what was to come.

Time passed slowly in the near darkness of the cavern, yet eventually Tatsuo appeared. His eyes were filled with sorrow, his being radiated his great sense of loss, yet he also held an aura of great
power, and Adlia knew somehow in that moment that his heart was true, even as she realized she had known it prior to this.

“Tatsuo-san,” Radagast said, moving to stand. “Your return is swift and welcome.”

“Chairo no Mahōtsukai,” the leader of the Ryū-ningen said with a nod, waiting patiently as Radagast made formal introductions.

Adlia searched her mind for something to say, for all she had planned seemed insufficient, yet she had no need as Erestor spoke for her. His diplomacy came to the fore, eloquently expressing the Framsburg party’s regret for their grave error. He finished by reviewing the terms of the weregild.

“We have little need for treasure,” Tatsuo said as he gazed upon the weregild itself, the chests of gems, jewels, and priceless metals that had been opened by Dwalin.

“We understand, and at the same time would bid you to consider that this is a revered custom of the dwarves of Middle-Earth.” Erestor replied. “This is a collection of inestimable worth, and while it cannot replace your beloved, it is how dwarves might seek recompense amongst themselves.”

As Erestor continued to speak, Tatsuo considered the offer, for it seemed sincere and might indeed serve his ultimate goal of restitution, a means of honoring to his slain mate’s spirit and restoring the honor of those who bore their weapons upon her. He inspected the jewels of the weregild more closely, stopping when he came upon the glowing white gems that Thorin III Stonehelm had added to the offering. “Chairo no Mahōtsukai,” he said as he knelt beside the chest, looking to Radagast, “Kore wa nan desu ka? Kiraboshi?”

Yet before Radagast could look upon what he would easily recognize – the portion of Thranduil’s glittering gems of white starlight that had not been returned with Bilbo Baggins those years ago – they were interrupted briskly.

“Rikuguntaishou,” said the guide who had initially brought them to the cavern, “there are reports of a Worm-swarm gathering on the western front.”

Tatsuo stood quickly and gracefully. “Seiryū, doumoarigatou.” Then he turned commandingly to the elves, dwarves, and hobbit. “Stay back, please.”

“Nay!” Adlia said fiercely. “If you fight against Morgoth’s spawn, I shall assist you!”

“And I!” Glorfindel added.

Tatsuo looked briefly to his fellow Ryū-ningen and shook his head. “No. It is unsafe.”

“But we have seen battle before! I myself helped slay one of the Nazgûl!” Merry yelled. “Let us assist you!”

Tatsuo looked expressionlessly in Radagast’s direction, the Brown Wizard nodding slightly.

Radagast cleared his throat. “I think it is best you stay here, for these battles are fierce and very different from the strategy you are used to. I will stay with you, for the moment at least.”

Tatsuo left silently with the guide, and the Framsburg party was left in the cavern.

“Surely there is a way we may assist in this,” Adlia beseeched the Brown Wizard.

Radagast shook his head. “No, you must leave this battle to us.” To them, he thought for a brief
moment, somewhat fearful to do more than set wards and view from a distance since his own tactical error had indirectly produced the orc attack on Thranduil’s forest. “Should you wish to view the dragons, however, I can take you to an area that is protected.”

“Absolutely!” Merry said excitedly.

And so the party gathered within the cavern exited and followed a long, meandering tunnel, Radagast speaking the occasional phrase to open hidden doors. Soon they were safely ensconced in an alcove that overlooked a portion of the Withered Heath.

The blackened valley was desolate, a cruel landscape that seemed incapable of succoring any life, providing a starkly contrasting backdrop for the dragons of the East. Beasts of different colors gathered in the air and on the ground, their jewel-tones sparkling in the early morning sunrise, gathering fire and ice to attack the Long-worms that were gathering in a northwestern corner some miles away.

Merry gasped in wonder as he saw Tatsuo shift form into a marvelous red dragon, their guide shifting into an equally impressive flying wyrm of azure blue. “They’re beautiful,” he whispered, even as his every instinct was to run away, for his knowledge of dragons was limited to tales of calculating beasts capable of committing great horrors.

“Do not meet their eyes,” Radagast warned. “The Ryū-ningen can inadvertently hold you in thrall if you do so, though they will not harm you, but it would certainly make you vulnerable to the Long-worms of the Heath. While they cannot pass through or into the mountain, they are still able to climb up a portion of it.”

As they stood and watched the dragons of the East depart, sky and ground blanketed by their sheer number and size, Adlia and Glorfindel shared a glance.

If Tatsuo had originally wanted them to serve at his side, but declined their participation in battle, what had his request of servitude entailed?

Yet soon Glorfindel shook his head. “I would not fight beside one known to me as he knows us, not so soon, Master Dwarf. Think not upon it.”

Radagast joined them, placing a hand upon Adlia’s shoulder. “I agree – yet such pondering is unneeded. I think he will accept the weregild. We will know for certain when he returns – and we must be patient, for he needs time to consider his decision and his attention is rightly occupied by a war that affects us all.”

Then there was a soft silence as they marveled at the dragons that flew past them, for it was a sight that none of them, save Radagast, had ever thought they might look upon.

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Time in the makeshift Were-worm stronghold within the Grey Mountains passed slowly. Once the army of dragons had departed from view, the Framsburg questors had returned to their cavern. Radagast had readied additional wards, knowing such supplies would be required if the Ryū-ningen took control of additional mountains within the range.

