Between Darkness and Dawn

by mellon_chronicles

Summary

Thus far, Aragorn and Legolas repeatedly crossed the path of an ancient evil and managed to escape with little notice taken... but that luck has just run out. The Witch King is very curious about the beings that have twice evaded and thwarted him. He wants to know who they are... especially the human. When he is deliberately poisoned, Aragorn's only hope of survival is to follow the Wraith's summons to Angmar, where the antidote lies. To stay with him now, Legolas must choose to walk willingly into the arms of the darkness that has once enslaved him, and once broken his spirit. Imprisoned by a brutal host, the flame of the ranger's hope begins to dim, even as Legolas struggles to keep it alive.

Notes

Rating: PG-13

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Disclaimer:
We own nothing of Middle Earth or any of Tolkien’s worlds or characters. Everything recognizable belongs to JRR Tolkien; anything else belongs to us. We have no permission to use these characters and are receiving no money for this story. This story was written for enjoyment only. Please do not use our original characters or situations without asking first. Thank you.

Series:
Part of the expanding Mellon Chronicles Universe, which includes:
“Tears Like Rain”, “Captive of Darkness”, “Hope”,
“Father’s Love”, “Never Alone”, “First Meetings”,
“Change of Heart, Change of Mind”, “Exile”,
“Return”, “Mistaken Identity”, “Vilya”,
“Black Breath”, “Sickness”, “The Seventh Stone”,
“Betrayal”, “Legolas’ No Good, Rotten Day”,
“Traitor”, “Escape from Mordor”, “Curse of Angmar”,
“Siege of Dread”, “Only the Beginning”, “Trouble Follows”, “It had to be Caves”, “It had to be Stairs”, “Cell Number Eight”, & “And So The End”
This story will make much more sense if you have read those first, but if you want to be adventurous and give it a whirl by itself, go right ahead!

WARNINGS:
Extreme torture and heaping helpings of angst (with a lot of hurt/comfort mush thrown in to cover all owies *grin*). I mean it folks, you know when we bother to use the word ‘extreme’ we are serious. :o) You have been warned.

Special thanks:
To our readers and reviewers all over the net – you are a wonderful bunch. To our yahoo group – you always make us smile. To our Beta Reader San – thank you for sharing your time with us. And of course, to my co-author Siobhan – thank you for writing with me, it’s the best part of my life. ~~Cassia

Time Frame:
Pre-LOTR, after “Siege of Dread”.

Additional Notes and Disclaimers:
We’ll try to keep this section short this time, I promise. I’ll just give you a few little disclaimers I want to get out of the way up front. *smile*

We are not herbalists.
We use many references to herbs and primitive or natural medicines in this story. While a few are real, most are completely fictional. Do not try these things at home, they probably don’t work! LOL

We are not Volcanologists.
We do some things in this story with magma and volcanic activity that we are not entirely sure is completely possible. We did look it up and got some interesting answers from a gentleman who *is* a Volcanologist, but take it all with a grain of salt anyway and realize when one is dealing with evil, undead spirits and body-less eyes, there is hopefully room for a few other phenomena. :o)

We are not sane...
OOPS!! *quickly hits delete key* how did THAT get in there?... *smile*

Okay, now that that’s over with, on to what you all are really here for: the story!!
Aragorn bolted wide awake, his hand wrapped around the hilt of his hunting knife. His breath came in short, quick gasps. He was covered in perspiration and entangled in the blanket wrapped about him.

A cool hand gently grasped his fingers, which still clung tightly to the handle of his blade.

“Easy, Strider.” The words were elvish and cut through the last vestiges of foggy dreams that entwined him. “We are safe. The fighting is long over.”

There had been orcs and people everywhere... and the bear...

The bear!

The human relinquished his grasp on the weapon and turned quickly to his left. The animal was
watching them closely. Its large, dark eyes reflected the scant moonlight. It whuffled softly, acknowledging the ranger's glance. Its breath ghosted lightly on the cool night air. With a small smile, Aragorn nodded at the animal and allowed Legolas to press him back down against the long grasses that formed his bed tonight.

"Dreaming of it, were you?" Legolas' voice was amused.

Aragorn rolled over and gazed up at the elf who had propped himself up on one elbow. Legolas smiled slightly as he glanced over the human's shoulder, watching the bear that lay behind them both.

It had only been a few hours since the chaos had ended and the plains had returned to their normally peaceful state. The events of the last few days coiled through Aragorn's thoughts, disturbing his waking moments and invading his sleep. His head ached - a reminder of the battle not long behind them.

Legolas' soft fingers touched the human's temple, and then drifted down to rest upon Aragorn's hand again. The fingers of the ranger's right hand were bruised and warm to the touch. "Does it still hurt?"

"Only when I'm conscious," Aragorn replied dryly. "That's what I get for being trodden upon by a hoard of orcs and a clumsy elf." It was a joke and Legolas accepted it as such.

"Clumsy? I wasn't the one on the ground," the prince pointed out.

Aragorn smiled, but his eyes were beginning to glaze with weariness. This was not how their little trip was supposed to have worked out, but at least everyone was all right.

"Sleep, you'll need the rest." Legolas' words cut through his thoughts; the very same words the elf had spoken to him weeks ago.

With a soft chuckle Aragorn closed his eyes. "I've heard that before."

"And I was right, was I not?" Legolas teased gently. "Nothing will happen tonight. We are safe I think." He placed Aragorn's hunting knife next to the ranger's head. Almost without thought, the ranger turned over onto his side and pulled the blade closer to his body, within easy reach. It was a habit he had never broken. By now he had finally accepted the realization that he never would.

He let the memories flood back through his mind, trying to accept them and own them, just like his adopted father Lord Elrond had taught him so many years ago.

//"When a memory is owned, the fear it holds you is broken and it no longer enslaves you..."//
Aragorn had thought them wise words then; he had had chance to practice them many times since.

He did so now.

As he drifted off to sleep, Legolas’ voice echoed dimly in his mind, words of the past reflecting within...

~*PART ONE*~

~Bitter Parting~

“Sleep, you’ll need the rest,” the elf prince insisted.

“Who knew one old man and his apprentice would have so much energy in them,” Aragorn growled grumpily. It had been two days since they parted from the main company of wood-elves. The pace they had kept since was even brisker than usual.

Beoma and the young man he had taken as his apprentice were both as spry as any elf Aragorn had ever known.

The baker was pushing the upper borders of middle age. His dark black hair and beard were almost completely frosted with grey, but the vitality in his large, powerful limbs had not waned. His apprentice, Pejor, was still a youth. He was not yet old enough to grow a proper beard, and only the scraggly beginnings of one clung to the side of face. The boy was slender and wiry, but very energetic. Until recently, he had talked to the ranger almost constantly.

The plan was for the elf and ranger to escort the two Beornings back to their homes. Under normal circumstances this would have caused the ranger no fatigue. Unfortunately, Aragorn had not counted on losing so much sleep between the elder baker’s snoring and Legolas’... family trouble. Aragorn glanced sidelong at his friend, but the elf was smiling now and teasing him, no hint of shadow in his playful gaze. Aragorn was glad.

“Master, master you’re snoring again,” Pejor’s soft voice drifted to them from across the darkened camp. Beoma grunted softly and a rustling sound suggested that he had rolled over. A few moments later the sonorous drone began again.
Aragorn had to chuckle and Legolas returned his grin. Those two... they were quite a handful in their own, unique way.

“Master Beoma...” Pejor’s voice almost bordered on whining.

Legolas started to rise, but Aragorn caught his friend’s wrist, bidding him stay. “No, let them be. For once, the kid has a point...”

Legolas shook his head and raised his eyebrow but settled down beside the ranger again.

Sometimes eager to the point of aggravation, Pejor was Beoma’s ‘latest project’ as the elder master baker had affectionately introduced him when he brought him to Rivendell several months ago. He said he needed someone to keep him young since Elladan and Elrohir weren’t able to visit as much as they used to anymore. Aragorn wasn’t sure if Pejor kept the older Beorning young or just kept him laughing, although perhaps they were one and the same.

Beoma and Pejor had been away from home some time now as they watched over their healing friends in Rivendell and they seemed anxious to get home. Only after some persuasion from Legolas, had the two finally agreed to halt for the night. The elf’s argument - that dealing with Aragorn after a lack of sleep would drive any being to insanity - had won them over.

Rolling over, the ranger smacked the elf lightly as he remembered what Legolas had said. “And thanks for the vote of confidence back there, using me as your excuse to set up camp for the evening.”

“What excuse?” Legolas laughed, pushing the human back. “It’s true, you are insufferable. Now don’t make me say it again, go_to_sleep.” He over-enunciated the words as though dealing with a stubborn child.

With a snort of derision, Aragorn grabbed the edges of his blanket. He wrapped it more firmly around his frame as he rolled over, demonstratively putting his back to his friend.

“Fussy elf.” He muttered darkly, the easy taunt earning a light laugh from his companion.

Legolas smiled. Pulling his cloak around himself, he lay down near his friend, gazing up at the stars. Legolas had a blanket and bedroll with their supplies but he obviously did not care to use it tonight. The last time he had neglected his bedding, no less than five of his father’s servants had hurried to bring him more blankets than any being could possibly use. Despite Legolas’ protests, they had not gone away until Thranduil was satisfied that his son was comfortable.
Aragorn rolled onto his back again, casting a sidelong look at his friend. “If you think *I’m* going to pop up and get you your blanket...” he murmured in a somewhat sleepy, but wry tone.

“You do and I will probably kill you,” Legolas cut him off quickly.

Aragorn’s grin widened in the dark. It was as he suspected. “Enjoying your freedom?” he taunted lightly, closing his eyes as the soft night sounds enveloped them.

Legolas had loved being with his father in Rivendell, but the more Aragorn watched them together, the more he understood why Legolas liked to spend so much time by himself. The creator seemed to have placed two very strong willed spirits together in Legolas and Thranduil. They had the unique problem of being different enough to have their own conflicting points of view, and yet alike enough to lock horns over them. In Rivendell, all had been well, but once they were on their way home again...

“Yes. There is something very pleasant about being able to govern one’s own actions. Strange how that is, is it not?” the elf’s reply was obviously meant in jest, keeping in the light spirit of their conversation, but there was a slight tension under the words that the ranger did not miss.

Aragorn sighed. He hadn’t wanted to have this conversation now, when he felt ready to nod off at any moment, but he had to say something.

“He cares for you very much you know, no matter how he acts sometimes,” the human said quietly. There was no need to specify whom he was talking about. Aragorn knew how he would feel if his father had refused to say goodbye to him after everything they had just been through in the past few months. He was a bit surprised how easily Legolas seemed to be dealing with the entire situation. It seemed to be something to which the prince was unfortunately accustomed.

Legolas was still for a moment. “I know. He would trade his life for mine, but he doesn’t trust me to figure out how many pillows I can actually use.” He rolled onto his side so he could watch his friend. He could see the concern in the ranger’s tired eyes and smiled gently. “Don’t, mellon-nín, don’t try to figure us out. You will only give yourself a headache.”

“Which I already have, thank you very much,” Aragorn rubbed his temples. “Just because I *can* go night and day without rest doesn’t mean I enjoy it...”
Legolas exhaled with a half-chuckle. “I’m sorry about that. Beoma and Pejor are surprising for mortals, but then again, so are you. You should have said something earlier and I would have stopped everyone sooner.”

Aragorn shrugged. “You had things on your mind.”

Legolas was silent for a long moment, remembering how he and Thranduil had parted two days ago. It was not the kind of thing he would have wanted or expected after how peaceful their relationship had been in Rivendell. Legolas was actually a little surprised it had all turned out so badly.

Aragorn was not. He had seen the clouds gathering from the moment the Mirkwood contingent left Imladris. Thranduil was ready to go home. Legolas was not. The prince could not explain it rationally, because he *did* want to go home... but he did not want to leave Rivendell, not yet. Thranduil made the decisions however and when he said they were leaving, they were leaving. Legolas understood and accepted the decree.

Aragorn had softened the departure by accompanying Legolas on the journey for at least part of the way. The ranger was escorting Beoma and Pejor home now that Celboril was sufficiently recovered to resume the duties that he loved so well. Since the two Beornings’ village near the Carrock was roughly along the same path that would take the wood-elves home, they agreed to journey together, until such time as they would have to part ways after crossing the Anduin.

The trip over the Misty Mountains had been smooth enough, but traversing the paths that had led them all into so much trouble and pain months before, had not seemed to have a good effect on Thranduil and Legolas. Thranduil became increasingly protective of his son, undoubtedly still remembering how close he had come to losing him. Legolas appreciated the concern, but was now fully recovered. He found the pampering both smothering and occasionally humiliating. The prince said nothing and let his father have his way, but Aragorn could tell what Legolas thought whether he voiced it or not.

Thranduil was not an idiot: he could sense that his son was pulling away from him, but he did not understand why. The harder Thranduil tried to hold on and fix the perceived distance between them in his own way, the more Legolas tried to pull back from the constant pressure to get a little space of his own. Raniean and Trelan spent many evenings silently slapping their foreheads as they saw the pattern they both recognized far too well settling back into place between their King and Prince. Legolas and Thranduil had both grown much and their relationship benefited from that growth, but some things it seemed, would never change.

When Legolas quietly announced his intention to accompany Strider to the Beorning village rather than returning home immediately with the rest of the company, it sparked an unexpected firestorm.
Thranduil forbid the parting, barely even letting Legolas finish.

//"But father..." Legolas was surprised at the abrupt command.

"*No*, Legolas. It’s not safe and you’re not well yet. Besides, haven’t you been away enough? It’s time to go home. Strider is more than capable of seeing Beoma and Pejor back by himself.” Thranduil’s tone was final. He did not intend to discuss this situation further.

Legolas took several deep breaths and folded his arms as Thranduil turned away decisively. He had let Thranduil have his way on every single issue that came up thus far. Besides, he had already told Aragorn yes, so it was not his father’s decision to make. “I’m going,” he said quietly.

Thranduil turned back quickly. “What?”

“I’m going.” Legolas repeated quietly, almost respectfully. “I am not ill anymore father and I can take care of myself. I promise I will not be long.”

“Legolas...” Aragorn was shaking his head, for he didn’t want Legolas to clash with his father over this. He had invited the elf to come with him, but he hadn’t meant to cause an argument.

“No, Estel, I said I was going with you and I am. Nothing will happen father, you have my word.”

“Nothing?” Thranduil’s voice turned incredulous. “The same nothing that always happens to you when you leave me? Legolas be reasonable. The last time you went off on your own you ended up in – in Mordor! Have you no notion of how many times you’ve almost died since then? How many Legolas?”

The younger elf flinched slightly. How many? More than his father knew. “The Carrock is barely four days journey from here and Beoma’s village only a little farther. In all likelihood I will catch up with you before you even make it back to Lasgalen.” Legolas tried to keep a reasonable, persuasive tone and not give voice to his rankled temper.

Thranduil was not impressed. The Elvenking did not like being crossed and his quick-burn temper was winding along with his concern. “Not this time, Legolas. I have heard that before. And now
“Do you think I rush into danger because it excites me, or because I don’t know any better? Do you honestly think...” the prince’s voice dropped. “...That I have chosen anything that has happened to me these past few seasons?”

“I just want you safe. You used to be more careful than this Legolas. Don’t be a fool.”

Aragorn shifted uncomfortably. He wanted to speak up, but didn’t know what he could say that would help. It wasn’t his place to interfere between Legolas and his father, but his heart ached for his friend. Thranduil may have meant well, but he was stabbing at wounds he knew nothing about. The Elvenking was placing blame upon horrific situations that he had not witnessed and hence could not understand. Aragorn had witnessed them and he did understand. He could see Legolas stinging from the verbal blows and coiling into a position to retaliate. This was not going to go well.

“I cannot live my life in a self-made cage, either to keep the world out or to myself in... that’s not safety, it’s cowardice.” Legolas’ voice was barely above a whisper. “I did that once father, you know I did, and it almost turned my heart as cold as the stone walls I was hiding behind. Do you want me to go back to that?”

“At least then I knew where you were half the time. I could *do* something when there was a problem, not just sit there for years having nightmares about you and being absolutely helpless. All you have gained over the years is recklessness. How often have I almost lost you? Too often. And now you want to go running off again, without even coming home first? What have I done Legolas? Why are you punishing me? Is my company that repugnant to you?” there was hurt behind the accusing and angry tones creeping into Thranduil’s voice.

“Of course not, Father!” Legolas protested quickly, deeply hurt by that accusation. “That isn’t true...”

“Then you will come home,” Thranduil’s voice was quiet now.
Valar, Legolas could never fight his father’s logic. “Because you want me to?” Legolas’ question was guarded, but earnest. If it was really that important to his father that he came home now, he knew Aragorn would understand...

Thrandaui perceived the question as a challenge to his authority and his tone frosted over. “Because I *tell* you to.”

It was the wrong thing to say. The worst thing he could have said.

Raniean, standing nearby but keeping respectfully out of the quarrel, resisted the urge to groan. He knew exactly how his friend would react, and he was right.

Legolas’ lips tightened. The prince turned away and started separating his gear from the royal pack horses.

Thrandaui stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Legolas, what are you doing?”

“Preparing to leave with Strider,” Legolas answered evenly.

Thrandaui’s hand tightened on Legolas’ arm, forcefully spinning the younger elf back around to face the older elf. “Legolas, have you heard nothing of what I am saying to you?”

Legolas faced his father calmly. “Yes, my lord, I’m listening. I have done nothing *but* listen since we left Rivendell. I mean you no disrespect, but I wish you would honor my decisions as I honor yours.”

“I do when your decisions are not foolhardy or ill advised.”

Legolas tried and failed to keep the small flash of anger from his eyes. “And who decides they are foolhardy and ill advised father? Are you truly the final judge on such matters?”

Thrandaui’s jaw tightened. “Legolas...”
Legolas grabbed his pack and turned away, tugging his arm out of his father’s hands. “I promise I will return home to you by the time the new moon is full.”

Aragorn shifted on his blanket and sighed at the memory as he tried to tune out Beoma’s disturbing snoring. In the end Thranduil accepted Legolas’ course of action only because he would have had to put him under arrest to make him stay. He had insisted that Legolas at least take Raniean, Trelan and some of the other guards with him, but Legolas refused. If the suggestion had been made before the issue became a battle of wills, Legolas would have gladly taken his friends along, but not now, not because his father ordered him to do so.