At Radagast’s suggestion the others passed the time with tales and games, Bofur and Glorfindel providing particularly creative modifications to the strategy ventures that Merry in particular had grown to appreciate. There were no game boards here, yet they made due.

“Tell me, Glorfindel,” Merry said as he contemplated his next move while awaiting his turn, “do you
typically play these sorts of games as battle lies without?”

The Lord of the Golden Flower smiled broadly and laughed merrily as he set down a makeshift game token. “Not so, Master Hobbit. Neither do I think it is a tradition of dwarves,” he chuckled as he glanced at Bofur.

“Aye,” Bofur returned good-naturedly, moving his own token about the board that they had drawn in the dust of the cavern floor, “though I cannot find room to object to this.” It was not entirely true, for he felt restless, yet not nearly so much as Dwalin, who sat nearby sharpening his daggers and polishing his war hammer.

Merry let loose a mock cry of frustration when he was bested yet again by Bofur and Glorfindel. Erestor and Adlia glanced up from where they traded tales quietly with one another. Like Dwalin, neither of them found the gloom of the cavern nor their reason for being there conducive to strategy games, yet each held sympathy towards the hobbit, for they knew their participating comrades were as skilled in this as in the tasks for which they were better known.

“Shall I assist you, Master Hobbit?” Erestor called out, his face as neutral as ever while his tone was strangely light.

“A team, then? Two against two?” Merry asked.

“I am not certain such a team would be fair,” Glorfindel’s laughter rang through the cavern, his eyes warm and bright as he looked at his raven-haired counterpart. “I have battled such against Lord Erestor for more than an age, and I am not certain I recall the last time I bested him. His skill far exceeds mine.”


Radagast chuckled. “Your flattery may well be undeserved. Let us see if it bears true.”

Adlia and Dwalin settled beside one another, declining to participate, for they were content to gaze upon the game before them. Adlia contemplated, not for the first time, the ease with which Erestor and Glorfindel interacted, and Dwalin studied her contemplation, yet he said nothing given the close quarters in which they currently found themselves.

All was interrupted by the return of Tatsuo, heralded with the sound of fast, light footsteps approaching the cavern.

“Chairo no Mahōtsukai,” he said firmly, “We require your assistance. The Long-worms have done something to the field of battle, turning icy plains to a field of sand, one that has captured my forces as if it rooted them in place. When my flying forces have approached to rescue those trapped, they are simply pulled into the trap with undue force. We know not how to undo it.” Or even what had caused it, though both he and Radagast suspected some type of sorcery on the part of the Long-worms, or perhaps even the scattered orc and goblin troops of the Grey Mountains. The latter had not been seen since the Second Battle Under the Trees.

“Let me accompany you,” Erestor offered, standing from where he sat beside Merry. “I may be able to assist in the assessment of the problem.”

“I as well,” Glorfindel had his own wealth of experience in battling the spawn of Morgoth, and he certainly would not sit idly by.

“It may be wise to reconsider our decision regarding their participation. They have seen much battle
over the ages, including against dragons,” Radagast explained to Tatsuo, for the Brown Wizard agreed that the elves would be of more use outside the cavern than within, “and may be able to contribute to a solution.”

“Aye, as have we!” Dwalin growled, in no mood to be denied a chance to be of assistance. Tatsuo questioned Radagast wordlessly, and a look of such intensity passed between them that both elves wondered if the two were communicating within their minds.

The leader of the Ryū-ningen nodded curtly, and the Framsburg questors moved quickly to gather their weapons, then followed Tatsuo out of the cavern through a short maze of warded tunnels, their destination a heretofore unvisited outcropping on the southern face of the mountain.

Once more he shifted into his majestic red flying form, and they followed Radagast’s lead in climbing atop him. “Keep low,” Radagast yelled as the dragon departed, after the Brown Wizard had quickly shown them how to keep hold on the dragon’s back, “for he flies swiftly and the cold winds are fierce at this speed.”

It affected Merry most of all, Glorfindel and Erestor the least, and the latter pulled the hobbit against his body to keep him warm.

They flew several leagues westward across the narrow, blackened valley of the Withered Heath, anticipation of the fight to come flowing through each of them. As they approached the site of battle, Tatsuo slowly circled the trap he had referred to, careful to stay above the region that was now known to pull any flying worm into the trap below.

“It must be sorcery!” Erestor called as he scanned the scene below them, Were-worms in Long-worm and flying forms unable to move the parts of their bodies that touched what appeared to be a sea of sand. “There is no sand in the Withered Heath, and certainly not of the type that would hold your troops immobile!”

“Which worm is casting the spell?” Glorfindel asked as he and Erestor using their keen eyes to search for the apparent sorcerer.

Radagast paid little attention to their words as he contemplated his own next step. His heart desired to scry with Morinehtar and seek the sophisticated spell-caster’s assistance in determining what action to take, yet his mind knew that use of such a tool would place them at risk of being detected by a well-schooled sorcerer serving the Long-worms, if indeed the sorcerer was as skilled as he suspected.

He rubbed his temple, knowing the latter was most prudent, even as it caused his heart to quail, for he feared making an error that would turn the tide of battle.

Yet the tide had already turned for the worse, and he knew he must act. He was not skilled enough in this type of magic to cast a counterspell as he knew Morinehtar was capable of, nor could he simply negate the spell as Gandalf would likely be able to, yet if he could find the source of the witchery…..

And then it appeared to him - as though the bare branches of the Heath’s few scattered bushes lead his eyes to see it – a small glint of gray-green light on a hill dusted with snow outside the perimeter of the field of sand.