"Legolas if they want to come, they are welcome,” Aragorn had tried to bring any measure of peace possible to the situation. “I always enjoy their company...”

“No,” Legolas was riled and hurt. He had too much of his father in him to give in an inch now. “You and I are perfectly capable on our own. I do not need nor desire an escort of wet nurses.” His tone was more biting than he intended.

Aragorn flinched slightly and glanced over Legolas’ shoulder. Legolas turned, following his friend’s gaze to find that Raniean was standing right behind him. It showed how upset Legolas was that he had not even noticed his friend’s approach.

Legolas froze slightly. He really hadn’t wanted Raniean to hear that last statement.

“Legolas,” Raniean shook his head, speaking quietly, just for his friend’s ears. “Trelan and I want to go with you. You’re our friend. Don’t reject us just because the King would have us act like nursemaids.”

Trelan stood behind Raniean quietly. He had obviously also heard Legolas’ outburst.

Legolas sighed and took Raniean by the shoulders, wishing to take back his hard words and remove the hurt behind his old friend’s eyes. He was upset and lashed out at the first person handy. It was a trait he knew he possessed, but hated. It was too similar to what he did not like about his father.

“Ran, Trey, I’m sorry, I did not intend that the way it sounded. You know I value your company. But... I need to do this on my own.” Legolas’ eyes pleaded for understanding.
“Because, if we go with you and you come back all right, it proves nothing to your father,” Trelan said quietly. He smiled dryly.

Raniean saw in Legolas’ eyes that Trelan had accurately assessed the situation and his consternation flared.

“Legolas, don’t be as pig-headed as he is. I don’t need two of him!” The taller elf tried to make a joke out of his frustration, although nothing about it was very funny.

“Please, Ran, I need you at least to trust me. I will be all right, I promise. Look after father. I will be home soon; perhaps I will even bring Strider with me if he is able.” Legolas smiled for them, trying to lift the dark cloud that had settled over the camp.

“You know I trust you, Legolas,” Raniean said quietly.

“You’re a stubborn elf, Legolas,” Trelan shook his head. “But you better be back in time to start practicing for the spring games. Raniean and I don’t have a trio for the competitions when you’re gone.”

The three childhood friends tried to smile.

“All right, I promise,” Legolas squeezed his friends’ arms.

Aragorn eased away while the three elves were talking. He felt bad about the way this situation had degenerated. He felt responsible for this latest rift between Thranduil and Legolas. Certainly there had been some tension on the journey, but he hadn’t expected to see it blow up quite this badly. He couldn’t understand. So much had seemed to have healed between Legolas and his father these past months, and now...

Thranduil was stalking about, overseeing the preparations to break camp. Harried servants hurried about trying to please their currently ill-tempered Lord.

“Your highness?” Aragorn tried to get the King’s attention.
The Elvenking had his back to the human and did not turn for a moment. When he did his face was cool and diplomatically set. “Yes?”

“Our highness...” there was so much Aragorn wanted to say, but so much he knew Thranduil wouldn’t hear. “I won’t let anything happen to Legolas. I would die to protect him, you know that.”

Thranduil nodded once, but did not speak. The King did know. Aragorn had proved his loyalty on more than one occasion. He did not blame the human for his son’s recklessness anymore, but he did not wish to discuss it with him either.

The ranger hesitated, not sure where to go from their quiet impasse.

“When I was young, I broke my brothers’ favorite hunting bows. I was upset because I could not go out with them. I meant to hide the bow, but ended up ruining it instead. It was an accident, but they were quite angry. They left on their trip. While they were in the mountains there was an accident. Elrohir broke his leg and they were trapped in a snare-pit they could not escape. Father sensed something was wrong and Moranuen found them, but it was almost too late. Until he brought them back I thought I had lost them, like I lost my parents, and there was no way I could take back what had happened between us.”

Thranduil looked away. “I’m sorry to hear it, but I assume there is a larger point you are trying to achieve here?”

Aragorn nodded. “We cannot always control what happens to our loved ones. Sometimes they are hurt. Sometimes they die. But if we part angry, and something *does* happen... it hurts that much more.”

Thranduil met Aragorn’s gaze firmly. “I held my son in my arms and believed he was dying. I sat there and heard the best healers in Arda say there was nothing they could do to save him. All I could do was hold his bleeding body. That is all I have EVER been able to do for him. I thought he was dead, Estel. I poured my heart out to him. Now he will not even return home with me. Nothing can hurt more. Now if you’ll excuse me, I believe we have our separate ways to go.”

Thranduil left Aragorn standing there, looking at the king’s retreat and wishing there was something else he could say.
“It’s not your fault you know,” Trelan’s hand on Aragorn’s back almost made the ranger jump. “Take it from someone who has known them longer than you. They’ll get over this eventually. It’s... it’s a kind of pattern with them. Believe me, things have improved. There was a time when Legolas would be on his way back to Mirkwood in irons right now.” The smaller elf was trying to be light, but Aragorn could tell he was only partly joking.

Aragorn shook his head and let his breath out slowly. He realized that Legolas was at his elbow.

“Come Estel, I have spoken to Beoma, he and Pejor are ready. Let us go.” Legolas gave no indication of whether or not he had heard what his father said about him.

“Legolas,” Aragorn hesitated. “Maybe you should stay. It’s not worth all this... I don’t even know what’s being fought about anymore.”

Legolas hesitated briefly, but then resolutely shook his head. “Nothing we have not disagreed on my whole life. I am not a child anymore. Someday father will have to understand that. If he could only trust a little less in the infallibility of his own wisdom...” the prince’s words trailed off. He hadn’t meant to go that far. “Forgive me. Únauth, mellon-nín. Forget it. Come.”

Thranduil ignored them when they left. He did not acknowledge Legolas’ farewell, although the younger elf tried twice.

Legolas did not seem to expect him to respond, and did not react to the rejection. But Aragorn knew his friend well enough to see that Thranduil’s actions hurt Legolas whether the prince cared to show it or not.

The morning sky spread out bright overhead as Beoma and Pejor quietly followed their escorts away from the main elf host. They could tell there had been trouble and kept to themselves for the moment, giving the two friends space.

“I’m sorry Legolas,” Aragorn said quietly when they crested a ridge and looked back to see the party of elves winding their way away towards the dark, distant shadow of the forest on the far horizon.

“I had hoped...” the ranger trailed off. What was he going to say? ‘I had hoped you both were past this?’ That did not sound at all like what he meant.
Legolas sighed. “Strider, father and I did a lot of talking in Rivendell. Real talking, not just him talking and I listening. I feel I understand him now as well as I ever will... not that this knowledge always helps.” He chuckled ruefully. “But nothing changes overnight. Trees that have grown for centuries take time to bend a new direction, even if the sun and winds that shape them shift. If I had a horse for every time my father and I have parted badly, Mirkwood’s stables would rival those of the Rohirrim. I have finally learned that it will pass, we will come to peace again and father will eventually forget he was ever angry. That is more than I could say ever before. And right now, I intend to enjoy my freedom while it lasts.”

Aragorn shook his head, unable to repress a small snort. “I may never understand your family, mellon-nín, but so long as we are not being exiled or chased by insane relatives, I suppose I can live with a few quirks.”

“Good, especially since you have no right to talk. I do not have two brothers who put water pitchers above other people’s doors...”

Aragorn groaned. “Legolas, for the hundredth time, they intended it for me...”

“Mmm,” Legolas nodded. “All very well, except that they got my father and me.”

“I would have liked to see that,” Pejor commented, now that the conversation seemed to be taking a lighter and less private turn.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Aragorn and Legolas said at the same time.

Beoma laughed. It was a distinctive, full-bellied whuffling sound that made you want to join him.

Now, looking up at the night sky littered with stars, Aragorn chuckled again. He was glad Legolas was here with him, even if that was a selfish thought. They had been together daily for over three years now, it would be an adjustment when they finally had to say goodbye. Aragorn knew he had things he had to do, as did Legolas. Even so, any small amount of extra time they could delay the inevitable parting was welcome... even if Legolas, Beoma and Pejor had seemed content to walk almost all night last night and half of this one.

“What?” Legolas asked, having heard his friend laugh.
“Beoma and Pejor, I swear they like walking in starlight almost as much as you do.”

Legolas smiled in the dark and shook his head. He had to agree. The Beornings were unusual people, but then, he already knew that. “I thought you were going to sleep.”

“I am, I am,” Aragorn rolled his eyes. “Gladly.”
The morning was bright and rosy, despite the nip of deepening autumn that lingered in the air. Here and there birds twittered in the branches overhead, winging their way south in preparation for the winter months. Like the birds, the elf, ranger and two Beornings had risen at dawn and already covered many miles.

Nature made a beautiful song, but it was difficult for Aragorn to hear it. Pejor was talking to the ranger and Aragorn nodded politely as they walked. At first he really had been paying attention to what the younger man said, but about a half hour ago even his lengthy attention span had been exceeded. He found his mind wandering.

Pejor was either oblivious, or used to the reaction.

“So if you hold it over the fire any longer it ruins the color, but if you take it off when it’s only slightly brown you can twist it into...” Pejor stopped speaking when his Master’s hand on his arm stopped his forward motion.

“Come, Pejor,” Beoma interrupted. “It’s time for us to let the good ranger have some peace. Home is just over those hills.”

Aragorn cast the baker a grateful look that made Beoma chuckle.

“Are we there already?” Pejor seemed genuinely surprised. “Well goodbye, Strider, it’s been wonderful talking to you.”

“You too, Pejor,” Aragorn replied graciously.

Legolas shot his friend an amused glance. “You are such a liar,” his laughing blue eyes seemed to say.
When neither Beoma nor Pejor were looking, Aragorn made a face at the prince.

“Good-bye, friends!” Beoma and Pejor waved to the two friends as the elder Beorning ushered his apprentice away. “We thank you for your assistance and your gracious company. We can find our own way from here. If you come this way again, you must stop by!”

“As long as you’re doing the cooking, Beoma, you can be sure we will!” Aragorn assured with a smile.

Aragorn and Legolas watched as the two Beornings wound away into the distance and disappeared from view when their path took them down into the valley, leading them home.

Aragorn sat down on a rock and tilted his face towards the sunshine. He was still a bit tired. He was glad that Beoma had not expected them to go all the way back to their village. He was not sure Pejor would have survived that long.

The ranger opened one eye and found that Legolas was standing in front of him, watching him. He closed his eye again.

“Do you hear that?” the ranger asked.

Barely imperceptible rustling sounds told Aragorn that his friend had seated himself on the grass next to the ranger.

“It depends on what ‘that’ is,” Legolas said after a moment.

Aragorn rolled his eyes. That’s what he got for talking to an elf. There wasn’t a single significant sound to be heard for miles, but doubtless Legolas could catalog every bird call and distant footstep if asked.

“The silence. It’s beautiful, or at least it *was*,” the human said wryly.
“Ah,” came Legolas’ reply. There was a long pause. “You know, you can’t really hear silence...” the elf said after several minutes.

For a moment Aragorn actually thought Legolas was serious. Another quick peek at his friend’s face however told him that the prince was teasing.

“Then maybe those elven ears of yours aren’t as good as you think,” the ranger’s rejoinder came equally deadpanned.

Legolas snorted softly. Neither of them wanted to talk about leaving or where they were going to go from here just yet.

“Oh really? Well then what do you hear, my esteemed companion?” the elf taunted.

Aragorn tilted his head back with a small laugh. “Well, I hear you, and I hear the birds...” the ranger stopped suddenly. His brows furrowed. The fact was, he didn’t hear the birds anymore. He opened his eyes to find that Legolas was on his feet again, looking around.

The birds had all flown off, but there were other sounds. The distant clamor was faint and muffled to Aragorn’s ears, but very clear now to Legolas’.

“Estel, I hear orc voices!” he said with no small amount of alarm.

Aragorn jumped to his feet at Legolas’ side. In the distance grey smoke rose in thin threads through the morning air. There was too much smoke for it to be from cooking fires and it was coming from the direction of Beoma and Pejor’s village.

The two friends took off at a run, following the path taken by the Beornings not long ago. As they ran, the scent of smoke was carried to them on the breeze.

Reaching the crest of the ridge, they looked down into the valley below. The sight that met them was not a good one.

The small Beorning village sprawled gently across the landscape below them. Black smoke rose in a
thick pall over the normally peaceful scene. Bright orange flames licked at and devoured thatched roofs like stacks of kindling. The town was on fire.

Small black shapes roiled around the burning structures in tangled knots of confusion. The twisted, ugly shapes of orcs were everywhere, like a swarm of crawling insects. Beoma and Pejor were nowhere in sight.

For a moment the shock was incredible. Orcs never attacked here. These lands were secure: the Beornings kept them safe. These people’s blatant hatred of the evil creatures kept the orcs at bay in this part of the world. Whatever action had set the foul beasts against the Beornings must have been great indeed. The surprise did not hold Aragorn and Legolas captive long. Almost immediately they began running down the hill, towards the scene of battle.

As they came closer, the wide-spread fighting narrowed itself down to that which lay directly before them.

A stone and thatch cottage was engulfed in flames. A woman and child burst from the yard behind the house. They did not scream or cry, but fear was evident on their faces. The child tripped and fell. The woman stopped to scoop him up and then kept running without missing a beat. Half a dozen orcs swarmed out from around base of the burning structure, right behind the fleeing mother and child.

They never reached their goal. A blur of brown and gold shot past the woman and an arrow buried itself deeply in the throat of the closest orc.

Aragorn and Legolas attacked the foul creatures with a cry. The ranger’s sword flashed bright and lethal in the fire-glow. Beside him, Legolas’ bow sung. The orcs fell swiftly before them as the two friends hurried past the burning house, wading deeper into the fray.

The Beornings were putting up a fierce fight and piles of orc dead already lay heaped amidst the burning houses. The orcs had the advantage of sheer numbers, but the villagers were making them pay very dearly for this raid. The small number of Beorning dead was encouraging.

“Strider!” Legolas shouted to get his friend’s attention.

Aragorn thrust his sword forward, impaling an orc with one sweep and jabbing another in the gut with the pommel of his blade as he yanked his hand back. He spun around and finished the orc he
had knocked down before looking up in answer to his friend’s call.

Legolas was a dozen yards away. The knives in his hands dripped with black orc blood. His gaze was fixed on a point to the north of them. Following the prince’s line of sight, Aragorn saw a small group of Beornings surrounded by orcs just beyond the edges of the village. They could barely see Beoma’s graying head bobbing amid the others.

For a moment Legolas had a clear look. Beoma had his arm wrapped protectively around Pejor’s smaller shoulders. A fierce look was on the man’s face as he struggled with the overwhelming odds stacked against them. The orcs were trying to pull back, herding their prisoners away.

Leaping up onto a smoldering haystack, Legolas sighted in on the orcs driving the villagers away. Three arrows left his bowstring and three orcs fell. The mound of hay beneath his feet shifted as several of the dark creatures jostled the base, trying to dislodge the elf. Flames licked higher, making the air stifling hot. Legolas was compelled to jump down before the dry stack he stood upon burst into brilliant conflagration.

Legolas landed on his feet and slit the throat of an orc that rushed towards him. “Strider!” he called again. The orcs on the edges of the town were getting away and he could not stop them from here.

Aragorn nodded. He understood what Legolas was trying to tell him. Jumping over a low fence, the ranger hurried down the cluttered street. A wave of fighting slowed his progress. A brave line of stout Beorning men were holding several scores of orcs at bay behind a series of overturned carts and flaming hay bales.

The orcs swarmed against one of the over turned carts, shoving it back against the defenders, attempting to break their line. Throwing his shoulder against the bottom of the wagon, Aragorn was quickly joined by several other men. Together they shoved the defense back into place. Jumping up onto the large wheel of the cart, Aragorn leapt down into the middle of the orcs below, his sword swinging.

Legolas lost sight of Aragorn in the fighting. Stopping only to deal with a few orcs that confronted him, he tried to gain a higher vantage point once more. The burning buildings obstructed his line of sight and the fighting held him mired down in the center of town, unable to locate Aragorn or the group Beoma had been amongst.

It looked as if the Beornings were slowly winning this battle, but the orcs were putting up a good fight.
When Aragorn finally reached the edges of the town, there was no trace of Beoma, Pejor, or the orcs he had glimpsed earlier. Shouting behind the ranger made him turn around swiftly. One of the larger, two-story structures was toppling down upon itself. The huge, flaming front tumbled towards the human like a hungry giant.

The ranger dropped and rolled only just in time to avoid being crushed under the wreckage. He covered his head with his arms as burning cinders showered around him. He started struggling to his feet... and that was the last thing he remembered.

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“Ohh, my head...” Aragorn wasn’t sure if he had said the words or only thought them. His head felt as if it had been shoved into a box ten times too small and batted about by a few cave trolls.

Everything was dark. He tried to open his eyes, but after a few moments he realized that his eyes were open and it was dark because it was nighttime. He started, suddenly disorientated by that realization.

“Easy, Strider, easy.” Legolas’ reassuring voice helped him come slowly back to full consciousness. “You should avoid confrontations with falling structures, mellon-nín. I daresay that your family does not have a good history with them.”

Aragorn smiled ruefully, wincing as he pushed himself up on his elbows, trying to get a better look around. “What happened? Where are we?”

The ranger found that he was on a hard earth floor, staring up into darkened rafters of what might have been a barn or stable of some kind. The smell of smoke and charred wood still lingered heavily in the air. There was a constant, pattering sound that his sluggish mind could not decipher until a soft peal of thunder told him it was raining. He craned his neck around, trying to find his friend.

“We are in a barn, near what is left of Beoma’s village,” Legolas reported quietly. The elf was sitting cross-legged beside the ranger on the hay-strewn floor. “This is one of the few structures still standing. The orcs are gone.”
Aragorn could sense other presences around them in the dark and heard a soft mutter of movement. “What of the others?” he asked. “Is everyone all right?”

Legolas sighed softly. “Some are; some aren’t. The men of the village pursued the bulk of the orcs westward, back towards the misty mountains. The creatures will think long and hard before attacking these lands again. The women and children remained here with a small guard. Word has been sent to the Carrock and the other villages. Help should be arriving in a few days. They will be all right until then, these are a strong people.”

“What of Beoma and Pejor?” Aragorn was almost afraid to ask. Legolas’ answering silence was not reassuring.

“I don’t know, Estel,” the elf admitted. “They are not dead, but they are gone. A number of the villagers are missing. I found their tracks leading away to the north. It seems to me that, for whatever reason, some of the orcs retreated northward with a group of prisoners long before the majority of the fighting was over.”

Aragorn rubbed his face, trying to clear the ringing from his ears. “So they couldn’t be followed,” he said grimly. He had seen those kinds of tactics in action before.

“So I would assume,” Legolas agreed. He kept his voice low so as to not disturb the other people sleeping in the barn. “Unfortunately they seem to have been successful. I was not able to ascertain that they had gone a different way than that which the rest of the orcs took until after the battle was over. By that time all the fighters had already left in chase of the west-bound orcs. There is no one here to go after the prisoners now and by the time help comes from elsewhere...”

“They will be beyond reach and hope,” Aragorn finished grimly. He pushed himself all the way upright and hung his head forward a little, trying to work the tension out of his shoulders.

“That is what I fear,” Legolas concurred. “The Carrock is two days journey from here. As soon as word reaches Grimbeorn of what has happened to his kin he will come to their aid. I do not know him, but I met his father Beorn once, a long time ago. They are not men one should wish to have as an enemy. I do not doubt that the orcs attempting to escape to the mountains will be slain, but I fear any aid will come too late to help those taken north.”

“Then we must go after them ourselves,” Aragorn said decidely. Beoma and Pejor had been under his protection; he felt responsible for them. Besides, he would suffer no one to be left captive in the
hands of orcs.

Legolas nodded. “I already assumed we would. I took the liberty of gathering up such supplies as we shall need before the rain began. We will be ready to leave at first light... *if* you are all right.”

“Me?” Aragorn flashed his friend a roguish smile. “You know how hard my head is.”

“Yes, I do.” Legolas raised one sculpted eyebrow at his friend. “But you still had me worried. Finding you in that flaming wreckage was no easy task, my friend. I feared you had been consumed by the fire. You were lucky that it was only some of the Beornings personal things had trapped you when the building collapsed. After we pulled you out, I could not wake you, but you did not rest easy. I worried that you were more injured than you appeared. You kept crying out something about the Corsairs.”

“Did I?” Aragorn honestly had no memory of any such thing. He mused for a moment. “I’m sorry, Legolas. I suppose that the last time I saw a village burn and was unable to stop it was in Gondor.” The man fell silent. He had been unable to save the prisoners taken in that raid so long ago. He vowed he would do better by Beoma, Pejor and their people.

Legolas squeezed his friend’s arm. “Are you sure you are well?”

Aragorn nodded quickly. A little too quickly for his aching head, which protested violently. He hid most of the pain from Legolas under a smile as he eased himself back down unto the makeshift bed of straw, thankful for the cover of dark. He really could use a bit more rest to ease the pounding between his ears. The pain seemed to abate some when he lied down. “I will be fine. I hate delaying though...”

Legolas chuckled. “Strider, it is dark, it is raining and you are injured. We would make no progress tonight. Rest for now, and tomorrow there will be plenty of time to hunt orcs.”

He watched as the ranger nodded slowly and closed his eyes. Relieved that the man seemed all right, the elf finally allowed himself to rest. A small smile crept across the Legolas’ face despite their predicament. As usual, Estel had not accounted for the fact that the prince could see him perfectly well in the dark. He had watched the human wince when acting too quickly and noted how slow and painful Aragorn’s movements were. There was no way Legolas would have let the man leave in the middle of the night in his shape. Tomorrow would be soon enough. He hoped that even the orcs wouldn’t force their slaves to move in this weather.
It was still raining lightly the next morning when Aragorn and Legolas began their northward trek. The fall air was chilly and the grey rain cold, but the two friends moved swiftly under the cloudy skies nonetheless. The tracks were still fairly fresh. Even with the rain, Aragorn had no trouble following them northward. The night’s rest had refreshed him and he was eager to begin. The orcs had quite a head start on them, but the elf and ranger knew that if they followed long and fast enough, they would eventually catch up with the foul creatures and their prisoners.

Legolas pulled his hood up over his head to keep the drizzling rain out of his hair and eyes as they hurried along the trail. He had expected the orcs to eventually turn westward, towards the mountains, but the trail continued to lead them further and further north. The creatures seemed to be following the Anduin upstream. As the great river dwindled smaller above the Rhimdoth, nearing its mouth in the GreyMountains, it became known as the Langflood.

“Where do you think they are taking them?” the prince asked after several hours, when it became apparent that the orcs were not going to turn sideways any time soon.

“I could not begin to guess,” Aragorn admitted. “It troubles me that these orcs did not go the same direction as their comrades. This whole situation is disturbing to say the least.”

Legolas could not have agreed more. “It is indeed. Since Beorn and his kin took to watching the road between the high pass and the Carrock, orcs have not dared to venture there. True, Beoma’s village was small and relatively unguarded in comparison to some, but even so...”

Aragorn’s thoughts were running along the same path. The orcs had either been overconfident, or they were seeking retaliation against the Beornings for the woodsmen’s continued vigilance against them. If the latter were true, then that lent added urgency to rescuing the prisoners before the orcs could vent their rage upon them.

The elf and ranger pressed on even faster.

Suddenly Legolas paused and looked upward. He thought he had either seen or felt a shadow flicker by overhead. Yet there was nothing there.
“Legolas?” Aragorn turned back towards his friend. “What is it?”

Legolas shook his head and hurried forward to join the ranger once more. “I don’t know,” the elf replied truthfully. “Perhaps nothing. But we should make haste.”

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Snow was falling upon the upper mountain reaches. It was still early fall in the southlands, but here, in the frozen north, winter came early and held the world in an iron grip until the mild spring set it free.

Decent folk did not settled this far north: they did not dare. If the bitter winters could not drive them away, the dark evil in the brooding mountains would. Here and there, twisted iron spires and broken rubble were buried under shifting earth and early snow. The once great realm of Angmar lay in tumbled ruins, but evil still lingered like a stain upon the land.

The greatest fortress of Angmar had never been destroyed, and for good reason. It was built into the mountain itself: a vast castle etched out of the living stone. From natural caverns tangled deep in the roots of the mountain to the myriad labyrinths painstakingly carved out of the upper core, the mountain had been converted into a dark palace. Thousands of slaves had died excavating and shaping the fortress. Their names and lives were now long forgotten, but the echo of their misery lived on in the cold, cheerless halls.

Long, the mountain had stood empty, but the past century had slowly seen lights kindling once more in the darkened window and the terror that shrouded the area deepened.

At one such window, a dark figure stood, gazing out across the cold, barren reaches of his former realm.

The large pane of glass in front of him was frosted over with icy tendrils that created a fern pattern on the window. It was freezing outside, but the room’s single occupant would not have known. He experienced neither heat nor warmth. He lived in a world of shadows in which such things held little or no meaning. He feared the searing touch of fire and the savage clutch of rivers. Those elements of earth were the most painful to his twilight-world existence. But he derived pleasure from nothing, save the torment of others or the fulfilling of his master’s will. It had been countless centuries since
he had felt anything but the aching, searing drive of his master. Sauron yearned only to be reunited with the one thing that held the key to his power in its keeping and that desire was echoed fiercely to all his minions. Wincing slightly with the ache of Sauron’s devotion to finding the One Ring, the Witch King growled softly. It was the only kind of opposition to his Dark Lord’s overpowering hunger that he allowed himself now. The years had fallen away, slipped by him, and he no longer remembered the freedom that he used to have.

He glanced at the ornate ring on his own finger. The collar that choked him, the noose that had squeezed all that was good from his life. It was always with him, he never took it off now... A reminder it was ... But a reminder of what?

Memory had passed, as had the desire to fight the power of the One Ring. He no longer thought in patterns he could call his own. He no longer moved through the world by his own volition, he was owned now, owned, bought, sealed, corrupted... he was dead.

Vacant eye-sockets glanced back towards the window. He watched the snow fall outside his castle, yet he remained untouched by the beauty of the world. He was unfeeling of the world about him, but still able to manipulate it skillfully. His fingers played with the vial he held in his hand, idly tapping it against the table.

Here in his study, he felt free enough to shed the black clothes that marked him as a Nazgûl. The sword that identified him as the Witch King rested behind him over the mantel. His form was barely visible when he was not clothed with the dark cloak and the metal shoes and gloves that were his usual guise. To elvish eyes he would have appeared as a deathly visage of a partly decayed corpse, his once regal clothes torn and whipped about him by an eternal wind - the breath of his master. But to the eyes of a human, should they ever see him without his corporeal attire, he would seem only a black, shadow-edged form that reeked of terror. For the most part the Witch King never walked in the world of men without his cloak, but here he was safe and it felt good for a moment to be without the restrictions that the clothes wrapped about him. His attention returned to his previous thoughts as the wind battered the windowpane in front of him.

His winged mount had brought good news from the south. The raid against the Beornings had been successful. True, most, if not all of the orcs he had sent out would likely have been destroyed, but he cared little for them. The important thing was that his plans had been set into motion. The prisoners had been spirited away... and they were being pursued.

Each step brought his quarry closer. Soon he would begin finding answers to the questions that had been building in his dark mind.

There were stirrings in the world of men and elves. Disturbing tidings had reached him, not only from his fellow Wraiths in Dol Guldur, but from other, more troubling sources. Some time ago,
several of the wights he had long ago sent out to inhabit the ancient barrows in Arnor, had fled their way back to him. Shapeless and quivering with rage, they bore tidings that their barrows had been destroyed and that the corpses they had occupied had been reclaimed by one of the Istari.

Captured and questioned, the wights had confirmed one another’s stories. Disturbing though the news had been, what had peaked the Wraith’s interest was not the meddling Istar, but rather the reports of the elf and human who aided him. The wight that had trapped the pair in its barrow provided some very interesting information. The human it said, was strange... almost elvish. The elf had been touched by darkness before. The wight was positive that he had felt the lingering traces of its Master, the Witch King’s touch upon the fair being, like a healed scar.

The Witch King was certain that this elf was the same one he had captured so many years ago and nearly turned to his own devices. He did not think it a very risky gamble to assume that the human was the same one that had rescued the elf from him at that time or that they were the same pair he had seen again in Mordor, near Minas Morgul. Now it seemed they were keeping company with the Grey Wizard and were responsible for the destruction of some of his servants in the barrows.

Interesting... very interesting. Those two seemed intent on popping up and mudding his plans. This did not please the Wraith. Once was chance, twice might be coincidence, but having crossed paths with that elf and human three times left the Nazgûl suspicious.

Since Saruman had crossed sides and begun communicating with Sauron, the White Council was no more, and so a great threat to the shadow had been removed... or so the Witch King had supposed. Now he wondered what the other members of the disbanded Council were planning. What were the elf and human in the scope of the Council’s plans? Spies? Or something more dangerous?

The Wraith intended to find out. He was especially interested in the man... a ranger if he recalled correctly going by the name of Strider. The evil being still remembered their first encounter. The human was no ordinary man, he had sensed that even then, but now he had even more reason to think thusly. The wight he questioned had repeated that one fact over and over again, steadfastly insisting there was something more to this ranger. Yet none of them knew what it was.

Interesting indeed.

The search for the ring had yielded no new fruits in a very long time. Many reluctantly suspected that it had washed down the river and been lost in the great sea. Sauron had withdrawn to Mordor, quietly rebuilding his strength and his troops. The Nine were scattered about Middle Earth, awaiting the Dark One’s instructions. Free to do as he wished for now, the Witch King desired to look into this matter more deeply. His spies brought him word and for a time he waited and watched. He knew that the elf was a wood-elf, but he and the human both seemed to have strong ties to Imladris and it was there that he judged their purpose and their weakness lay.
The Wraith had already made one covert attempt to disrupt whatever they might be planning, but it had failed miserably. That was the last time he left anything solely in the hands of a pack of slobbering orcs.

At first, word of an orc uprising near Rivendell had promised to provide the Wraith with just the kind of opportunity he sought. He had sent more wargs and orcs to swell their ranks and lent the dark power of his will to their attacks. Guruth, for all his cunning, would never have been able to breach Imladris’ protective barriers without that kind of aid. A disruption of the power of the elves in that area would have been a step forward for the minions of Mordor. At the same time, the Nazgûl had thought to learn more of the elf and ranger as well. Unfortunately, Guruth had not kept his end of the bargain and proved only interested in his own means to an end.

In the end it had been a disgusting waste of effort. Now the Witch King was taking things into his own hands and there would be no mistakes. Not this time. He had underestimated them too many times in the past. It had been a mistake to let the pair go so easily the first time. He had erred in never thinking that the elf he enslaved was important enough to look into the being’s mind and pry from him his identity and the identity of those he called friends. At that time it would have killed his new pet project and he hadn’t wanted that... but now he regretted not having taken that step. Time for him was as as idle as it was for the elves and so it seemed only yesterday that the elf had been under his control and the ranger in his grasp.

Yesterday and a lifetime ago.

The Wraith rose and paced the room. Restless... his soul was restless and the unceasing pressure of his master’s desire for the One Ring gave him no respite. His thoughts flowed darkly back to his near success with the wood-elf. He had thought himself on the verge of a new era, but it was not to be. Further experimentation on other hapless captives over the years since then had shown him that the Eldar were too resistant. They could be ensnared for a time, but the poison eventually killed them before they could be notably valuable. With significant modifications however, he had found a much more useful function for his poison with humans.

Still, his failure with the first elf galled him. It would be good to have him here again, to rectify his past misjudgments. There was just something about the elf and the ranger that barely touched on a memory... If he could find out more from them, more about them, he knew he would finally be able to get to the bottom of the mystery. He suspected that if he ever did, it might even please his master.

Returning to the task at hand, the Nazgûl wrapped his boney fingers around the vial in his palm. He had a messenger leaving for Dol Guldur. The human was bearing messages inquiring about the other two Wraiths’ latest venture in tampering with the great spider’s offspring. The Witch King was assisting his comrades in the breeding of a new species of the sentient beings, ones with a specific
bent that suited his fancy. Now, he would need his courier to deliver another message as well, an invitation of sorts.

To make sure that all went as it should, he was also going to need someone to watch over everything from afar and report back to him.

Standing from his desk and grasping his cloak, the Wraith threw the coat on and stormed down the hallways, heading for his mount’s sleeping quarters. The humans that populated the tower scurried out of his way. The orcs that attended to him did likewise. No one interfered with the master when his mood was dark and no one spoke to him unless it was required of them.

Entering the large, open cavern, the Witch King approached the winged beast that lay curled on the heated sands that comprised the floor of the chamber. The great monster’s bedchambers were specially heated through channels that had been cut in the mountain itself, created to reroute portions of the thermal flows that had been harnessed by the Witch King when he had begun building his retreat here. It had cost the lives of many slaves to create the channels that heated the castle’s many floors and the upper chambers. There were still caves and caverns below that the Nazgûl had never felt compelled to explore. He knew the mountain was occupied by more than just he and his servants. Signs of cave trolls had been discovered near to the lower reaches and there were other tell-tale signs of occupants that were darker and fouler than the small minded trolls. Yet the Nazgûl was unconcerned. His presence was felt by all that lived within the sphere of his touch. The fear that he invoked and the ill temperament of his winged companion kept anything from encroaching on his home.

The flying beast lazily shifted on the sands, turning is scaly head and fixing iridescent eyes upon its master. The Nazgûl held no fear for the mount. The beast yawned as the Witch King approached and began to speak in the black tongue. For a moment the creature considered denying the Wraith. It had only just returned from a surveillance mission. It was warm on the sands and the creature did not want to leave. Accustomed to the arid lands of Mordor where it was spawned, the creature hated this northern cold. As always, however, its master’s will won out and the fell beast lurched onto powerful hide legs, stretching thick leathery wings out and arching its long neck. At least the trip back to down the MistyMountains would be nice this time of year. It was still warm down there.

The creature loosened an ear splitting, terror-inducing screech, answering the Nazgûl’s request. Turning, it leapt off the ledge of the open cavern. Catching the winter winds, it spiraled high into the air, calling back to the Wraith. It would return soon with more news, and it wanted its bed kept hot. With a dark smile that was invisible to the naked eye, the Nazgûl walked slowly back down into the tower. When his mount got back it would find its bed hot, he would make sure. He always rewarded faithful service. There was much for which to prepare. Calling to his servants, he descended the spiral staircase and entered the main living areas.

“Send me Tynair,” the Wraith commanded, summoning his courier. “Tell him I have some
additional instructions before he leaves.”

The Nazgûl hissed softly in satisfaction as his slaves scuttled to obey him. He actually had something to look forward to and that was a feeling he hadn’t know in years.

His dark heart laughed and a wave of fear expanded through the castle, encompassing all that lived there. Angmar would host guests soon.
The night was not nearly as dark as Aragorn would have liked. The full moon overhead illuminated the landscape dully, making hiding places fewer and farther between. The ranger hunched lower in the bushes, his dark clothes blending into the foliage. He kept his face turned down so as to not let his skin catch and reflect the moonlight.

After more than a week of chasing their quarry northward, Aragorn and Legolas had finally caught up with the orcs and their prisoners. Six Beornings, including Beoma and Pejor, were being held captive by sixty or seventy orcs. The equation was dismally disproportionate. The ranger had to wonder why they had bothered with such a small number of prisoners, but he knew that logic did not always factor into orc actions. Severely outnumbered, Aragorn and Legolas’ only real hope lay in surprise.

The orcs were camped in a small dell, not far from where the rivers Langwell and Greylin joined to form the mouth of the Langflood. Across the river, the dark shape of Northern Mirkwood blotted out the stars on the eastern horizon. Mount Gundabad dominated the sky ahead of them and the junction of the Grey Mountains and the Misty Mountains hedged them in on the north and the west.

They had to act tonight. It seemed apparent now that the orcs were making for the northern mountains. Aragorn feared that if they made their goal, all hope of recovering the prisoners alive would be lost.

The ranger gave a low, whistling bird call. A few moments later, he heard an answering trill. Legolas was in position on the opposite side of the encampment.

The Beornings sat in the center of the camp. Four men and two women, bound hand and foot. A long rope knotted around each neck, connected them to one another. Beoma lay on his back, pillowing Pejor's head on his stomach. Neither of them was asleep. The younger man had bruises on his face and looked scared. Beoma seemed to be whispering something very softly to his apprentice, but Aragorn could not hear what was being said. The big baker shifted slightly. He seemed to be straining at the rope around his neck.