He squinted, unable to believe what he saw. And so he squinted further. Surely this could not be what he thought.

Radagast interrupted the ongoing conversation between his companions. “To the west and slightly
north, do you see that?”

Dwalin, somewhat surprisingly, was the first to answer. “Aye, your vision is true. Master elves, do my eyes fail me?”

“No, Master Dwarf,” Erestor said softly. “It appears to be one of the Uruk-Hai who is responsible for the sorcery below us.”

“One bearing the white hand of Saruman,” Glorfindel added, his surprise no less than the others who flew atop Tatsuo’s glimmering red back.

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“I will take one of you with me, if you will volunteer,” Radagast said gravely after they had landed in a hidden staging area and discussed the situation that lay before them with Tastuo and two of his commanders. “We will need to approach the caster and overcome him, either with my own spells - or perhaps with weapons.”

Glorfindel raised an eyebrow, still not entirely certain if he believed what he had seen. “And what is your proposal for sneaking up upon this supposed sorcerer?”

Radagast sighed. “I have a way, but I can only do so for one of you.” he said simply. “That one would act as cover for me, for what I plan would leave me vulnerable to my own destruction before I complete my task.”

“I will do it!” Merry cried, certain nothing in the barren field that lay between the spurs of the Grey Mountains would come close to the horrors he had seen during the Ring-Quest.

“It would be more likely that my accomplice will return,” Radagast said gravely, “if he or she was resistant to magic. But even if this succeeds, you must know that it involves great risk.” He looked to Glorfindel, and the golden-haired elf knew that Radagast understood as well as he did that this could very well be a trap of its own.

The Brown Wizard glanced at the dwarves, reluctant to ask them directly, for he truly feared the danger inherent in this mission.

Grim silence followed his disclosure, all understanding what he had left unsaid.

“I will do it.” Adlia stood, her face stern with resolve, her sense of duty preempting any kindling of fear.

Tatsuo turned towards her, the sleek features of his resumed mannish form impassable. He studied her for some moments, followed by a slight nod. Commands were spoken in rapid succession, and then he turned to leave, beckoning her to accompany him.

“No, my friend,” Radagast said softly. “I have another plan for travel. I will require one of your land worms to carry us part of the way, for that would be much faster than trekking on our own.”

Adlia turned to follow him, but suddenly could move no further as an iron grip held her in place.

“No,” Glorfindel whispered, the deep sense of foreboding flaring powerfully within his heart. “Surely other options can be explored. You may not return.”

She laughed, but whether from irony or fear – or both – in response to his uncharacteristic gravity, she did not know. “Hmph! This coming from an elf who single-handedly faced a Balrog. And died!”
“Yes,” he said, “But that was different. I did not single-handedly take on an army of Morgoth’s minions! From the look upon Radagast’s face, you may very well be walking straight to your eternal doom.”

She straightened, every pore of her broad frame exuding the fierce warrior that she was. “Aye, I would have said the same to you, had I stood by your side at the Cristhorn. But the difference here, elf, is that I will come back. And you are wrong,” she smiled, “for I will not be walking. We’ll be riding. On a Worm.” She motioned to the ground troops stationed nearby.

He could not help but smile with conviction. “I will go with you then.”

“Nay, Master Elf. He clearly said this is a task for himself and only one other – the other being a dwarf.” For a moment her resolve faltered, wondering if his concern was warranted. Yet surely Mahal watched over her, as he ever did.

“I cannot weave you a fresh greenery braid, for as you may have noticed, there is no greenery here.” He looked in mock amusement around the desolation in which they stood. “And the last braid I made you has seen better days, and that does not portend good to my mind.” So he did all he could think of, needing this good-luck charm of his House to accompany a fellow warrior into battle to combat his own worry given how his vision of foresight seemed to be rapidly encroaching upon reality – he sliced a portion of his golden hair from his head, deftly weaving the locks into a braid and tying it around her arm, gold glistening in the sunlight.

Adlia had no time for her to ask if it held the same meaning as shearing hairs from her beard. So she simply clasped his arm in a warrior’s embrace, bidding the same goodbye to the others. Then she and Radagast climbed atop the eastern Long-worm, not looking back until they were some distance away, the elf’s figure outlined against the stark blue clarity of the cold sky as he viewed the Worm’s departure.

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“And now,” Radagast said from atop the Long-worm shortly after they had left, yet before they had approached the portion of the Heath from which the enemy could view them, “hold my hand. You must keep in contact with me at all times.”

Adlia did so promptly, even as she was most confused by the strange request. “We shall disguise ourselves by blending with the Worm, and then once more with the Heath, much as the lizards of the South do.”

“Aye, you mean take on the same colors?”

Radagast, master of shapes and changes of hue, nodded his response to her rhetorical question. “I do not have quite the spell-casting power of my brethren, but I do have welcome strategies at my disposal.”

And so they rode swiftly, keeping care to ensure the Ryū-ningen upon which they essentially lay did not encroach the field of sand that would immobilize her as it had her fellow warriors.

After what seemed to be a very small span of time they dismounted. They were far enough away from their destination that the Ryū-ningen would not garner undue attention, and would proceed the remainder of the way on foot. Radagast spoke an incantation that would ensure they walked with the lightness of elves, leaving no footprints in the light dusting of snow at their feet.

Radagast had done this many times before, but the sensation was entirely new to Adlia, and she was
torn between enjoying it and feeling as if she might float away in the light wind that surrounded them.