“Hold on just a little longer, friends. We’ll get you out of those bonds,” Aragorn thought. His hand
slid to the pommel of his sword. In his mind he marked the targets nearest to him. There were two sentries on this side of the camp, twenty-four other orcs milling beyond them. Three were lying down, the rest still kept moving about. He did not concern himself greatly with the orcs on the other side of the camp, beyond marking their number and positions. That was Legolas’ half to deal with and he trusted the elf could handle his own. The orcs were still far too alert to make an attack wise. Their best chance lay in waiting until all but the sentries were asleep.

Unfortunately not even the best laid plans can account for what direction an orc will take when he needs to relieve himself.

Across the camp, Legolas cringed inwardly as one of the dark beasts rambled out of camp, unintentionally heading directly for his friend’s position. “Turn right, turn right... all right, turn left, just TURN...” he willed silently. It was not to be.

Aragorn tried hard to scramble back deeper into the bushes without being heard, but he was too close and there wasn’t enough time. The orc tripped over him in the dark. The creature squealed loudly once. He never got a chance to make a second sound, but the damage was already done. The disturbance had caught the attention of the rest of the camp.

Aragorn shoved the dead carcass away from him and jumped to his feet as the other orcs rushed towards the intruder. He cursed inwardly. This was not good. They had lost the element of surprise and the situation had just become a lot more difficult.

Legolas gave up his own cover, springing to his feet and firing a hail of deadly arrows into the horde of orcs swarming around his friend. With a shout, many of the orcs turned to face the new threat.

Legolas did not bother to hide his glow now. He flamed in the darkness, intentionally drawing the dark creatures away from the overwhelmed ranger. The orcs cringed at the sudden flash of light and screamed in hatred. As soon as they saw that their second foe was an elf, the majority of them swarmed back towards him.

The minor respite gave Aragorn a chance to dispatch a few of the orcs mobbing him, and to catch his breath. He tried to cleave a path through the mass of bodies to Legolas’ side, but the dark beasts kept them apart. He could just see Legolas’ hair flashing pale gold under the moonlight as he whipped in tight circles, surrounded by orcs. The elf was a constant blur of motion, but did not seem to be in real trouble at the moment, despite the odds. Legolas was holding his own.

“Estel, the prisoners!” Legolas called out to his friend in Elvish so the orcs would not understand. Thus far none of the orcs had been smart enough to use their captives against the elf and ranger.
Legolas did not want to give them the chance to get over their surprise and come up with the idea.

Aragorn understood and fought his way towards the center of camp. The Beornings were fighting hard against the tight cords entrapping them. A few had managed to pop several strands of the twisted rope by brute strength alone. Aragorn switched his sword to his left hand, quickly pulling his hunting knife with his right. A sword was ill-suited to the more delicate work of cutting bonds and in the dark, chaotic confusion Aragorn did not want to injure anyone. Starting at the end of the line, he quickly began slicing the captive’s hands and feet free, leaving them to discard the rope around their necks themselves as he hurriedly moved to the next one. The Beornings were sturdy folk, not easily given to panic, and for that Aragorn was glad. As soon as one was free they started helping with the others.

“Strider, behind you!” Pejor’s warning came just in time. Aragorn threw himself to the ground, only barely avoiding a scimitar thrust meant for his back. The attacking orcs adjusted quickly to the change. Aragorn felt the blunt end of a sword handle crash painfully against the back of his head, making his vision blur. He rolled quickly, bringing his sword up to fend off another blow. His dagger was still in his other hand and he threw it with a snap of his wrist. The orc fell backward with a strangled cry. The ranger jumped to his feet in time to meet the next attack.

Seeing what Aragorn was up to, the orcs were now after the prisoners. Working with desperate speed Aragorn slashed at the thick, knotted ropes with one hand while trying to fight orcs with the other.

“Run! RUN!” he urged the two women he had just freed. They were attempting to help him free Beoma and Pejor, but he did not want their own bravery to be the end of them. The orcs were all around them. It was hard to avoid being trampled, much less skewered. The two Beorning men already freed had relieved the orcs of a few hand weapons. They favored axes over swords, but made do with what was available. One was already bleeding from a deep gash to the arm, but they continued fighting to hold the orcs back while Aragorn cut their companions free.

The women did not heed him. At the moment they could not have without running straight into the arms of more orcs.

Aragorn had to duck to avoid Legolas who appeared suddenly in the middle of the confusion. The elf deftly stabbed an orc that Aragorn did not even realize had set its sights on the human’s head. The ranger attempted to reach Beoma’s ropes amidst the mêlée.

The orc fell dead, clutching at the prince and trying to drag him to the ground. Legolas took a quick step back, out of reach, and yanked his knife free. The fighting was unfortunately so close that the prince’s elbow knocked sharply into the back of the ranger’s head and the elf had to dance to one side to avoid tripping over his friend.
Aragorn reeled sideways, losing his grip on his sword. A huge orc tried to tackle Legolas, driving him backward. The elf was compelled to leap out of the way, nearly colliding with Aragorn again as he was forced to hop over his friend’s back.

An orc stepped on Aragorn’s fingers as the ranger tried to get out of the way. Wincing in pain the human jerked his hands free, kneeling upright and banging directly into the back of Legolas’ knees.

“Strider!” the elf protested as if Aragorn had intentionally sprawled under his feet. Legolas’ balance was good and a momentary sway and dip was the only result of the impact, but it still took far too much of his attention. He was clipped sharply across the jaw by an orc elbow and tasted blood. His vision blurred for a moment as he tried to remain in control of the unwieldy and claustrophobic situation.

“Stop stepping on me!” Aragorn hissed as he scrabbled about to find his missing blade in the churning dust. He almost had it when an orc rushed by, kicking it out of reach again. Beoma and Pejor jostled against his side as they too attempted to avoid being trampled, adding to the general chaos.

“Then get out from underfoot!” the elf retorted, wiping his bloodied lip on his shoulder as he danced sideways, trying to take the fight further away from his friend.

Aragorn grunted in frustration as he rolled out from under the feet of several orcs that had pushed forward to take Legolas’ place. Grabbing one of the creatures’ ankles, Aragorn yanked hard, bringing the orc down and giving himself the time and space he needed to scramble forward and grab his sword. Another orc tripped over his fallen companion, landing nearly on top of the ranger. Aragorn got his sword up in time to impale the falling creature. He groaned as he shoved the orc off of him only to be faced with another. This was not going well.

Finally wrestling free, Aragorn found that Beoma had managed to squirm out of the half-severed bonds around his wrists and was now working on his ankles as he and Pejor scooted urgently around in the dust. Their kinsmen were locked in battle trying to protect them, but they were frighteningly vulnerable.

Aragorn crawled quickly to their side. He sliced the ropes around Beoma’s ankles. As he turned to free Pejor, Aragorn saw from the corner of his eye how the baker yanked the rope around his neck over his head. The ranger tugged Pejor quickly to his knees as soon as the lad was freed. This free-for-all was going to get someone killed soon. They had to get out of here.
Pejor started to rise, but Aragorn had to tug him back down again to avoid getting beheaded. The orc changed his grip and stabbed down towards the young apprentice. Aragorn threw himself in the way, pushing Pejor down and delivering a counter stroke that only barely kept the orc’s sword from finding a home in his own heart. He pulled himself back to his knees, trying to keep Pejor covered and inch them both away from the fighting. The press was so great he couldn’t stand.

Gripping Pejor’s shoulder tight against him with one arm and swinging his sword with the other, the ranger looked around desperately for Legolas. Eye-level with orc knees and belts and mired in a cloud of dust, he was lucky to see anything. Aragorn couldn’t find the elf through the flurry of bodies. He coughed harshly and blinked to clear his burning eyes. The orcs pressed him savagely, giving him no time or space to maneuver. He winced as an orc clubbed the side of his head. He reeled to the side, scrabbling in the dust and trying desperately to rise while protecting himself and the young Beorning in his care. He could not.

Aragorn didn’t know what hit him, but the next thing he knew he was taking a mouthful of dirt as his head connected sharply with the ground. A heavy orc boot dug deeply into his back. His sword had fallen from his grip and he couldn’t reach it where it lay. He could not even lift his head. A shiver of dread ran down the human’s spine. A small, realistic corner of his mind knew there was no getting out of this situation.

Suddenly, a strange roar rose above the clamor of the battle. Aragorn felt the pressure disappear from his back with a jolt. Grabbing his sword and rolling quickly onto his back, the ranger looked up to find a huge, black bear looming over him. It was raised up on its hind legs, shaking the orc in its mouth like a rag doll.

The ranger’s eyes widened in surprise at the sight and he only just had the presence of mind to drag himself to his feet in the space cleared by the wake of the bear’s presence. He supposed the fighting must have disturbed some of the woodland creatures, but he did not intend to get too close. The way his luck was running tonight he did not want to escape the orcs, only to be killed by a wild animal.

Pejor must have been too dazed to be frightened. Aragorn realized the young Beorning was not following him. He turned back, grabbing the boy’s wrist and tugging him quickly towards the edges of the fighting. Pejor appeared unable to understand what the hurry was, but obeyed when Aragorn planted him firmly in the bushes.

“Get down and stay down!” the ranger instructed, before plunging back into the fighting. He could see Legolas now, surrounded by orcs as usual. The other Beornings had either pulled back or were simply out of his sight. The bear had not left. It raged through the clearing, scattering orcs left and right. It was easily the largest animal that Aragorn had ever seen. Razor sharp teeth and claws were making disturbingly short work of the orcs. The magnificent creature was destroying everything in its path and the orcs fled from it in terror. Aragorn could not blame them.
Squealing in terror, the few remaining orcs fled straight past the ranger before disappearing into the night. Aragorn whirled to face them as they came, but they were only interested in escaping. When the human turned around again, he found the bear almost upon him.

The ranger backpedaled quickly, but lost his footing on the uneven ground. His head was still churning violently from the many blows he had taken tonight and his sense of balance was severely crippled. He fell on his back. As he scrambled backwards on his elbows, the thought shot through his mind that he should have stayed down here in the first place considering how often he ended up in this position. Legolas was not going to let him live his clumsiness tonight down... IF he survived. Right now, that was looking doubtful.

He kept his sword up between himself and the advancing bear, but the creature was undeterred. Easily four times the ranger’s size, Aragorn knew that the animal had the definite advantage in this situation. The ranger feinted right and then tried to bring the sword up closer to the bear’s huge neck. The huge creature easily checked the man’s movement. He swatted his massive paw almost lazily and sent the ranger’s sword skittering out of his hand.

Aragorn froze. His heart hammered in his throat. He had heard that you should play dead when confronted with an angry bear, but at the moment, that idea felt much too frighteningly realistic to be considered a possibility. Still, the human decided not to make any sudden moves that would provoke the animal.

The bear stood over him, its enormous body dwarfing the ranger’s. Lowering his muzzle, the bear sniffed the ranger. His warm, snuffling breath stirred the human’s hair. The hair around the bear’s muzzle was frosted with grey. For a moment Aragorn was transfixed by the deep, soulful fire in the creature’s eyes. He decided the bear was not evil, but if it was protecting its space or its cubs, it didn’t have to be malicious to rip him apart. It wouldn’t have to try very hard either.

The human’s out-flung hand groped next to him in the grass for his fallen sword. Where in Arda was Legolas?! Slowly, his fingers closed on the hilt of the weapon and his body tensed.

“Strider! No!” Legolas’ voice startled the human. Aragorn started to bring his weapon up as he squirmed backward, but Legolas’ hand on his wrist stopped him, pinning his sword arm down. The ranger didn’t understand and struggled for a moment.

Legolas firmly pulled the human back towards him, shooting the bear a look that said the creature had better back up a bit. Aragorn sat up slowly, relaxing a little when he realized that the bear was content to just stand there and watch them. The ranger’s keyed up nerves gradually began to wind down. He eased the death grip on his sword and Legolas released his arm.
A distinctive, wuffling laugh made the ranger look around for Beoma. Suddenly, Aragorn realized it was the bear that had laughed. He blinked; certain that one of the many knocks on the head he had taken had affected his mind. Now Legolas was laughing at him as well.

“Strider!” the elf nudged his friend hard as he rose back to his feet. “Don’t you recognize Beoma?” His voice was amused.

Aragorn rubbed his head. Tonight had definitely been too much. “No, Legolas, for some reason he seemed... different to me.” The ranger looked back at the bear in semi-amazement. “Beoma?”

The bear growled an affirmative and Aragorn could have sworn he was smiling. Pejor joined them, running his fingers through Beoma’s thick, soft fur, comforted by his mentor’s presence. The bear rubbed his massive head fondly against the youth’s side.

“Strider, the Beornings are skin-changers,” Legolas chuckled, helping his friend to his feet. “Didn’t you know that? Goodness, I would have thought ONE of your brothers would have thought to mention it to you after all these years.”

Actually, Aragorn did know. However, he had been told the stories as a child and wasn’t actually sure he believed them or not. Until now. At any rate, it was not the first thing that had come to mind when he saw a creature that size barreling down on him. The ranger laughed. It was the only thing that he could think to do at the moment. This had been quite a night.

The other Beornings were slowly joining them now. It seemed that everyone had survived, although certainly not uninjured.

“Well if you could do this all along, why didn’t you do something sooner?” the ranger asked Beoma as he wiped off his sword. “Can all of you... change?”

“Yes, we can,” it was Pejor who answered. “But not all of us can simply shift at will, Strider. Grimbeorn and his near kin can change forms as they so desire, but for most of us it can only be done when the moon is in the same phase as it was when we were born.” The young man gestured to the sky above them. “Then we must remain in our other form until the next moon cycle. None of us could risk shifting when we were bound as the orcs had us. The ropes would have choked us to death before the change was complete. Before you arrived, Master Beoma was telling me he wanted to find some way to shed the bonds. Tonight was his last night to try.”
“It is rare that none of us were in phase when our village was attacked,” one of the women offered. “Thank you, for coming after us.”

Aragorn inclined his head. He was trying to form words but they weren’t coming. His throbbing head was taking all of his attention. Legolas saved him. The elf caught the human’s shoulder lightly, steadying him.

“No thanks necessary,” the elf assured. He glanced around at the corpse-strewn clearing. “Come, let us leave this place of death. Strider and I passed a spot on the other side of the river that is suitable for a camp tonight. There we may tend the wounded and hopefully get some rest.”

The Beornings were agreeable to the idea and so they started back the way they had come.

Legolas stayed close to Aragorn, but the human seemed to have sustained no serious injuries aside from a massive headache. There was nothing wrong with him that a good night’s rest would not cure.

Beoma padded quietly along in the dark beside them. Aragorn couldn’t help repeatedly looking over his shoulder to see if the bear was still with them. Never let it be said that he could not always learn something new.

Legolas caught his friend in the act and chuckled. Aragorn scowled.

“Will you be coming back home with us?” Pejor asked, falling into step with them. “Master Beoma can look after us now, so there won’t be any danger.”

The two friends hesitated, exchanging a look to confirm what the other was thinking. It was Legolas who answered.

“No, Pejor, I’m afraid not. If you are safe, then our task is accomplished. I cannot speak for Strider, but my father is expecting me home and I have already tarried far too long. I fear he shall have my head if I delay much longer. After we see you safely on your way, I must begin my return journey at once.” The elf nodded towards the slowly growing shape of Mirkwood before them.
“I will see Legolas on his way and then I should be going home as well, Pejor,” Aragorn agreed. “You are in good hands now and it will be faster for me to take a different route. Do you think you’ll be all right?”

Pejor nodded. “Oh yes, we’ll be fine. I would not wish either of you trouble at home. Believe me, I understand how that can be. I will miss you, but...” A small smile spread over the boy’s face. “Master Beoma doesn’t say much when he’s in his other skin, which makes him much easier to talk with.”

“Or talk *at*?” Aragorn could not resist teasing with a chuckle.


The ranger laughed and clapped the young man on the back. Who knew the boy had a sense of humor?

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Aragorn sat on a rocky outcropping, his bare feet dangling in the swiftly moving stream. The Langflood had lost much of its rain-swollen off-run of the previous weeks. It was currently no more than a deep ribbon of water winding through the tall grasses of the meadow valley that ran past the length of Mirkwood on its western side.

Legolas finished packing up the camp. He had elected to take care of final preparations while Aragorn bathed. Aside from the disturbing dreams last night, the human’s rest had been peaceful and he seemed to be doing much better. For that, the elf was glad.

The ranger laid back on the sun warmed rock, letting the heat of the approaching noon-day dry his hair and leggings. The heated rock felt good to his bared back and bruised body. The man’s face was slightly discolored from the knocks he had taken and he ached more this morning from the battle than he had yesterday. Yet he was smiling. It was one of those glorious autumn days where the brilliant heat of the sun outweighed the waning temperature of the air.

The Beornings had headed back south earlier this morning, returning home. Beoma led his party,
still in the form of a bear. He would remain that way for the rest of the week, until the new moon entered its first quarter. His mentor’s current guise did not disturb Pejor and the youth had not stopped talking from sun up to sun down. Finally on their own again, the two friends were enjoying the peace and quiet created by the absence of the Beornings and the temporary release for any responsibilities. Unfortunately it was temporary and they both knew that they had obligations they could not ignore forever.

Aragorn didn’t move as Legolas silently seated himself next to the ranger. He knew without opening his eyes that elf was there and he felt, without having to ask, that Legolas was ready to head home, even though the ranger wasn’t. Secretly he longed to forestall the parting. They had been together almost constantly for a very long time now, and that made this particular parting all the more difficult. Aragorn knew he would miss his friend dearly. Legolas was a prince however, and he had duties that could not be ignored indefinitely.

With a sigh, Aragorn squinted up at the elf.

Legolas smiled down at the man before casting his gaze back across the river. The thick tree-line of Mirkwood bracketed the far edge of the valley. The trees called to him, welcoming him home. It had been long since he had run beneath their canopy and climbed into their branches. The prince suddenly realized how much he had missed this place. He hated to leave Aragorn, but he was ready to go home.

“I have to go,” Legolas answered Aragorn’s unspoken question. “I would not trade any of my time with you, but we have already been delayed longer than I anticipated. My father will be waiting and I *did* promise him to return, even if it was not under the best of conditions. He will not have forgotten our parting and he will be anxious to see me again.”

“I know,” Aragorn replied, rolling over onto his side and leaning on his elbow. He accepted the tunic that Legolas held out for him. “And my brothers want help filling the cellars for winter. They keep saying I never pull my weight around the house anymore.” He laughed as he pulled on his shirt and laced it up.

“They miss you.” Legolas smiled at the human.

“Right,” Aragorn growled playfully. “They miss having a scapegoat for their pranks!” He returned the smile that the elf bestowed upon him.

“You have not been around much lately. It is *you* they miss Estel,” Legolas countered lightly.
“I know,” Aragorn admitted with a sigh. “And I have missed them. I think that there are those who have dearly missed your presence as well.” He shoved the prince teasingly, pushing him off the rock.

Shrugging into his coat, Aragorn accepted his pack from the elf. Legolas stared at the human for a few seconds, at a loss as to what to say next. Before he could speak a word the ranger enveloped him in a crushing hug.

“Don’t stay away too long,” the man whispered, “I’ll need someone to come dig me out of Elladan and Elrohir’s messes.” The human released the elf and stepped back.

“I promise, mellon-nín.” Legolas’ words were laced with the slightest tint of sorrow. “And you are always welcome at the palace. Don’t let Ada scare you away. He really does like you now you know.” With a parting smile the prince headed for a narrow part of the river. Rocks jutted up beneath its surface, providing a perfect place to cross.

Aragorn watched as the elf nimbly leapt from rock to rock, quickly crossing the swiftly moving stream. He waved to his friend from the far bank. Readjusting his pack, he headed south, keeping to the edges of the river. Legolas walked away due east, quickly fading into the forest of Mirkwood.

A small sigh escaped Aragorn’s lips. How he hated goodbyes. He knew in his heart they were not forever, but still, every time the word crossed his lips a small part of his heart ached. Who knew how soon he would see his friend again? Time passed so differently for the human who lived amidst the elves. He glanced one more time across the river, but Legolas had already faded from his sight.

From his vantage point inside the woods, Legolas stopped and turned back, watching the human as he walked down the river’s edge. When Aragorn glanced back, searching for the elf, the prince smiled softly.

“Farewell, Strider. It won’t be long,” he whispered. He knew exactly what the man was thinking.

The elf had nearly turned back to continue his journey home, when something dark and indistinct touched the edges of his awareness. There was an evil nearby... and it was close, too close.

Taking a step back towards the meadow valley, Legolas stopped mid-stride. He vaguely recognized the thin threads of fear and shadow that brushed his mind and the shock was severe.
Ulairë. Nazgûl.

Across the river, a large dark horse burst from the foliage of the woods in front of Aragorn, startling the ranger. The man stepped back, throwing up a hand to ward off the sudden attack.

The animal was a deep, coal black. The tack and saddle that the rider used were also black, possessing a definite sense of evil artistry about them. Jagged points and sharpened corners cut at odd angles turned the steed itself into a weapon. The horse's hooves pawed the air as it reared up on powerful hind legs, lunging at the ranger. Aragorn was knocked to the ground and tried to roll away from the huge beast.

The piercing red eyes of the horse tracked the human as he tried to escape, keeping the ranger off balance and cowering. The beast's hooves pounded the earth like dwarf hammers around the ranger. It barely missed crushing Aragorn's arm when he tried to draw his sword, and the human was forced to leave the weapon be to evade the deadly, flailing hooves.

A black clad rider leaned over the animal's left shoulder and trained a wicked looking bow on the man. The arrow that was notched on the string dripped with a thick, foul substance. The hood of the man's cape hid his identity and anything that would make him memorable.

"Your presence is requested," a distinctively human voice called out to the ranger. Whatever else the man was, he was no Wraith. The rider's gloved hand released the string and the arrow pierced Aragorn's left shoulder, driving him back to the ground with a sickening thud.

Aragorn cried out in pain.
Legolas’ shout distracted the rider, and he straightened in the saddle reigning in the jittery stallion. The horse snorted defiantly. Their task was complete; it was time to turn home.

“Listen carefully,” the rider in black instructed Aragorn. “My master has summoned you. *If* you wish to live, you will make your way to Angmar before the new moon is half spent. Look for the mountain with the black spire. If you tarry, you won’t live to see a new moon ever again. Do not think to look elsewhere for help, for you’ll never survive. Your time is already running out and your only hope lies in Angmar. Make all haste for the black mountain. May the Valar have mercy on you... for no one else can.” With that warning, the rider spurred his steed and bolted for the safety of the woods to his left. The horse seemed to melt into the dark patterned shadows and fade from sight with a clatter of hooves.

The elf sprinted across the natural rock bridge, bringing an arrow to bear on the darkly clad attacker as he disappeared into the trees, but it was already too late. Legolas raced towards Aragorn’s position, ready for another attack should the evil beast and its rider return. Even as he neared the place where they had disappeared, he could feel the dark touch of the Nazgûl’s presence receding. Legolas realized the rider may not have been a Wraith, but he had most certainly operated on behalf of one.

Dropping down next to the ranger, Legolas pressed the human back, trying to get the man to stop writhing. Aragorn moaned and shifted restlessly, one hand locked around the arrow’s shaft. He curled in on himself, trying to stop the fiery pain that was consuming him. He had been wounded by a drugged or poisoned arrow before, but it had spread numbness. This one spread pure fire.

“Legolas, it burns,” he groaned softly. “Get it out.”

“I will, my friend. I will. But I need you to lie still for a moment.” Legolas held the human by his shoulders, trying to get Aragorn to look at him. He didn’t understand why this had happened, or why their attacker seemed content to just wound the ranger and leave. He didn’t have time for questions right now.

Locking his gaze on the elf, the ranger quieted under the prince’s touch. Unable to remain completely still, Aragorn ground the heel of his boot into the forest floor while Legolas gently unlaced his tunic and cut it away from the wound. A dark substance spread out from the arrow’s shaft, mixing with the human’s blood and running in small rivulets off his shoulder. The dark, sticky liquid bubbled slightly where it touched the man’s skin. It truly was burning the ranger.
Legolas pried Aragorn’s fingers from the haft and once more pushed the man back against the ground. Reaching across the ranger, he dragged Aragorn’s pack close and emptied the contents out on the ground. He grasped a small glass vial that contained several pebble sized crystals. Emptying the container on the man’s chest, Legolas chose a good sized stone and pressed it against Aragorn’s lips.

The ranger’s body was tense beneath his hands and the man resisted the medication, groaning through gritted teeth.

“Aragorn, you must help me,” Legolas pleaded with the human, trying again to unsuccessfully get him to take the crystal. “Take it, mellon-nín, it is just mentasis. I know you’re in pain but I have to get this arrow out of you. It will be easier if you are more relaxed. This foul substance on the arrow is poison, a form of morgul poison if I am correct. We need to slow down its spread. You have to cooperate with me or I can’t help you.” The elf’s voice was collected, but inside he was panicking. Aragorn’s pain level was increasing and soon he would go into shock.

The mentasis was actually a byproduct of the mentalyion plant that grew in the MistyMountains near Rivendell. The purple, flowering perennial secreted a substance that, when it came in contact with the air, would crystallize into small crystal formations. The secretions held a powerful herb that slowed the body’s systems down and dulled pain, making the patient very pliant and calm. It required the wounded party to place the mentasis under their tongue and let it dissolve. That was what Legolas’ aim at the moment.

Aragorn knew what Legolas was trying to do, but he was having a hard time thinking rationally. It was all he could do to keep from knocking the elf off of him and trying to pull the arrow from his shoulder himself. He wanted it gone and wanted it gone now. He didn’t care about the damage; all he could think of was getting rid of the encompassing pain.

When the elf pressed the crystal to his lips again, he allowed Legolas to place it under his tongue. Clamping his mouth tightly shut, Aragorn held his breath and closed his eyes, fighting the waves of fire that swept through his body.

For a few minutes the pain was intense. Then, with a sigh, Aragorn began to relax beneath Legolas. He drew in a deep breath and let it out gradually as the herb started to work. Slowly the ranger lowered his head all the way back as his legs straightened out until he was lying flat against the forest floor, breathing evenly.

“Aragorn?” Legolas was half afraid the dose had been too much. He didn’t have that much experience with the drug and Aragorn wasn’t in a suitable condition to have been able to judge for himself.
The slightly dilated silver eyes slowly opened and gazed up at the elf.

“Are you with me?” The prince questioned further as he released his hold on the man.

“Yes,” Aragorn answered softly. His words were slurred but he was coherent. “It wasn’t a Nazgûl, Legolas. It was a man on a morgul steed.”

The elf nodded encouragingly as he began to quickly clean the wound, carefully collecting the dark substance so it would not spread and burn the ranger further.

“Did he say anything to you?” Legolas was trying to keep the human preoccupied as he worked, also hoping to find out more about what had happened.

“Yes.” Aragorn’s voice drifted off and the prince gently tapped the ranger’s face.

“What did he say, Aragorn? You were going to tell me. I need you to stay awake,” Legolas instructed softly. He spread a drawing tincture around the shaft of the arrow and prepared to pull the weapon out.

“He said... my presence has been requested and that I am to go... go to him. I have less than a fortnight to get there;” Aragorn spoke softly. His eyes watched the elf’s blue ones. “I don’t think I want to go.”

Legolas smiled softly. “I shouldn’t think so. Don’t worry about that now. We’ll figure out what to do next in a little while. Right now I need to get this arrow out of you,” the elf spoke slowly and quietly, hoping Aragorn could understand him even if the ranger was numbed to anything else. The human wasn’t making much sense, but he would worry about that later.

With a small nod, Aragorn agreed. He gripped the elf’s shoulder with his right hand and stared up at his friend, waiting.

There was so much trust in the silver eyes that tracked his every move that Legolas found it hard to proceed. Mentasis or not, Aragorn was going to feel the arrow when it was removed.
With a pained grimace, Legolas placed his hand over the man’s face, gently brushing the ranger’s eyelids with his fingertips. Aragorn obediently closed his eyes and allowed the elf to carefully tip his head to the side so that his face was turned away from the arrow.

Getting a solid grip on the shaft with his left hand, Legolas held the ranger down with his right and rose up on one knee. He wanted to do this in one swift motion to lessen the pain, if at all possible.

“Ready, Aragorn?” He asked quietly, wondering if the man had slipped into unconsciousness. He half-way hoped the ranger had.

“Yes,” came the soft reply.

Steadying himself, Legolas jerked the arrow straight up, pulling the shaft and the head out of Aragorn’s body. The man arched against the pain, crying out as the barbed head tore out of his shoulder leaving a jagged, gaping gash behind.

With a small moan Aragorn relaxed and stilled beneath his friend.

A quick check proved that he had simply lost consciousness. Part of Legolas was grateful for the small blessing - and part of him was worried sick. The arrow wound itself was not particularly grievous, but it was the fact that the arrow had so obviously been poisoned that filled the elf’s heart with dread. They were too far from any inhabited place to get help. His home was on the easternmost side of the woods. Rivendell laid hundreds of miles away over the mountain ranges. The Beornings were woefully inadequate in all but the basic healing arts, often taking their more critically ill either to Rivendell or one of the human habitations farther south. If what the rider said was true and Aragorn didn’t get help soon...

Quickly banishing the negative thoughts from his mind, the elf concentrated on cleaning the wound. The skin around the cut was red and feverish. It had been peeled back and burned away in some areas. Most of the thick liquid had congealed around the arrow shaft and was easily cleansed, but Legolas was certain that a fair amount remained inside Aragorn, already in his bloodstream.

The elf dug blindly through the tumbled contents of the ranger’s bag, looking for any more of the drawing ointment he had originally used. It was all spent. Trying to maintain his calm, the elf mixed together the few herbs he could easily recognize as being good for this type of wound. Gently he placed it in and around the cut, laying leaves of athelas over the mixture before applying the bandage. He knew the kingsfoil did little good in his hands, but he hoped that it would aid
Aragorn’s body anyway.

When Aragorn came to, it took him a moment to realize where he was. The sun was just beginning its slide down the sky behind them and the meadow valley was bathed in the low light. Long shadows stretched across the Langflood towards the western edge of Mirkwood. The day had already been spent.

His body felt oddly disjoined from his consciousness. His hands and feet wouldn’t respond to his commands and he had a hard time just opening his eyes. As the world slowly came back into focus and feeling began to spread through him again, he discovered that he was being held and gently rocked. A soft singing voice floated on the warm late afternoon air and he knew at once that it was Legolas who held him.

The elf’s arms were crossed in front of Aragorn, holding him tightly and he sat resting with his back against Legolas’ chest. Breathing in deeply, he alerted the prince that he was awake and the elf stopped singing.

“Strider?” Legolas asked, leaning around and gazing at his friend.

“Where are we?” Aragorn mumbled softly, trying to find his voice.

A flagon of water was pressed to his lips and he drank greedily. Legolas moved out from behind the ranger, gently leaning the man against the trunk of the large tree they were seated beneath.

“We are still in the meadow near the Langflood, about fifty yards from where you were struck down.” Legolas knelt in front of the man and gazed into his eyes, judging his friend’s state of awareness for himself. “Do you remember anything?” he questioned softly.

It took a moment for Aragorn’s thoughts to coalesce.

“I was headed home,” he started to explain. He frowned as the memories darted away, flitting on the edges of his thoughts. Shifting against the tree caused his wound to flare and he winced, fingerling the bandage curiously.

When the memories came back they flooded his mind all at one time, shouting for attention.
Aragorn gasped and turned back towards the elf who was watching him intently. “It was a man on a horse. A dark horse. At first I thought it was a Nazgûl but he was no Wraith, Legolas,” the words hastily tumbled out of the man and he reached out to grab the elf’s arm as he spoke. “He said that I was to go to Angmar if I wanted to live. He cautioned me not to return home or go to anyone else. He said my only hope lay in making it to the black mountain before the new moon was half spent.”

Aragorn searched his friend’s face for some response. The elf had gone deathly pale as the ranger recounted the words.

“Legolas, what did he mean? *Who* has summoned me?” Aragorn had a feeling he already knew, but he needed to ask anyway. He was desperately hoping that Legolas would contradict his fears. Unfortunately the elf could only confirm them.

“The kingdom of Angmar was broken a long time ago, by your ancestors in fact; as I am sure you are aware. Yet dark rumors have long whispered that the Witch King’s castle remained untouched and that, since the power of your people waned, he returns to inhabit it at times. A dark terror dwells in those hills. Some of the Mirkwood exiles who passed through that land when they returned from beyond Carn Dûm with my Uncle, told us that it is a barren place, full of malice. Beyond their words, I know little. But this I do know Strider, that, if we have been summoned thus, we are in danger.” Legolas divulged all he knew and had heard of the dark castle. “I can think of no one other than the Witch King who would wish us to go to Angmar. If that is true, and this wound is his doing, then it is grievous indeed.”

Legolas’ words echoed the ranger’s own thoughts. What Legolas did not express was what he truly feared. If all their suppositions were true, it was likely not even Lord Elrond could save Estel, even if they would get him there on time. The elf’s heart recoiled painfully, refusing to allow that thought to remain. There was no way he was even going to consider losing his friend.

“We can’t go there,” Aragorn argued, unintentionally sliding into Legolas’ use of ‘them’ as a plural. Gingerly he moved into a more comfortable position as his body woke from the effects of the mentasis. “*You* can’t go there, Legolas. He’ll recognize you.”

“My friend, I think he already has or we would not be sitting here like this now,” Legolas answered softly. It was painfully obvious that for some reason they had been hunted down and intentionally attacked now, when they had no hope for help. He had the sinking feeling that this might have even been the whole purpose behind the raid on the Beorning village. Only someone as powerful as a Nazgûl could have brought that about. The Beornings had never been the targets... they were. Now here they were, hundreds of miles from any possible means of help. If it had been a trap, then it was a wickedly clever one. The prince held no illusions that the message had been meant for Aragorn alone. If this was the Witch King’s doing, the evil one knew very well that Legolas would never
abandon a friend in trouble. He was right.

“We’ll go to my father then,” Aragorn pressed on, unwilling to accept the fate that seemed to be chosen for them. “He’ll know what to do. He can make an antidote for whatever they’ve given me. He’s the best healer Legolas, we’ll be safe there.” The ranger kept talking even though the elf was shaking his head.

“Strider it would take us over a month to get back to Rivendell. You’re a healer, assess your symptoms honestly and tell me you truly think you have that long,” the elf said quietly.

“We *can’t* just go to that place and submit to a Nazgûl!” Aragorn was beginning to panic as their options narrowed. “That’s as good as walking into the jaws of death! There has to be another way,” he whispered, staring into the the elf’s blue eyes.

Legolas didn’t answer right away. Standing on his feet, he gazed skyward. Judging from the amount of light they had left he realized that they were staying the night here. Silently he walked off and began to collect rocks for a fire ring. He was terrified of the thought of being anywhere near the Úlairë and even more afraid that Aragorn would die no matter what choice they made. All of this was his fault, in more ways than one.

“Legolas?”

Aragorn’s quiet question drifted towards the elf. He made sure to stay where the ranger could see him as he collected wood for the fire, but his mind and thoughts were too jumbled, fearful and recriminating for him to deal with Aragorn’s cares as well as his own at the moment.

Realizing Legolas needed a few moments, Aragorn relaxed back against the trunk of the tree. He wanted to get up and help, but his body ached and his shoulder was throbbing once more. He watched as the elf silently constructed a fire ring and began stacking the wood. Unable to stand the pain from his wound any longer, he grabbed his pack and began digging through it for something that might ease his discomfort.

Legolas had a small fire going by the time Aragorn found that which he sought. He fumbled with a small pouch, trying to untie the knot. Slender hands stopped his awkward movements and the ranger glanced up at the elf that knelt next to him.

“Elladan tied it shut. He always uses these stupid slip knots,” Aragorn explained quietly. “They get
stuck sometimes. I guess I won’t have to worry about that anymore.” He tried to lighten the mood but fell very flat.

Legolas’ gaze snapped up to lock onto the ranger. He sat down slowly next to the man. “What do you mean?” The question held a sharp edge stemming from barely concealed distress.

“Legolas...” Aragorn took a deep breath. There was no use denying the truth. He trusted Legolas enough to be completely honest with him. “Legolas, we’ve been friends for too long to lie to each other, or ourselves. We both know I’m not going to make it,” the ranger’s voice was soft, but frank. Aragorn shook his head and continued when the elf tried to interrupt him.