Their fleetness of foot allowed them to walk, crouched low to the ground, with greater speed than typically would be the case. Any who would look upon them would see nothing, as they blended expertly with the landscape below and the sky above from any angle that they might be viewed. It was a skill the Brown Wizard had focused on cultivating in recent years, and while it was taxing, it was times like this that he thanked Yavanna for the skills she had bestowed upon him.

Soon enough they reached their target. They stopped close to the spell-caster, staying clear of the small area of gray-green light that surrounded him. Adlia held her breath out of fear that they might be detected, while Radagast began to prepare his assault.

In Orthanc, Éomer and Aragorn were nearing completion of yet another day of combing the tower’s many rooms, finding additional relics of the Riddermark amongst various other scattered treasures and learnings, thus far all minor in import.

They were readying to settle with their royal escort in the camp outside Isengard, dinner being prepared as tent flaps fluttered in the light breeze, Aragorn in particular enjoying this snapshot of a return to a life more similar to that he had known prior to ascending the throne.

He realized – yet again – that Arwen had been correct, and vowed to take her advice regarding regular crown-related travel outside the castle walls, leaving the business of Minas Tirith in her most capable hands when he did so.

His mind wandered then to thinking of his beloved, and how he already missed her so, his spirit gladdened that he would be returning to her side soon. A growing part of him was rejuvenated and began to long for the granite walls of Minas Tirith.

He was cut short in his musings by a shout, and both he and Éomer looked to the source of the noise. “My Lords!” one of Elessar’s Royal Guard shouted, “What in the name of Gondor is that?!?”

The Númenórean tower was engulfed in a brief flash of gray-green light that seemed to originate from within the tower proper, arcing high into the sky, its endpoint seeming to be leagues – or more – away.

“Ready your weapons!” Éomer ordered as the intensity of light continued to grow, wondering what Saruman had set upon them from beyond the grave.

“Hoom!” said Quickbeard, entering the encampment to learn what had occurred. “That was not a natural play of light in the sky. Tell me, young one, what was its cause?”

Aragorn nearly sneered in response. “Devilry within the tower, of course. Yet I am not certain what set it off, for we were far from it when it began.”

Soon the light was gone as quickly as it had appeared, and when Aragorn and his guard went to investigate inside Orthanc proper, all of the relics of the Riddermark that had been hoarded by Saruman had disappeared.

Chapter End Notes
Japanese Translations (hover translations are also inserted into the chapter; apologies in advance if any of the new ones are incorrect!)
Chairo no Mahōtsukai = Brown Wizard
Ryū-ningen = Were-worm
Okaeri = Welcome back
Tsukite kudasai = Follow me, please
Kore wa nan desu ka = What is this
Kiraboshi = glittering stars
Rikuguntaishou = General
Doumoarigatou = Thank you
Toward the Red Mountains and the Seaside of the South

Chapter Summary

In the Withered Heath, the battle is won, for now - at a cost. In the east, Legolas and Gimli journey toward the Red Mountains, seeking those whom Morinehtar believes may assist with breaking the enchantment, while Gandalf and the sons of Elrond do the same, in their case journeying to find Maglor along the seaside south of Umbar.

Chapter Notes

Warning for bodily injury - not graphic, but noted, in this chapter.

Radagast’s cloaking vanished the moment he attacked the spell-wielding Uruk, and the bearer of Saurman’s white hand was caught both off-guard and unguarded. A blast of brown-white light threw the creature to the ground, but he quickly regained his bearings. Eyes narrowed, he laughed and spat at Radagast. “Defeat me, wizard, and you simply defeat yourself!”

Radagast hesitated upon hearing those words, for they flared his reluctance to make an error, and his magical hold upon this apparent follower of Saruman stumbled.

“Feeble wizard, no wonder my Master would never have called you his! Even in death he outwits you!” he snarled as he bore Radagast to the ground – and then stopped. He’d been so focused on the Brown Wizard that he hadn’t noticed the dwarf standing off to the side, and the heft of her axe upon his midsection threw him downward once more, this time into unconsciousness.

And then a swarm drew near, a small battalion of warriors - orcs and goblins, to Adlia's eye - appearing as if from the ground itself.

Adlia recalled Glorfindel’s reluctance to have her travel hence, wondering if his stern words would prove to be the truth of the matter. Yet she was not one to entertain such thoughts for long.

Not now, she screamed in her mind as her voice screamed to the encroaching horde, “Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!”

“I need three minutes!” Radagast yelled. “Just three minutes!” and he set frantically to work undoing the enchantment that held the Ryû-ningen in the thrall of paralysis.

From their vantage point across the expanse of desolation that formed this portion of the Withered Heath, Glorfindel and the others saw the unexpected enemy force descend upon the Brown Wizard and dwarf. They sprang into action themselves, climbing upon Tatsuo’s back and flying off, a group of Ryû-ningen following his flight, arcing in a wide circuit to avoid the enchanted area that had turned the barren, frozen wasteland into a desert of paralysis.

They did so even as they knew they would not be able to reach the pair in time, for they were too far
off, even if said time was counted in mere minutes.

Yet not so far off that the keen-sighted amongst them were unable to see what unfolded, including Adlia’s valiant fight.

And her fall.

The hearts of each of her companions sank at the sight, none more so than Glorfindel’s. He sat astride Tatsuo’s flying dragon-form, his typically fearless, joyful face a mixture of emotions that any observing him would not be able to entirely place – and Erestor, seated close to him, could sense his despair.

The Lord of the Golden Flower knew this would happen – and he knew just as well that he did not do enough to stop it.

“Aulë is with Adlia – a dwarf will not truly fall easily!” Erestor cried, for once the more optimistic of the pair, even as he knew then and there that perhaps, just perhaps, he shouldn’t be.

The battle that followed upon their landing was fierce and surprisingly short, for Adlia had indeed protected Radagast long enough for him to remove the enchantment that pervaded the field, his brownish-white light overpowering that of gray-green that flashed in attempts to resist his efforts.

The orcs and goblins were easily slain by Tatsuo’s forces, the few of the enemy who reached the Brown Wizard causing no significant damage, and that portion of the battle was over nearly as quickly as it began. Tatsuo summoned those of his warriors most skilled in healing to tend to those wounded by their captivity within the strange field of sand, while the remainder of the Ryū-ningen focused their attention on the Worms of the Heath who had lain in wait and now retreated.

Glorfindel had fought his way to the fallen dwarrowdam’s side, and while he was not the first to reach her, for several of the Ryū-ningen were swifter and more powerful, it was he who tended to her, a cloak of gold hair covering his face as he leaned over her still form. He appeared to her through the veil of her unconsciousness as he did to Frodo at the Ford of Bruinen those months ago, a shining figure of white, although his expression was more grave than that which had graced his face when the hobbit nearly succumbed to his own injury delivered by the morgul-blade.

Erestor shared the first glance Glorfindel sent across the battlefield after he had done what he could for the dwarf, the raven-haired elf breathing slightly heavily in the aftermath of battle, for he had not fought in some time, though his finely honed skills remained true to form.

He expected to see his friend grieving, for surely Glorfindel’s declared comrade-in-arms could not have survived the onslaught, even as the dwarf had fought to the last to protect Radagast.

Surely Adlia could not be alive, not in light of the torn and mangled body, clearly visible from where Elrond’s chief advisor stood with Dwalin some distance away, the hale dwarven warrior waiting as he held his breath, knowing that the Lord of the Golden Flower possessed healing skill that he himself did not.

But then Glorfindel smiled unexpectedly – Adlia lived, even if barely! – a wide, blinding smile that somehow made Erestor’s heart ache, even as he could not place how or why, even as he praised Elbereth and Aulë with the entirety of his being for each and every grace granted to them on this day, not the least of which was Adlia’s life.

For now, at least, she survived, and Merry and Bofur began to assist Glorfindel with the wrapping of her wounds as Erestor and Dwalin moved to Radagast’s side, intent on ensuring he was well.
The Brown Wizard was in the process of searching for the spell-wielding Uruk - yet he was gone, as though his unconscious form had vanished into thin air, even as a gray-green aura lingered in the spot where he had fallen.

“I am filled with a sense of unease, and I would attribute it to these tunnels – yet not due to their crafting, for that is sturdy enough.” After completing his preliminary scouting, Gimli sat down beside Legolas at their resting point in the tunnels that led from Shénmì de Sēnlín to the Orocarni Mountains.

“Yet surely this path surpasses the option of travel above ground,” Dhruv said firmly. The Easterling had been born and raised eastward of the southern range of the Orocarni, and he knew with certainty that travel above ground in this region would be dangerous, even more dangerous than it had been before or during the War of the Ring, for civil unrest pervaded the area, an unrest that Morihetnar worked tirelessly to assist in quelling.

For his part, Legolas looked closely at his beloved dwarf. While he held no sense of foreboding in these tunnels, the knowledge that Gimli did was unsettling. “Do you wish to scout them further?” he asked as his fingers intertwined with the dwarf’s, his heart swelling upon the receipt of the loving gaze sent his way.

“Surely being cautious is always wise, but I myself am not worried about the safety of this path,” Dhruv said as he and Éowyn rummaged through their supply bags, deciding what to cook for dinner. “Vánaspáti would not lead us astray.”

The small group was traveling to the Red Mountains via Morinehtar’s hidden, warded pathway underground, while Gandalf and the sons of Elrond had taken Nergüi and an elf of Morinehtar’s forest to seek Maglor in the far South and, if luck should be on their side, the other wizard of Blue. Dhruv, for one, was most excited to meet the dwarves of the mountains, for they were a tale of his childhood come to life, Mahal’s children in the East being as reclusive as they were.

Dinner was cooked quickly and well, and Gimli’s stomach was grumbling loudly before it was served, a fine distraction from the worry that prickled in the back of his mind. The food was more foreign-tasting and spicy than anything Dhruv and Éowyn had cooked on the journey thus far, Morinehtar having provided a variety of local ingredients that Dhruv was able to put to full use.

“I must say that this is delicious,” Éowyn said with an appreciative smile to their Easterling guide.

“Aye,” Gimli replied. “A year ago I would not have thought that I would enjoy a dish such as this, yet I do. I fear it leads me to only one conclusion.”

“That you will soon need to extend the bands of your breeches to accommodate a well-tended belly?” Legolas said happily, a twinkle gleaming in his eye – he had seen hobbits eat more than he would have imagined possible, and dwarves as well, yet even that did not quite match the firm liking Gimli had taken to this cuisine, his consumption wholly supporting his newly-developed preference.

Somehow it pleased Legolas immensely to see his beloved eat so well and so happily.

“Aye, perhaps,” Gimli said with a chuckle and a kiss on his elf’s cheek, “but that was not what was on my mind. No, we must remove the cooking contingency from Éowyn’s contract.”
“Do not speak so soon of that, my dear friend,” she said after laughing, “I have merely been an apprentice, and I am not certain that I am ready to cook these dishes on my own. That aside, Faramir signed what you presented to him, and we should leave it as-is. There are certainly clauses I do not want removed!” She sat back, viewing the elf and dwarf with a most-pleased eye.