“No, my friend, listen to me. I’ve been thinking about it. We are, as you say, more than a month out from Rivendell. Your people cannot help me even if we could reach them and neither could the Beornings. Where then, do we go? Angmar? That’s not a real option; it’s only putting a different and likely more horrible face on death. I won’t go there. I won’t take you there.”

The ranger stared hard at the elf as Legolas explained himself. His thoughts had been running over all the same paths as Legolas’ had been. The prince had been thinking through every option, trying any way to find a solution that didn’t involve going to Angmar. The only one he hadn’t thought of was the one that the ranger had chosen.

“You’re not going to die,” Legolas stated flatly.

“Not tonight, no,” Aragorn replied lightly, with a small smile.

“It’s not funny, Estel.” Legolas was angry and it showed through in his tone. “You think I would agree to just sit here and wait for you to die? That’s not an option either. I won’t let you.”

“You can’t stop it now my, friend. If what the Wraith’s messenger said is true, then the only ones who could make a difference now are either too far away, or somewhere we aren’t going.” Aragorn tried to reassure the elf and convince himself at the same time.

“I have herbs that will help when it gets...” His words were cut off as the elf wrenched the knapsack away from him and walked to the far side of the fire, throwing the bag to the ground.

“Stop it!” Legolas shouted at the ranger. “How can you think like that? And what of me, or your
family?" The elf touched his heart before pointing over the hills behind them. "What of us?"

Stalking back around the camp he knelt in front of the ranger and glared at the man. "You went into Mordor after me and convinced me not to give up this life. You made me believe I had something to live for. When I died in the mountains your father valued my life so much he was willing to risk his own to bring me back. And now you sit there and have the audacity to tell me that you just want to let go as if your life means nothing? You think I will just let you slip away and not fight for you like you have for me?" Tears streamed down the elf’s face. "How dare you," he whispered.

"It is the Witch King, Legolas. I only thought to protect you," Aragorn spoke quietly. His eyes were large in the firelight and tears of his own collected on their edges. How could Legolas think this wasn’t hard for him? Of course it was! But what choice did he have? They had to be realistic.

"Do you think I never want to see my family again? Or Arwen? Do you think I want to leave you or Middle Earth *now*, this way? Do you think I *want* to die?" The ranger shook his head. "I don’t know what else to do. I know you wouldn’t let me go to Angmar alone, but how can I endanger you by asking you to go there with me? How can I ever bring you anywhere near that evil creature’s clutches again? Better one life than two. You will not think of yourself. You will risk yourself for my sake. I know you, Legolas."

"As if you haven’t done the same for me." Legolas’ quiet words stopped the ranger. "Let me return the favor. Or at least let me pay the debt of my own folly." The elf dropped his head, pressing his palms against his eyes as if to pretend he was tired and hide the tears that were escaping them.

"Legolas, don’t..."

"No!" the elf snapped, cutting his friend short. "Do not dare tell me this is not my fault. The Nazgûl obviously wanted to catch us alone and I did a good job of making sure he could. If I had allowed Raniean and Trelan to come with us our circumstances would be different. We may not have had to chase the Beornings and walk into this trap, or at the very least we would not now be alone. We could go to Angmar while someone else went to your father and my father and tell them what happened and get help. But father was right about me. I’m foolhardy and I can’t be trusted. My stupid pride has endangered your life and made sure no one will ever know what has happened to us."

The prince’s shoulders shook with a repressed sob. If Aragorn died he would never forgive himself.

"You are none of those things, my friend." Aragorn’s soft voice made the elf lift tear-stained eyes to meet the human’s gaze. "You couldn’t have known this would happen, no one could. Everyone
makes mistakes; that doesn’t make this your fault. We can’t live in the past now and wonder about what-if’s. We have to try and face the future. That is all we can do.”

Legolas nodded, wiping his eyes hurriedly. He was by no means ready to let go of his own self-condemnation over the situation, but he did agree that the future was what was important now. A future, in which he was not going to let his friend die.

“You are right, mellon-nín. We have walked into worse predicaments than this and escaped. We can do it again. Together we will find a way out of this. We *will* survive, Estel, both of us. But we must hold onto hope and do whatever it takes.” Legolas fixed Aragorn with a firm gaze. “*Whatever* it takes,” the elf repeated.

“Are you saying you think we should go to Angmar?” Aragorn whispered, almost disbelieving.

“Yes. I am saying we must go. If that is the only way for you to live, then that is where our course lies. There must be an antidote there. The dark one may have his plans, but we can have our own as well. We’ll find the cure and we’ll make it out again. We have before.” Legolas reached out and gripped the ranger’s right arm, giving him a gentle squeeze. “Just don’t give up on me yet. Do you understand, my bull-headed adan?” The softly spoken taunt worked and Aragorn pulled the elf against him.

“I promise, no giving up,” he whispered into the elf’s ear.

Sitting back, the ranger smiled at the fair being before him. He was not at all sure that going to Angmar was the best idea, but it did seem to be the only one. If Legolas had hope, then he would try to maintain his own. He was glad the elf was with him. He knew deep in his heart that if Legolas were not here now, he would not survive.

“Now, if you’ll be so kind as to bring me back my bag, my shoulder is killing me and I know I have some white willow in there,” Aragorn chided softly.

With a start Legolas realized the ranger had been trying to find something before he snatched the knapsack away. Quickly retrieving it and pulling the pouch out once more, Legolas sat back down in front of the ranger and handed the items to the man. He retrieved a small jar and gently spread the ointment over the deep cut, lathing it with the numbing gel.

Aragorn sighed as the pain receded, soothed by the elf’s ministrations. When Legolas had re-
bandaged the wound the ranger handed him the small bag. It was full of pulverized willow bark and vantium leaves, a pain remedy with which the prince was familiar.

Legolas laughed easily as he slipped the flap open and poured the herbs into the palm of his hand.

“Were these the herbs you were talking about that would help?” He asked softly, eyeing the ranger with a sheepish grin.

“Yes,” Aragorn admitted. “For the pain. That was all I meant, my friend.” He returned the wide smile as he handed over the small pot to boil and soften the medicine. He was aware of what Legolas had thought he meant.

“Forgive me,” Legolas apologized as he added water to the herbs and set the pot near the flames. Scooting back he rested against the tree next to Aragorn.

The ranger gently nudged the elf causing the prince to laugh. “Fussy elf,” He muttered as Legolas leaned back against him. “I have some nice herbs for you,” he teased lightly.

“You aren’t going to let me live it down, are you?” Legolas murmured good-naturedly.

“Of course not,” Aragorn replied, “It’ll be a great one to tell to my brothers when we get back.”

Legolas laughed. He rolled his eyes at the thought of trying to explain that one to the human’s adopted family. Yet he would gladly do so, if only they had the chance to ever see them again. The prince’s thoughts drifted to his own family as silence fell between the two friends. His father was expecting him home. It wouldn’t be the first time things had not turned out quite the way Thranduil wanted. The king would be angry, but Legolas had to believe that when he explained the situation, Thranduil would eventually forgive him. He couldn’t leave the ranger man to die anymore than Aragorn would abandon him. Legolas wished he could somehow send word but knew that was impossible. He would have to make his explanations and apologies when he returned home. *When*, not *if*, he told himself sternly. They would return home – both of them.

He glanced at Aragorn. The ranger had scooted down and rested his head on the elf’s shoulder. He watched the fire wearily, the hypnotically weaving dance of the flames lulling him to sleep. Legolas didn’t move. The man needed to rest, his body had suffered a great deal that day.
They could head out tomorrow. Legolas smiled to himself as Aragorn relaxed fully against him. Tonight they would just rest.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Packing up their belongings had taken longer than usual the next morning. Neither the ranger nor the elf spoke much. They set out in silence and the dread of their path hung heavy upon them.

They had not gotten far before Legolas stopped Aragorn, turning the man away from their northern path. Aragorn realized they had reached the same place they had split company the day before. Was it only yesterday they had dreaded leaving one another? Well now they were together, but under what circumstances...

“Estel, we cannot take *this* where we are going.” He grasped the man’s hand and fingered the silver and emerald ring on Aragorn’s forefinger.

“You can’t even hide it in your things, it will be discovered and it is sure to be recognized,” the elf pointed out.

With a sigh the ranger shook his head. Of course. Barahir could not make this journey, it would betray him.

“I hadn’t even thought of that. But I can’t just leave it. It’s a family heirloom.” He winced and rubbed his sore shoulder. It hurt worse today than it had yesterday and the ache was making him edgy. The ring meant more to him than just lineage; its history made it a meaningful symbol of friendship between the world of elves and men. The green stones had been cut in Valinor. It was a relic from the first age and not the kind of item one simply laid aside.

“Of course not...” the elf said thoughtfully, considering their options.

“Then what do you suggest?” Aragorn asked, shielding his eyes against the rising sun.

Legolas glanced about them quietly for a few minutes, his gaze roving over the sparse forests that bracketed the eastern face of the MistyMountains. Turning slowly around, he peered across the Langflood and stared longingly into his own woods. The forests he had loved as a child. They called to him now even, begging him to return and not leave again so soon.
That was it, *his* forests were the answer.

With a questioning glance he held his hand out towards the man, asking silently for the ring.

Aragorn slipped it easily from his finger, trusting the Silvan elf implicitly. As he dropped the ring into Legolas’ palm he was struck by a moment of irony. A long time ago, another golden haired elf had given this ring, the symbol of the house of Finarfin, to Aragorn’s forefather Barahir. Now he was in turn entrusting it back into the keeping of an elf. Not too remarkable perhaps, given its many different guardians, both human and elven, over the years. However, the irony came because, for some inexplicable reason, Legolas had always reminded Aragorn of the image his childhood mind had created to fit the stories of Finrod Felagund. In their current situation, that comparison, however strange, did not sit well with the ranger.

With agile steps, Legolas ran lightly back across the river using the same stone pathway he had yesterday. Aragorn followed him much slower, watching his steps carefully on the slippery rocks.

By the time he had caught up with Legolas, the elf was standing near a large, old tree that sat just inside the edge of the forest. The giant oak had a hollow in its trunk near the base. Grasses had grown up around the dark opening and leaves blown by the winds had nearly covered the scar. Legolas crouched down near the hole and pushed the greenery away, exposing the hiding place.

He smiled up at Aragorn who was nodding in agreement.

“But wait!” the ranger dropped down next to the elf and dug quickly through his pack, pulling out an empty leather pouch that had held some sort of herb at one time. “Here, we’ll put it in here. At least it will help to keep it safe from the elements until we can return.”

He held the tiny bag open, allowing the elf to drop the silver circle inside. Pulling the strings shut, he tied it off just like Elladan had taught him and passed it back to Legolas.

“How will we ever find it again?” Aragorn asked as Legolas rose and helped the ranger to his feet as well.

“It shouldn’t be too hard,” Legolas answered glancing back at the ford. “First there is the river and the crossing that we used. It is straight out from this tree. Secondly,” the elf paused in his explanation and pulled one of his daggers from its sheath on his back. Quickly and deftly he carved
an intricate pattern into the bark of the tree. The cuts were superficial and did not harm the tree. Given a few years they would heal over and no one would ever know they had been there.

“There,” he spoke softly, stepping back and allowing Aragorn a closer look. “That is my mark. If I were with a group of wood elves they would know that I had been here. Normally I would show the direction I had gone as well, but not this time. This time it only shows that I was here. This will help us find the right tree, but mean nothing to anyone unfriendly. If Raniean, Trelan or one of my company should find this sign, they will know to look about further to see if I have left anything. Anyone else will simply assume it was for another party and will ignore it.”

Aragorn nodded slowly. He glanced back across the river in the direction of Rivendell. It occurred to him suddenly that he didn’t know what would happen if no one ever found the ring again. They were heading into darkness and it seemed to envelop his heart for a moment, squeezing tightly and shutting out all hope.

“Aragorn?”

“I just...I...” The ranger’s words faltered and he stared back at his friend.

“I know,” Legolas answered softly. He understood his friend’s hesitancy and fears. He had been thinking the same thing. He hoped that if the worst should happen, Raniean or Trelan would someday chance to come this way and find Barahir. He wasn’t altogether positive that he and Aragorn would pass this way again, but he wasn’t about to let the ranger know his thoughts.

“We’ll come back for it,” he reassured softly as he led them back across the river and north towards the snow capped peaks of Angmar. “I promise you Strider, we’ll retrieve it on our way home.” He smiled at the ranger and wrapped his arm around the man’s shoulder as they walked.

He vowed not to let himself think differently, even as he silently said his goodbyes to the forests around them.
Part Five - Sacrifices and Decisions

*I can barely look at you
But every single time I do
I know we'll make it anywhere
Anywhere from here

Light up, Light up
As if you have a choice
Even if you cannot hear my voice
I'll be right beside you

-- Snow Patrol
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They had been traveling north for quite some time now and the jagged edges of Angmar’s mountain peaks could be see in the near distance, poking up through the mists that clung to them like blackened teeth. One seemed a few shades darker than the rest and a twisted spire arched skyward near its summit. Neither friend had to guess very hard which mountain it was they sought.

Aragorn had slowly been growing worse. Every day his strength waned and the illness taking him deepened. Every day it was harder to get up and face another day’s long, cold, grueling march. In consideration of his friend’s failing health, Legolas forced the ranger to stop early tonight, quickly making camp in a secluded part of the forest. The human was too ill to protest. That was a sure sign he was fading.

“Legolas...” Aragorn’s voice was soft and weary.

The elf immediately left off tending to the fire he had started and glanced at his friend. The ranger was huddled back against the tree behind him, a drawn, slightly frightened expression on his face. His eyes did not fix on the elf, but wandered about as if lost. The ranger’s gloved hand groped outward slightly over the blanket around him, as if searching for his friend.

Legolas thought his heart would break. Hurrying over he sat down beside the ranger. Sliding his hand into Aragorn’s agitatedly twitching fingers, Legolas squeezed the human’s hand reassuringly. It was bitingly cold this time of year in the northlands and their breath frosted harshly on the chilly air. Aragorn’s movements had disturbed his protective covers and he shivered in the cold wind. The elf gently pulled the blankets back around his friend’s shoulders, tucking the edges in protectively.

Aragorn started when the elf took his hand, but then seemed to relax a little, calmed by the elf’s nearness.
Legolas stroked the fingers in his grasp gently with his thumb, rubbing reassuring circles into his friend’s palm. “Sîdh, mellon-nín, pân natha mae. Peace, my friend, all will be well.”

Aragorn smiled slightly, letting his head fall to the side a little. It came to rest against Legolas’ shoulder. “Nach milui artheled enni. You are too good to me, Legolas,” he whispered hoarsely.

Legolas was slightly alarmed by his usually strong friend’s state of weakened dependency, but he let none of that fear color his reactions and simply wrapped his free arm around the human’s shoulders, allowing Aragorn to feel the comfort of being enfolded in the elf’s firm embrace. The ranger’s throbbing shoulder eased up a little under the prince touch. The relief, small though it was, was most welcome.

Aragorn’s breathing was slow and labored. The poisons working on him were taking their terrible toll. He hated how weak it was making him, how much he knew he was leaching off of Legolas’ strength just in order to keep going. He felt incredibly ill... and very afraid.

“Legolas?” The human murmured softly.

“Hm?” the elf absently stroked the human’s sweat-slicked hair with the fingers that rested against his friend’s shoulder, Aragorn’s gloved hand still fondly trapped in the long fingers of the prince’s other hand.

“I can’t see.” Aragorn’s voice was quiet, but a tiny trace of fear flittered around the edges of his tone.

Legolas started and pulled his friend up quickly by the shoulders, looking into the ranger’s familiar grey eyes. He realized the human’s wandering gaze was looking right through him, not focusing on anything. Cold dread chilled the elf’s heart like ice as he passed his hand in front of his friend’s eyes several times. Aragorn’s gaze did not follow his hand. The ranger was blind.

“Can you see nothing at all then? When did this happen?” The prince looked deep into the human’s eyes, turning Aragorn’s head gently from side to side in his grasp as he checked him over. He tried to keep any alarm or panic out of his voice, maintaining a façade of calm for his friend’s sake.

“About an hour ago, but it’s been dimming for days. There’s nothing wrong with my eyes. It’s the poison,” Aragorn’s voice was still soft and matter-of-fact. He appreciated that Legolas was not
overreacting from the startling news. He didn’t have the strength to deal with that kind of emotional swell right now. “It’s stealing all the light... leaving nothing but consuming darkness.”

Legolas tried not to choke on the lump in his throat. He hated to imagine his friend caught in a darkened world like this. The poison was taking Aragorn too hard, too fast. He was doing his best to support his friend and share his strength with the ranger, but it wasn’t enough. He could warm the human’s chilled body with his touch, but it left as soon as the elf withdrew. All he could offer seemed to be but small drops of strength that quickly disappeared into the darkening maelstrom trying to steal Aragorn away from him. Something had to be done. He had to find a way to make a difference, any difference... The prince pressed his lips together tightly.

“Wait here a moment, mellon-nín, I’ll be right back,” he reassured, rising and moving away.

Aragorn nodded and leaned back against the tree. He could hear the faint sound of Legolas moving around their small camp, but could not see what the elf was doing. He had no idea what his friend had in mind. In truth he felt too ill to care very much. He shivered slightly from an unnatural cold that had nothing to do with the sharp north winds.

Aragorn was glad when Legolas sat back down next to him, because the elf’s presence seemed to push the cold away from his body and let him feel warmth again in his aching bones. The ranger smelled a new scent lingering around the elf and wrinkled his nose. “Togiuith?” he exclaimed the name of the herb questioningly.

Legolas nodded, and then remembered his friend couldn’t see him. “Yes, I stole it out of your pack I’m afraid.” He smiled gently. Peeling the leather glove off Aragorn’s right hand he swabbed the human’s palm with a bit of the pale umber tincture he had taken from his friend’s belongings.

The human was puzzled. He didn’t understand what Legolas had in mind. Togiuith was a drawing herb, used for pulling the sting out of insect bites or mildly poisoned wounds, but it would do nothing for a toxin as severe as the one afflicting him. He did not think it would have any benefit for someone in his current state. “Legolas...”

The elf hushed him. “Just trust me, Strider, all right? I may not be a healer, but we wood-elves know a thing or two that might surprise you.” Legolas rubbed his own right palm with the herb.

The human seemed a little uneasy, so Legolas began explaining to assuage his hesitancy. “When the spiders first appeared in Mirkwood the wood-elves were hard pressed to know how to deal with them. The most common ones use their venom to immobilize, rather than kill... but some breeds *do* kill with even a bite. That breed has almost died out as they were weaker beings than their
cousins and the elves hunted them to near extinction, but in the early days they were much more prevalent. At that time, our people were dying frequently with nothing to save them, until a remedy was found.” Picking up one of his long knives from the ground beside them, the elf cleaned the blade with the same Togiuith tincture.

Legolas did not mention that what he was about to attempt usually only worked, or at least worked best, between family members whose ties of kinship were strong. That was the reason he had not tried it sooner. But now they were swiftly running out of time. Aragorn was the brother of his heart; that had to be enough... Somehow, it had to be.

Lifting the ranger’s hand, he turned it palm up in his grip, laying the cool metal of his knife blade against the callused flesh so that Aragorn could feel it and not be startled by what he was going to do.

Aragorn felt the steel against his skin and turned questioning, sightless eyes upon his friend. He made no move to pull away because he trusted the elf completely, but that didn’t mean that he understood.

“Legolas? What are you doing?”

“I’m going to have to ask you to trust me, my friend,” Legolas repeated gently as he flipped the blade onto its sharpened edge against the ranger’s flesh. “I think I can help you, and at the very worst it will at least do you no harm. It is something my people discovered a long time ago. The Togiuith cannot draw the poison by itself, but it can act as a catalyst if used correctly, between two people whose bond is strong enough. I think ours is.” There was a gentle smile in Legolas’ voice that set Aragorn at ease.

The ranger nodded, giving his wordless consent for whatever the prince wanted to attempt.

Legolas accepted the permission and his fingers tightened on Aragorn’s hand. “Relax, mellon-nín, this will only hurt for a moment.”

Aragorn had a fairly good idea of what the elf intended to do and breathed deeply as Legolas used his knife to cut a long, deep incision across the center of the human’s right palm.

Deep, red blood welled up around the knife and Legolas winced sympathetically. “I’m sorry Estel,” he murmured, asking forgiveness for causing his friend pain.
Aragorn shook his head, meaning that no apology was necessary.

Setting Aragorn’s hand carefully on his leg so that the bloody palm was turned upward, Legolas took his stained knife and swabbed it with the herb tincture once more, before placing the shining silver blade against his own flesh. Without flinching, the elf carefully sliced his left palm open in the same manner in which he had cut Aragorn’s right. Pouring several spoons worth of the Togiuith into the bowl of his injured palm, the elf tightened as the herb stung sharply. He should treat Aragorn’s wound with it as well, but the elf hated causing Aragorn further pain, so instead he poured more into his own palm, hopefully absorbing enough for both of them.

Lifting the human’s arm out of his lap, Legolas clasped Aragorn’s right hand with his left, pressing their bleeding palms together and trapping the Togiuith between the two wounds.

Aragorn hissed through his teeth as the medicine and the contact burned his palm. For a minute or two they just sat that way, hands clasped, unspeaking. Legolas’ eyes were closed and he was whispering something quiet under his breath that might have been a prayer, or might have been part of whatever ritual he was sharing with his mortal friend.

The ache of the medicine faded... then Aragorn’s palm began to tingle. It was not an unpleasant sensation however. In fact, as it spread up his arm and throughout the rest of his body, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was as if a warm breath of fresh wind had entered his chilled, aching bones, revitalizing his flesh and lifting some of the darkness of oppression from his soul.

Legolas felt Aragorn’s cold, stiff body begin to loosen against him and he smiled. It was working. He knew they could make it work. The elf breathed slowly, deeply, wading his way through the physical effects of what he was doing. While Aragorn got a reprieve, and fed off the elf’s strength, Legolas was physically sucking the poison that was killing his friend out of the ranger’s body, and into his. A creeping chill frosted the prince’s bones and his joints began to ache. He was suddenly keenly aware of the sharp frostiness of the air and the chill that radiated from the very earth itself under him. The light of the world around him dimmed several shades and he knew he was experiencing what his friend had been going through these many days now. A deep, grinding ache flared in his shoulder. He did not know if he was feeling Aragorn’s pain or if the touch of the morgul poison was reawakening old associations in his own body. The elf tensed to keep his teeth from chattering.

Despite the ill effects, Legolas wished he could pull everything out of his friend. He wished he could transfer Aragorn’s fate to himself as Lord Elrond had so selflessly done for the prince earlier in the year. But he could not. Legolas did not have that gift and the best he could offer Aragorn was some of his strength and a brief reprieve, lightening the human’s load of suffering by enabling him to share the poison killing him with another body. Between immortals, and working only against spider
venom, the cure could save lives... but this poison was a hundred times worse and Aragorn did not possess the strength of an elven body. Through the sharing of his immortal blood, Legolas could slow the ranger’s descent into darkness, but he could not stop it forever.

Aragorn smiled softly as the essence of Legolas’ life-blood flowed into his veins, aided by the herbs and the strength of the elf’s will. Blessed relief blossomed out through the ranger’s body like a warm, gentle river; like taking a hot bath after being too long in the snow.

Legolas smiled too, despite the pounding headache building between his temples as he pulled Aragorn’s tainted, mortal blood into himself. The elf knew the effects on both of them would not be lasting. His body would deal with and neutralize the poison he was absorbing with his friend’s blood, given a little time. Unfortunately, the vicious morgul poison would continue to propagate in Aragorn’s body and would overwhelm him again after a short period of time. As much as he wanted to, Legolas could not cure Aragorn; he could only buy him more time.

Aragorn’s brows furrowed in concentration as darkness wavered around him like a shifting veil. Slowly, light began to seep back into his awareness, painting the world around him into vague, muted shapes as though seen on a very dark night. Into the blindness of his private midnight, Legolas’ dim form appeared beside him, growing slowly brighter. The ranger could see his friend now, sitting next to him and clasping his hand. The elf’s eyes were closed as he concentrated on what he was doing.

Legolas shimmered brightly in the darkness, bathing in the elf’s own inner light... yet it was not the same kind of glow as when Aragorn observed the prince in the dark of a normal night. Usually, Legolas appeared as if he were reflecting the radiance of the stars like ithildin, but right now the prince shimmered as if he were totally made out of light himself. He even looked different... Aragorn did not know how to explain it but for a few moments, he was seeing Legolas as he looked in the unseen realm between that which was visible, and that what was intangible. The natural radiance of the wood-elf’s fëa shimmered around his friend like silver-blue moonlight, drawing Aragorn into the circle of light until he was totally encompassed by the brightening glow.

Suddenly, Aragorn realized that he himself was glowing dimly. Then, a moment later, the world about snapped back into focus. Aragorn was assaulted with the sights, shapes and colors of the fire before him, the rocks and the trees around them, the fading evening sky and the slowly waking stars over head. He blinked hard several times to make the adjustment of having his sight return, but otherwise felt unable to move. It was not an unpleasant feeling. It was simply as if his body had become part of something he couldn’t understand. He was overwhelmed by the rush of clarity and warmth, afraid to break whatever wonderful spell had wrapped him up in its embrace.

His gaze was still locked on Legolas. The elf was no longer glowing, and looked normal once more to his sight, although perhaps a little weary. Yet there was a smile in the prince’s eyes when he opened them, meeting his friend’s gaze.
Legolas saw Aragorn staring at him. Color had returned to the ranger’s face and warmth to his touch. The elf was relieved. He smiled softly when the human just sat there, seemingly frozen in whatever he was experiencing. Legolas had not stopped to think what this kind of sharing between a mortal and an immortal might do to a man, but apparently his friend’s body was a little overwhelmed. It did not know what to do with the elven blood and elven strength that had just been given. Had he been a normal human, his body would not have been able to accept the gift, no matter how much love it was given with. But Aragorn was a descendant of Elros, a man of Númenor, and his body could accept the strength imparted to him, even if momentarily at a loss of how to deal with it.

Aragorn opened his mouth, but seemed to be trying to remember how to talk.

Legolas smiled gently, squeezing Aragorn’s hand in his, not quite ready to release it yet.

“Speak, my friend,” he urged, trying to lead the ranger back to a functional state. If he did this again, he would have to be careful how much of himself he gave to his friend, for, apparently, the human’s body could take only so much. He hadn’t thought of that.

Aragorn chuckled slightly and let a deep breath out as he returned from wherever he had been. “Dear friend...” he murmured, squeezing Legolas’ hand back. “What did you do?”

Legolas gently unclasped their bloodied palms and commenced cleaning Aragorn’s wound carefully.

“Nothing permanent I fear,” the elf apologized quietly. Legolas felt a little dazed, but pushed the sensation aside. “Still, it should help for a time.” He bound up the ranger’s palm with slowed fingers and tied off the soft bandage. “Can you see again now?”

The ranger nodded, looking around them. Yes, he could see more than he felt he ought to be able to honestly, especially considering that the moon had risen and the sun was almost set. It was as if the darkness did not matter, but formed merely a slight filter upon his vision.

Aragorn frowned as he looked at his bandaged hand after Legolas released it... either he was seeing things, which was entirely possible given his state, or his fingers were glistening with a slightly incandescent light in the growing dusk. That was *very* odd. The next thing he realized, with a small thrill of panic, was that Legolas, still beside him, was *not* glowing at all, even though he normally would be as darkness descended.
“Legolas,” the ranger’s voice suddenly took on a serious, demanding tone. “What did you do?”

Legolas had cleaned the blood from his hand, but was having difficulty trying to bandage it one-handedly. His normally graceful fingers fumbled with the soft cloth. He focused on the task with a slight frown.

“I told you, nothing permanent, Estel.” He sighed. “My people discovered how to use Togiuith to initiate a transfer of blood and strength. It allowed the person bitten by the spider to exchange some of the poison for the strength of another elf. Split between two people, the toxin was not deadly... unfortunately, I cannot do that for you with this foul morgul poison. I can’t cure you Estel, I can only help. I’m sorry.”

Legolas’ fingers trembled slightly and he dropped the bandage in disgust at his own clumsiness.

Aragorn caught his friend’s hands between his own, taking the strip of cloth from the prince and gently wrapping it around the elf’s self-inflicted injury. The ranger winced. The wound in his friend’s fair palm looked dark and ugly. Small tendrils of black ran away from the edges under the skin and the flesh was already deeply inflamed.

“I don’t care about that,” the human said quietly, covering Legolas’ bandaged hand with his own. “I mean, what did you do to yourself?” Aragorn’s eyes were sorrowful and worried. It was nearly completely dark now and Legolas’ elven incandescence remained disturbingly absent. He might as well have been another human sitting across the ranger. Aragorn was quietly terrified of what Legolas might have sacrificed for him.

Legolas read the dread in his friend’s eyes and shook his head quickly.

“Ú-gostach, fear not,” he reassured. “I have taken no lasting harm. This poison is not meant for me, and what small amount I absorbed, my body can deal with.” The elf spoke true, but carefully avoided telling his friend that having mortal blood in his veins was nearly as difficult as dealing with the poison. He felt... old, and suffocated, as if he were both blind and deaf with all his extra senses severed. He hadn’t expected it to be quite this bad and was suddenly eternally grateful that he was an elf. If this was even a small taste of mortality, it was not something he relished.

Aragorn nodded. As long as his friend had not done anything seriously detrimental to his own health, he would not comment. Legolas’ hands were cold in his and he hated that the elf had in anyway hurt himself to help him.
Legolas felt warmth spreading through his arms and quickly pulled his hands away from Aragorn. “Daro! I did not give you strength so you could give it away again, Strider,” he chastised gently. “Please, mellon-nín, you need to keep it for as long as you can. I... I cannot lose you.”

Taking the elf by the shoulders, Aragorn pulled him close, hugging Legolas tightly. He didn’t say thank you; somehow that didn’t seem quite adequate for someone who was willing to tamper with his own immortality to keep his friend alive. He didn’t know what to say, so he just held his friend quietly, trusting that somehow, the elf who knew him so well, would know what was in his heart.

Legolas did. He hugged the human back. He smiled when Aragorn released him. “Now get some rest, mellon-nín, I will keep watch.”

Aragorn did rest, and for the first time in days his sleep was deep, dreamless, and refreshing.

Legolas stood guard over his friend all night long. As it had been every night since they had entered this land, he had the eerie feeling of being watched. He could not see anything and nothing came near them, yet he knew it was out there. The back of his neck prickled constantly and the sensation left him on edge more tonight than any other night. He attributed his added jumpyiness to his own diminished strength, but it remained nevertheless uncanny and very disturbing. The elf felt certain they were under constant surveillance, but so far, they had encountered no kind of resistance at all. In fact, it seemed as if something or someone were actually keeping any dangers of the wilds away from them. As if someone did not wish their journey hindered by unnecessary delays. That was not a comforting thought.

By the time the sun rose, Legolas was much more exhausted than he should have been. The elf had the rare experience of feeling glad to see the stars disappear as the sun slipped up into the sky and ended the long, anxious, wearying night.

The prince rubbed his eyes. He wanted to sleep, but that was out of the question. They had to move forward; Aragorn was running out of time. Rushing to their doom with open arms because to delay meant death... it was quite a situation they were facing.

“Echuiach, mellon-nín. Wake, my friend,” Legolas stirred the ranger lightly.

Aragorn stretched and opened his eyes, sitting up slowly. He could still feel the dark pulse in his shoulder wound as it slowly worked to reclaim his body, but Legolas’ gift last night had not been in vain and he felt better than he had in days. He couldn’t say the same for his friend however.
The ranger chuckled as he pulled himself to his feet, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “You look terrible Legolas,” he teased lightly. “Bad night?”

The elf’s slightly blood-shot glare dared the ranger to laugh at him again. “Mortals,” he rolled his eyes. “Pack up, Strider, we’re leaving.”

“Yes, sir,” Aragorn bowed with mock deference. “Apparently not only humans are grumpy when they’re tired.”

Legolas didn’t bother to reply, but started gathering up his gear. Aragorn frowned. The prince was not himself.

“Legolas... perhaps we should wait. You should rest before we move on. I’m sorry; you should have woken me to take turns, mellon-nín.” The truth was that Legolas often took entire night watches alone. Normally it did not faze the prince, but today Aragorn wondered if this was one time Legolas should not have pushed himself.

Legolas shook his head. “No, rest is time we cannot spare.” He forced a smile for his friend’s sake. “I’ll be fine.”

The day’s journey was long and both human and elf were fatigued at the end of it. The dull chill had started working its way out from Aragorn’s wound again and his head throbbed. Legolas, sharing his friend’s pain, felt nearly the same, although, even as Aragorn’s strength began to wan again a little, the elf’s was slowly working its way back to normal.

After making camp, Legolas sat down and found he could not get up again. He was freezing cold and couldn’t get warm. He was exhausted and ached everywhere. Valar, how did Aragorn stand mortal life?

Aragorn knelt next to his friend. He was weary, but he was used to feeling this way. It was not as much of a shock to him as it was to Legolas. Pulling a blanket around Legolas’ shoulders, he gave him a gentle nudge towards the ground.

“Rest, mellon-nín, my turn to take first watch tonight,” he said.
Legolas could no longer deny his need for rest and reluctantly obeyed. “Promise you’ll wake me,” he murmured as sleep claimed him. “I don’t want you wearing yourself out, Estel.”

“I promise,” Aragorn agreed, pulling the blanket up higher and tucking the edges in around his friend’s body to stave off any nightly chill. He would not be foolish and wake Legolas to take the second watch because he knew he was running on borrowed strength alone right now. Yet Legolas had to stop pushing himself as if he were invulnerable. That elf didn’t know his own limits, whether he was suffering from an influx of poisoned mortal blood or not.

Aragorn was not overly worried about anything attacking them during the night. Obviously, the evil that was drawing them in was not about to let them get harmed too soon, if that were any comfort. So he felt safe letting his attention rest on Legolas for a while as he watched his friend sleep.

Legolas shimmered very dimly in the moonlight and Aragorn was gratified to see that in combination with the fact that the elf slept with his eyes open. His friend was drained, but would be all right. Still, the worn, haggard expression on the fair face and the troubled rise and fall of the slumbering shoulders made Aragorn’s heart ache.

Too much. Legolas as always ready to give up too much for him. Like now... how could he let the elf walk back into the hands of evil, after having seen twice how that evil almost destroyed his friend? Aragorn would die one way or the other... but Legolas... The human rested his head in his hands. He felt the cloth of the bandage on his palm against his forehead, and dropped his hands down into his lap again. Fingering the bandage he slid it off a little, peering at the wound underneath. He was slightly surprised to find it almost completely healed already. Only the knitting scar was left, and that still shimmered faintly in the moonlight. A dim streak of radiance was all that remained left across his palm, like a small trace of his friend’s selfless love.

Reaching out, Aragorn gently eased aside the bandage on Legolas’ out-flung hand, being careful not to wake the slumbering elf. At the moment however, it would have taken a lot more than Aragorn’s soft touch to stir the prince, despite the fact that he was usually a light sleeper.

The ranger swallowed hard. The wound to Legolas’ palm was still dark and disturbing to look upon. It had barely healed at all, although the black tendrils had at least receded back into the dark center. Legolas’ body was fighting; it would just take time.

Aragorn replaced the bandage and squeezed the elf’s hand lightly. Legolas, still fast asleep, responded reflexively and a small smile flitted across his lips.

Aragorn wanted to cry. Their wounds were a physical manifestation of what was happening, what
*would* happen if they continued onward as they were. Legolas gave him life; in return all he could give the elf was death. That was the way it was between humans and elves. It was the same thing that kept him from Arwen. Did he love Legolas any less, to let him make the kind of sacrifice that he did not want to require of his beloved? They were brothers of the heart, yet very different in body. It always came back to this inescapable fact. With growing resignation he realized it always would. How could it not for a mortal amongst elves?

Selfishly, he had to admit that he wanted his friend with him. When Legolas was by his side he felt he could face anything, even the possibility of the slow, horrible death confronting him, even the dark terror that wanted to eat through his very heart... but it was not fair to the elf.