“Hmph,” Gimli said, wanting to ask her what those particular clauses were, but deciding against that for now, as it would likely be something she would feel comfortable discussing only with him, “then you should have Dhruv move to your new realm. What say you, Dhruv? You would still serve King Elessar in such a manner – perhaps even more so, if Prince Faramir is as delighted with your cooking as I am.”

“I am flattered,” Dhruv said, “but my life is that of a warrior. I cannot see turning in my sword for a pot and ladle.”

“Must it be a forced choice?” Éowyn asked, intrigued by the idea. “You could serve in our forces and assist in other ways as well. Perhaps you would consider joining the royal guard.”

“Perhaps,” he said, eyes downcast, for while he enjoyed Éowyn’s company and did not want to offend her by refusing, he remained shocked by the dragon-slaying during the Framsburg quest. While it had not been done at Faramir’s hand, it had been the Steward’s task that had produced that event.

He had no desire to serve someone who would condone such a thing – he’d had far enough of that to fill several lifetimes – even as he knew his judgment would be viewed as harsh by the Westerlings. They simply would not understand.

“Tell me more of this betrothal quest custom of your people,” Dhruv asked, changing the topic while attempting to side-skirt any discussion of the Worm-slaying in Framsburg, a matter that he preferred to move to the back of his mind, for now. “Will you do something similar for your brother when he marries?”

“That and more,” she said, knowing that something was amiss within the heart of her newly-found friend even as she decided to ignore it, for this was clearly the plain-spoken Easterling’s preference. Then she looked toward Gimli and Legolas. “And the assistance of these two would help me to create a betrothal quest to rival any other my kingdom has seen.”

“Speaking of quests,” Gimli said somewhat gruffly as he stood, his disquiet returning as dinner concluded, “Legolas and I will scout ahead and return in an hour or two.”

The elf gracefully sprang to his feet, returning his bow and quiver to their rightful place upon his back.

“Pardon my words,” Dhruv said when they had departed, “but such a couple remains a strange thing to me, even as I have seen with my own eyes how well-suited they seem to one another.”

Éowyn stared into the tunnel, the dwarf and elf no longer discernible, and her voice held no judgment. “I think that thought crosses their own minds at times, yet I am thankful that they heed it not.”

Dhruv nodded thoughtfully. “I am as well.”

“Well then,” she said with some eagerness, “I would greatly enjoy hearing more of your homeland. Perhaps you might tell me more of your fight against the Darkness?”
“Enjoy may not be the right word,” Dhruv said with a smile, “but gladly.”

As Dhruv told tales of his early adulthood, Legolas spoke softly as he walked by Gimli’s side some distance away. “I wonder, meleth-nin, about what aid your kin in the Red Mountains may be able to provide to assist us.”

Gimli looked up at Legolas, heartened that the elf’s mood had remained more hopeful than it had been when the dwarf caught up to Legolas on his Eastward journey. “I know not myself, my only One, simply that the Blue Wizard thinks they may be able to help.”

“I hope so,” Legolas muttered, frowning. “I still do not fully understand why my Adar readily took a gift that partially came from Maglor’s hand, even in light of its import.” Over the days that had passed since his learning of the significance of the white gems of starlight, he had grown less concerned with decisions regarding their ultimate use – even as he knew he would choose to free trapped souls as opposed to seeking his own happiness – and more concerned with the source of their creation. Fëanor’s son? This knowledge had enhanced his motivation to find another solution hundredfold. “Surely those gems could be corrupt, as corrupt as the one who assisted in their crafting.”

This was not the first time Legolas had spoken of this, and Gimli was unsure what to say. His initial responses – speaking of what seemed to him to be Maglor’s regret and repentance – had fallen on disbelieving ears. He is a kinslayer, Gimli! More than once over! The similarity – however small – between the Silmarils and the white gems of starlight disquieted the Prince of Eryn Lasgalen even more.

Gimli simply reached for Legolas’ hand. “I know not what to say, my elf, beyond that it seems other options will be available to us, and we may have no need of these gems whatsoever.”

Legolas sighed, comforted as much by what Gimli spoke as by the solidness of his very being. “As always, my dearest dwarf, you find the right words. No wonder Galadriel was enamored of you,” Legolas said playfully – yet Gimli was in no frame of mind to continue such banter. Instead, he felt the need to speak from his heart.

“My sweet one – even if her hand was free for mine to grasp, I would choose yours each and every time. For all of her beauty, the Lady does not hold a candle to you.”

Legolas never would have dreamed such words would make his heart float in happiness, but they did, and he settled into daydreaming about their upcoming wedding, wondering excitedly about Pippin and Arwen’s planning of his nuptials.

The silence was broken only by the repetitive stomping of Gimli’s boots and his breathing – a song, of sorts, that slowly grew enticing beyond measure to Legolas’ ears.

He breathed in Gimli’s scent deeply, his hand drifting over to touch the dwarf’s shoulder, and then stopped abruptly.

“Is there something ahead, love?” Gimli whispered.

“No – or if so, that is not what brings me to stay your feet,” Legolas said with a soft smile, falling to his knees to be at eye level. “I simply thought we are far enough away from the others that I might divert you for a bit, before we return to the task ahead.” He sighed happily, fingers threading through Gimli’s beard.

“Hmph! I had not realized your practice of scouting involved romantic interludes – I should hope it
was not something you sought often,” Gimli said gruffly, an expression of mild jealousy written across his face, and regardless whether it was real or assumed, Legolas felt even more enamored at the sight.

“Ah, but had my scouting involved such interludes, surely I would have gone further and more often with you by my side. It would have made the Ring-Quest more enjoyable, would it not?”

“Hmph! Or we would have been so distracted that we would have been overrun by the enemy many times over!”

Legolas’ eyes twinkled amidst the darkness, and then he grew more serious. “I need not remind you that your presence at my side strengthens me; I am certain my mind would be fraught with worry had you not sought me.”

Gimli shook his head. “How could I not? What sort of dwarf do you take me for?” And Gimli could not resist kissing him then, forgetting for some moments about the tasks that remained ahead.

Yet the prickling in his mind eventually returned. “How long did the Blue Wizard say it had been since he had traveled hence in these tunnels?” Gimli asked as he stared into the distance, absent-mindedly stroking Legolas’ hair, attempting to ready himself to resume their scouting.

“Hmmm?” Legolas murmured, leaning his forehead against Gimli’s shoulder and snuggling further against his warm frame. “I am not certain, why do you ask?”

Gimli narrowed his eyes, attempting to see more clearly. “Unless my eyes deceive me, the way ahead is blocked, either by a cave-in, or a barricade of stone and dirt.”

Legolas smiled at the thought of a more familiar type of obstacle thrown in their way, and Gimli could not help but smile in turn. “Then let us go meet this new challenge that awaits us, meleth-nin.”

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“This dirt and stone speaks of ills long gone,” Legolas said softly, touching the partial barricade before them, finding the occasional branch in its midst. Yet it was not tall enough that it could not be climbed over, and would not delay them in their travel. “That must be what you sensed, Gimli. The land was violated, most severely, and now it rests.” He looked upward, and saw where a portion of the roof of the tunnel seemed to have caved in.

The Prince of Eryn Lasgalen stepped back, a frown upon his face. “I amend that, Gimli. In the distance, there are faint echoes of footsteps.”

“Aye, how far away, do you think?”

“Several miles, perhaps. I apologize, Gimli – I have been so focused upon you that I did not pay close enough attention to what was around us.”

“Nay, my elf – if your eyes and ears seek me and only me for a time, I have no quarrel with that.” He moved to the tunnel wall to study the sounds that reverberated within.

And then he clapped his hands in delight.

“Aye, it is my kin, come to greet us.” He grabbed Legolas’ hand. “Come, let us return to camp and fetch Éowyn and Dhruv.”

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The greeting, when it came, was more akin to an attack than a warm welcome, for the Stonefoot scouting party believed Morinehtar’s warded pathway to their mountains had been compromised.

“Hold!” Gimli bellowed as arrows whirred over their heads, “I am your western kin, we mean no harm! We have been sent by Dusnûlukhâl!”

“Prove it!” a voice bellowed back. "Perhaps he has been compromised - by you!"

“We have passed this far – and only Khaghol Zigrâl could have provided us the words to pass beyond the wards within this tunnel! I may pride myself on my skill in battle, yet surely we could not subdue a Wizard! Mahal as my witness, I would not deceive you!” And then he spoke something so swiftly in Khudzul that none of the others could make out what the sounds were.

“Drop your weapons!” the voice called after a short pause, and after a nod from Gimli, his companions obeyed.

“You as well, Longbeard!” the voice said again.

With a sigh Gimli dropped his axe to the ground.

“Hold still. Do not move, or you will feel my blade in your back!”

And with that, the scouting party moved forward, led by a dwarf with graying hair. “Speak your name, Longbeard.”

“Gimli, son of Glóin, of the Lonely Mountain.” He firmly hit his head and then his chest with a clenched fist, “May Mahal smile upon you.”

The dwarf looked at him curiously, for he had heard of this dwarf. “Why do you travel within Khaghol Zigrâl’s tunnels with an elf and two humans?” He wasn’t certain the answer would be enlightening, for the dwarves of the Blue and Grey Mountains were a strange lot, all things considered, yet stout enough.

Gimli explained their quest while his companions remained still, and by the end the leader of the Stonefoot’s scouting party was shaking his head, a grim smile on his face.

“I hardly see what is so amusing,” Legolas finally said, unable to keep silent any longer, and before Gimli could correct his misconception, the leader of the scouting party spoke.

“Believe me, elf, I am not amused, not even in the slightest, even if it may seem so to you…..ah, I would hardly know where to begin. There is nothing of mirth in your story, not in what has befallen you, and certainly not in the fate of your people, for being trapped in such a way by the Dark One seems to me to be both horrific and cruel.” The dwarf crossed his arms against his broad chest and tapped his fingers. “I am not certain how we might assist you, but if Dusnûlukhâl thinks we may be able, so it must be. Pack your things; I will escort you to our Queen.”

And with that, the group of four was led toward the Stonefoots’ mansions within the southern portion of the Orocarni Range.
“This may become more of an adventure than I had previously surmised,” Gandalf offered wryly as he waded through the field of tall grass growing far to the southeast of Shénmì de Sēnlín, wiping his brow and grimacing in the late afternoon heat.

Nergüi smiled at the White Wizard and the raven-haired elves from where he walked with their guide, the top of their heads barely visible amidst the strange foliage that surrounded them.

“Meaning you wish your staff could summon Gimli and his axe?” Elladan chuckled as he envisioned his dwarven friend being completely engulfed in this field, the mannish portion of his own blood sweltering even as the elvish component reacted little to the heat without. “Yet surely our blades could cut swaths just as keenly.” Before their guide or Gandalf could speak otherwise, he added, “do not worry, I am well aware that we must not cut it.”

Elrohir, for one, appreciated the levity, for their current journey was filled with a mixture of trepidation and confusing anticipation. “I do agree that it feels as though we have been amidst this sea of grass for days. It is unlike anything I have ever seen.”

“Come!” their Avar guide called from where she stood several yards ahead, still uncertain what to make of these particular elves and their companions – wary, even – yet Morinehtar had thought highly of them, and surely his judgment could be trusted. “We must hurry to make it to the edge of this field by nightfall.”

They had thrice flown under the cloak of night on Morinehtar’s swift Fenghuang steeds, and then proceeded on foot thereafter, walking in the heated lands of the far South, seeking Maglor.

The sons of Elrond had near-insisted on accompanying Mithrandir in his quest to find their Adar’s foster-father. Morinehtar had suggested that Maglor might be able to assist Legolas and Gimli, given the assistance he had provided to Rómestámo in the creation of the white gems of starlight. Yet all who knew Elrond’s history were well aware that finding a solution to the enchantment was not the sole – or perhaps even primary – cause of their desire to meet the son of Fëanor.

Yet at the same time neither knew exactly what they sought – nor how they would react when he was found.

Rómestámo reportedly lived near the lamenting minstrel near the Sea south of Umbar, though he was rarely in residence, traveling as frequently as Morinehtar in his bid to combat darkness within the South. Or so Morinehtar hoped, for he had little recent contact with his kinsman, both consumed in their then-battle against the ever-growing darkness, and now by its aftermath.

“Stop!” Gandalf said softly, peering into the distance from where he had been talking with Nergüi.

“Shall we scout ahead?” Elrohir asked, readying to depart and intending to take his brother along with him.

“No – follow our Avar guide’s lead and tread softly,” Gandalf reminded them, “and do not use loud voices. And stop talking of axes and swords!” Gandalf looked at them out of the corner of his eye, for he had rarely seen the sons of Elrond acting so disquieted, even as few others would be able to discern the same.

A rustling ahead caught their attention, and their Avar guide raised her hand for them to wait, a command that they heeded immediately.

It was merely a large animal, foraging amidst the tall grass, and when it spotted the small party, it gazed at the elves and then ran away.
“What was that?” Elladan asked their Avar guide, wishing she had grown comfortable enough with them to disclose her name – but it was not yet so.

“A distant relative of what you refer to as a horse,” she said impassively as she concentrated on the air around them. “Come, let us go.”

They left the field and walked through the nearby forest-of-sorts through the evening, reaching the path their guide sought under bright moonlight.

The cooling air provided a welcome respite as they walked the winding path before them, marveling at the strange flora around them.

“Mithrandir,” their guide said, and Elladan smiled at how her accent made the White Wizard’s name sound, “these are the flowers that Morinehtar has me cultivate for his spell-casting.”

Gandalf moved to her side, interested in these particular elements that Morinehtar used in his enchantments, marveling at the smell of the strange flowers, but even more so at the inherent power held within petals that seemed so delicate.

“You are enamored of her,” Elrohir whispered to his twin as they waited, “even as you know nothing of her.”

“I am not!” Elladan whispered back – firmly, for surely he was no elfling who would be drawn to someone he barely knew.

“I know you too well, brother – and what I say is true,” Elrohir said smugly.

Elladan rolled his eyes. “Surely I can enjoy another’s company without being enamored!”

They resumed walking, stopping when Mithrandir or the sons of Elrond spotted a flower or herb of interest, but before it was time to make camp they came to an impasse, even as the sound of the sea grew stronger in their ears.

“Down this cliff is where we must journey next, but it is not passable for all of us in the dark,” she glanced at Gandalf and Nergüi in particular as she spoke, her questioning of mannish eyesight clear, even as she knew Gandalf was the head of the Wizard’s order, “so we must wait for the light of morning to proceed any further.”

They made camp amidst reeds that grew near the cliff-edge, the sound of waves crashing in the distance a soothing one.

Hours later, Gandalf stood from where he sat upon a boulder, smoking his pipe and gazing into the distance at no particular target. He turned to the sons of Elrond, who sat nearby, talking softly with one another. “Ready yourselves – he approaches, though he would not have us know.”

They turned their faces in the direction of Gandalf’s near-imperceptible nod. While he was still some distance away, Maglor thought for some moments that his keen eyes were deceiving him, for the two sitting by the white-robed old man – a man who seemed familiar, somehow – looked eerily similar to Elrond and Elros as he had, on countless occasions, imagined them fully grown into many centuries of life.

He blinked then, thinking this scene must be an illusion, that the years of madness following the casting of the Silmaril into the sea had returned, his mind as burned by grief and regret as his much-loved brother’s body had been scorched by fire.
And then he fell to his knees, more overcome by grief than he had been in centuries.

Chapter End Notes

Japanese Translations (courtesy of Raelien)
Ryū-ningen = Were-worm

Khudzul Translations (Dwarrow Scholar)
Khaghol Zigrāl = Blue Wizard
Dusnûlukhāl = Dark-defier = Morinehtar = Alatar the Maia

Sanskrit Translations
Vánaspáti = Forest Lord

Other translations (via google translate, apologies if there are errors)
Shénmì de sēnlín = Mysterious Forest (Chinese)
Avar = singular of Avari = elves who never began the great journey (i.e., with Oromë to Aman)

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