Aragorn was mortal; his death was an eventuality he could never escape, whether it came now, or years from now. Not so for Legolas. Only a very cruel person could want to link an immortal star to the same doom as an Arda-bound mortal. Aragorn was not such a person. He had tried to explain that to the elf in the beginning but he knew Legolas would never listen to him.

Rising quietly, the human picked up his pack. Legolas would never leave him willingly, even if his life were the price he paid. Aragorn knew that, but could not accept such a cost. The ranger could hide his trail as good as or better than any elf. Legolas would never be able to follow him. The decision came quickly, but it was not lightly made.

Aragorn paused, taking one last look at his dear friend. His eyes stung. He knew Legolas would never understand. The elf would be angry and hurt; he knew he would be if the situation were reversed. Yet his friend’s life was worth any sacrifice, even one so dear as that of their friendship.

He hated to leave the prince sleeping and unguarded, but it was the only way. In the long run, Legolas would be safer.

Kneeling down beside the elf, Aragorn pressed a gentle kiss upon his sleeping friend’s brow.

“Valar keep you, my brother,” the human whispered quietly. “I shall love you always.”

Pulling the brooch from the neck of his cloak, Aragorn pressed the small mithril star into Legolas’ palm. The pin had belonged to Elladan and Elrond before him. Legolas knew how much it meant to the ranger, and would understand the message his friend was leaving.

“Le ú-nach erui,” Aragorn whispered softly. “You will never be alone.”
The elf’s long, graceful fingers closed automatically around the broach, the peaceful expression on his face deepening. “Estel...” he murmured in his sleep.

Aragorn closed his eyes, turning his tear-stained gaze to the starry heavens. “May you find estel - hope, my friend, and know I never wanted to leave you like this. Forgive me.”

Rising silently once more, the ranger slid noiselessly away from the small camp and was almost instantly swallowed up by the darkness of the night beyond.
Shadows are falling and I’m running out of breath
Keep me in your heart for awhile.

If I leave you it doesn’t mean I love you any less
Keep me in your heart for awhile.

When you get up in the morning and you see that crazy sun
Keep me in your heart for while...

-- Warren Zevon

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Legolas tossed and turned in a troubled dream. He dreamt that Aragorn knelt and kissed his brow before disappearing into the darkness. The elf tried to call out, to stop his friend... but he could not. The human was gone and a devastating wave of grief washed over the elf.

“Estel!” Legolas awoke at his own cry and found that he was staring up into the dawn-lit sky, warmed by the bright glow of the sun as it spread out across the landscape.

He blinked. Aragorn should not have let him sleep this long. Drat the human, he was going to make himself more ill! Rolling on to his elbow, Legolas looked around for his friend, ready to chide him.

No one was there.

The fire had burned itself out long ago and the smoldering coals lay unattended in the stone ring.

Legolas sat up and scrambled quickly to his feet, letting the blanket fall away from him as his gaze darted across the small, deserted camp. Even Aragorn’s pack was gone. The ranger’s tracks led to the edge of the camp and then simply disappeared.

“Strider? Strider! Estel!” the elf shouted in alarm, turning in circles as he scanned the area. It did not feel as if the human had merely stepped away for a few moments, and if he had, he would not have taken all his gear with him.
Suddenly Legolas’ senses caught up with his body and he realized that he was clutching something in his left hand. Opening his fingers almost fearfully, Legolas stared down in horror at the small, gold and silver star in his palm.

Aragorn’s broach. The one he always wore. The one Elladan gave him to remind him that he would never be alone.

Legolas clenched the pin tightly in his fist, letting it dig into his injured palm. He wanted to scream, to wail at the heavens as he realized what must have happened.

Aragorn had left him.

Legolas knew his friend had had the best of intentions, but the abandonment burned like a hot knife in his chest. It burned like the deepest kind of betrayal of trust and it stole away his breath.

The ranger had left him, intending to go to Angmar and die there alone. Aragorn would walk knowingly into the dark snare laid before him, and Legolas would never see him again. After all they had been through, after Legolas had even been willing to share his very immortality, Aragorn had simply walked away and left him alone. The ranger had abandoned him here without a word or a second glance.

Legolas’ throat was so tight he realized he was gagging. He physically couldn’t breathe. He knew Aragorn’s actions weren’t intended as betrayal, but Valar, that was exactly what it felt like.

His dream came back to him and the elf felt tears sting his eyes, sliding heedlessly down his cheeks. He fell back to his knees in despair.

He never even got to say goodbye. Aragorn was simply there one minute, and gone the next, vanishing in the night as if their whole, wonderful friendship had been nothing but a fleeting dream flitting across the immortal prince’s life. He had always feared their parting would be so one day, but he had never expected it to be this brutal or this abrupt.

Legolas could not accept this. He could not let it end this way. Rising to his feet, the elf used his stubborn determination to move up and to hide the crushing grief he felt.

Aragorn was not getting away with this. The ranger may be content to accept that his time had come
but Legolas was not, not without a fight. If Aragorn walked into the Witch King’s clutches alone, the elf knew he was never coming out again. Together... maybe they had a chance.

Estel had always been the hopeful one; the one who never gave up and Legolas had come to depend on that. Now however, it seemed that his friend was ready to bow to a fate he should not have to accept. Legolas’ hands tightened on Aragorn’s broach. Well then, *he* would just have to hold Estel’s hope alive inside of him, and trust that he could bring it back to the human before it was too late.

Quickly picking up the remainder of the camp, Legolas set out to follow his friend. He could find no trace of the ranger’s trail, but he knew the direction he would have gone.

He would find him. He had to.

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Hold me in your thoughts, take me to your dreams
Touch me as I fall into view
When the winter comes keep the fires lit
And I will be right next to you

-- Warren Zevon
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The sky was low and heavy with clouds. From time to time the distant muted sounds of far-off thunder shook the heavens.

Legolas glanced skyward gauging the weather. The storm would in all likelihood pass, saving its heavy burden for the mountains higher up the valley. It was well enough because a rainstorm here would only turn into sleet and snow, which would be an untimely impediment to his journey.
Redirecting his gaze, the elf searched the ground before him for any telltale signs that the ranger had passed this way. It had been days that he had been traveling alone now, trying desperately to find Aragorn’s trail and rejoin the human. He knew they were heading into the same direction, but the icy landscape was vast and cluttered. There might be a hundred different ways to approach the dark mountain. Two people had very little chance of finding one another out here, especially if one of them did not wish to be found. The frustrated elf wasn’t even sure that he hadn’t passed right by the ranger. He had no way of knowing if he was now ahead of him or not.

The twins always swore that Aragorn could hide himself when he wanted to, only to be found if he so desired. They were right.

The ground gave up no hint of the ranger’s path, no sign that any human life had come this way before. Legolas was growing more frustrated and angry by the minute. Given his present state of mind, it might have been better for the poison to get the ranger before the elf caught up with him. If he found the human he was going to make sure Aragorn never pulled such a stupid stunt again.

Legolas winced in silent desperation at his own slip. “*When* not *if*,” he reminded himself. Anger was easier to focus on than heartbreak right now, but they were both there in equal measure.

The winds picked up slightly as he crested the bowl of the small valley in which he had been walking. Up ahead, the call of a lone wolf drifted through air. In moments the howl was joined by several other growls.

Legolas stopped on the ridge and listened, trying to decipher what they were saying. He was startled to realize that the wolves were moving away rapidly, heading east. It could only mean one thing this far north: either they had found prey, or they were the prey.

With a burst of speed the elf raced toward the general area where the wolves had been. He hoped it would shed some light on his friend’s whereabouts and yet feared what he might find. If the poison had begun to affect Aragorn again as it had before, there was no telling what in what shape the ranger would be.

As he ran, a dark shape blotted out the sky above him, passing over him and disappearing behind the tree line. As Legolas ran, he glanced up to see what had caused the momentary eclipse. The black form of a winged Nazgûl mount darted ahead of him; its shrill, piercing cry rending the air. The sight of the evil beast set a dread in the elf’s heart for which Legolas was unprepared.

It had been years since he had laid eyes on the vile creatures the Úlairë used as their mounts. He knew they were close to Angmar, but not this close. Why was the beast here and what was it doing?
Legolas had little time to ponder those thoughts as he raced through the trees, following the morgul beast’s path. It seemed to be en-route to the same vicinity he was and his fear escalated.

The dark shadow dropped through the trees with a shriek. The keening cry was met with sounds of snarling barks and growls that the elf could just now hear.

~*~

It really had been a stupid idea. After the third day of trudging alone through the wilds towards the distant peak of Angmar, Aragorn knew he had made a mistake. There was no way he was going to make it to the mountains on his own. He was moving too slow and failing too fast. Yet, even now, he could not bring himself to turn back. He probably could not have found Legolas again had he tried and even if he did... it would only mean Legolas’ end as well as his own. Now, nearly a week of hard traveling after having parted from his friend, he was certain he had lost the elf far behind him.

Aragorn’s steps faltered. The poison was wreaking havoc with his system and he was weary beyond belief. Yet he dared not stop, not now. He knew he was being hunted. He had heard them. They thought they were being quiet, but they weren’t.

A pack of wargs had picked up his trail a few minutes ago, routing the wolves that had been dogging his steps, trailing him since dawn. They could sense that the human was in distress as easily as they could pick out the sickly member of a herd of sheep. The ghostlike hunters had stayed to the safety of the trees, waiting for dark to take down the lone man. Now their sleek shapes had been exchanged for the more powerful, hulking forms of the wargs that had chased them away. It was not an improvement. Aragorn would have taken wolves over wargs any day.

Aragorn pulled his sword from its scabbard and doggedly continued walking. It wouldn’t matter soon. The poison or the wargs would get to him. A better end than at the hands of what lay waiting for him in Angmar, he supposed. He hoped Legolas wouldn’t find him after the fact. He didn’t want the elf to see. Secretly he hoped Legolas would actually appear any minute now, but he knew he had covered his tracks too well. In all likelihood the wood elf would pass by his final resting place and never know the man had perished.

“Serves you right,” Aragorn chided himself darkly. He felt incredibly guilty over having left Legolas alone. What if something had happened to the prince? He had no way of knowing. Legolas had been sleeping so soundly when Aragorn left; he hadn’t even realized he was alone.
With a weary sigh, Aragorn tried to keep putting one foot in front of the other. His gaze darted into the forest that bracketed his right. He could see the wargs pacing him, their eyes glowing oddly in the fading light. It wouldn’t be long before they judged their time was right. He needed to find safety, some place where he could construct a fire and keep the mountains at his back. He needed to find it quickly.

A small, bowled-out meadow nestled back against the granite cliffs up ahead, beckoning him. A long since abandoned fire ring sat partially overgrown near the far edge. There was enough light to make it safely there and plenty of debris on the ground for a fire. If he hurried he could make it.

Sheathing his sword, the ranger picked up his pace, keeping to the edge of the granite shelf. The mountains rose straight out of the forest here at the base of the rocky incline. Large pieces of shale and granite littered the area, tripping him up and impeding his progress.

The wargs paced the wounded man, content to let him wear himself out and make their jobs easier. The less fight their prey could muster, the happier they were. Low, throaty growls emanated from the woods, causing the ranger to glance in their direction.

Sweat beaded across Aragorn’s forehead and his breathing was ragged as he pushed himself faster and harder. Just a few more steps and he would reach his goal. He stumbled and fell into the shallow bowl, rolling down the grassy incline.

The sounds of his pursuers increased as the wargs rushed towards the downed man. The moment they had been waiting for had arrived.

Knowing he was out of time the ranger curled in on himself, covering his head with his hands as the dark bodies poured into the meadow.

~*~

The Wraith’s mount wheeled high overhead, watching the human stumble along towards his master’s castle. Its keen eyes had seen the wargs that rushed silently along the edges of the forest, following the ranger.
It hated people. In fact it hated just about everything, except its bed in Angmar and the orcs that fed it. It tolerated them, and its master of course, but the beast had no reason to be pleased with its life, no source of joy for its existence. It lived with the twisted soul of a human corpse for its master. Its sole purpose was to do the Nazgûl’s bidding. As much as it desired to ignore the Wraith, it could not. It had been made for the Úlairë and the Úlairë was its own.

The Witch King had sent his mount out to watch and protect the human and the elf as they made their way to his northern home. He wanted no harm to befall them on their journey and had impressed that wish upon the morgul beast.

Now it seemed the human’s flailing attempts to reach the castle had attracted a pack of wargs. When the large, wolf-like creatures swarmed towards the ranger, the mount was actually pleased. It would finally get to take out its aggressions on something.

Folding its wings back, the fell beast arrowed towards the meadow, losing a shrill, keening cry. The shriek of the creature threw the wargs into a momentary panic. It was enough time for the mount to drop down over the creatures and grasp one of the large males, hefting the warg high into the air and dropping it back into the forest. Wheeling in a tight circle the flying beast dove a second time.

Aragorn was on his feet and running for the more defensible area of the fire ring. He threw his pack to the ground and pulled his sword. Behind him, the rock walls rose high, protecting him on two sides now. The only way for the wargs to approach him was through a frontal assault and he would go down fighting. Wiping the sweat from his eyes with the sleeve of his coat, he widened his stance and waited for the wargs to regroup.

He didn’t know where the Wraith’s mount had come from, although he had a good idea that it was what had been following them all along. At the moment he did not care. Any help he could get was welcome and right now the morgul beast seemed to be on his side.

Though momentarily distracted, the wargs had not forgotten why they were here and quickly regrouped. Fanning out around the edges of the meadow they stalked back towards Aragorn’s position.

A smaller, younger warg to the ranger’s left feinted at the human, drawing the man’s attention and garnering a quick response from Aragorn. Turning sharply, the ranger arched his sword, swinging it up into the cub and catching the wargling across the chin, drawing blood.

An adult from the right flank charged the distracted man, throwing him backwards with its bulk as it hit Aragorn broadside. His reflexes were slowed, his reactions muddied by the poison flowing in his
blood and he had no time to react. Rolling with the blow, Aragorn sliced out at the warg’s underbelly. He cried out as the beast pinned his arm with its huge paw. The sharp, curved talons cut through his coat and dug into his skin.

In a flash the warg was gone. A windstorm swept around the prone man as the enraged winged mount swooped into the meadow and pulled the warg off the human. Its great wings back beat the air as it gained altitude, quickly kicking up dirt and debris and clearing the ring of predatory beasts back to the edges of the field. Stupid little human. It couldn’t even take care of itself. The fell beast snapped the spine of the warg in its mouth viciously.

Legolas had nearly reached the meadow. He was tracking the footsteps of the ranger through the long grasses. Aragorn’s weaving trail was no longer masked and the elf could tell just how badly his friend was faring. Keeping an eye on the skies overhead and focusing on the sounds of battle just beyond him, Legolas raced forward. He heard Aragorn’s pained cry and reached for his bow and arrows, afraid of what he would see as he crested the knoll.

His fears were not unfounded. He saw Aragorn fighting off a large warg that sprang at him from the left, leaping from the ring that was slowly tightening around the ranger.

With a shout Aragorn thrust his sword into the creature’s chest, ducking the massive head and turning away just in time to avoid the beast’s claws. The rest of the pack had no intentions of giving the human a break. A large matriarchal warg charged the man, taking advantage of his slow recovery from the last attack.

“Aragorn!” Legolas shouted a warning to the human as the dark creature charged him from the right. The warg bowled the ranger over, pouncing on his chest and pinning him in place. She howled in pain as one arrow struck her hindquarters and another one slammed into her shoulder.

Legolas was racing down the shallow incline, firing arrows into the pack of wargs and scattering the large creatures. The winged mount dove into the fray, picking up wargs and dropping back into the woods. It caught sight of the elf and screamed in rage.

It remembered that being. That was the one who had hurt it in its own home. It had harbored a special hatred for the elf ever since.

Legolas’ arrow targeted the warg’s skull, the tip of his arrow aiming for the base of the monster’s head as it turned back to the ranger. Aragorn slashed at the warg’s paws. He tried to wriggle out from under the creature’s weight but he was pinned down fast.
Breathing out slowly, the elf let the arrow fly.

The warg standing on the ranger stared into the human’s eyes. For a fraction of a second, a low growl emanated from the slathering open mouth before it fell dead. It crashed down on top of Aragorn, crushing the air from his lungs.

With an ear-piercing scream the morgul creature dropped from the sky, descending on Legolas. So intent was the elf on the battle in the grotto that he did not pay attention to the winged creature’s position.

The mount slammed into the elf, raking his talons across the prince’s shoulder as they hooked pincer-like into the fair being’s flesh.

Burning pain swallowed Legolas’ consciousness as he suddenly found the ground rushing up to meet him, having been viciously bowled over from behind.Merciless talons like razor sharp daggers tore his shoulder as he felt his body being jerked to a stop before he could hit the ground. The prince was lifted slightly, only to be shaken and thrown back to the earth as he was released. The piercing cry of the morgul mount made his eardrums cringe as the elf painfully rolled onto his back. Bringing up his knives, he tried to put some defense between himself and his assailant.

His attacker was already far out of reach however and had no intention of pressing the elf right now. The treacherous creature circled overhead, glaring down at Legolas with a certain amount of satisfaction as the elf’s red blood dripped from one of its hideous claws.

It wheeled on the tip of its wing, screaming at the fair being that lay on the ground. It was incensed. It had had to protect what it hated. If it hadn’t been ordered by its master to let no harm befall these two on their journey it would have enjoyed watching the wargs shred the elf to pieces. He would have enjoyed helping.

Legolas rose unsteadily to his feet, keeping a weary eye on the sky. He winced and held his bleeding shoulder, much to the mount’s satisfaction. The elf saw the flash of an old scar on the beast’s wing as it circled upwards.

Small minded though the morgul creature might be, it had not forgotten the member of the Eldar race who had injured it several years ago in its own home, where it should have been safe. The bone still ached in the cold seasons and it was continually cold in Angmar. The break had healed slowly and its master had not been patient. The light from the elf hurt its eyes; despicable creature. The fell
beast lashed out at the remaining wargs, lighting down in their midst and scattering them with a sweep of its powerful tail. If it couldn’t have the elf, it would take his anger out on something else.

Leaping skyward, the Nazgûl’s mount drove the wargs into the forest and disappeared behind the sky line, bellowing in frustration and rage. It had wanted to kill the elf but had restrained itself. The wargs would find no such mercy from the morgul creature. Still, he had marked the elf even as the elf had marked him, and the archer would not forget the pain of that wound anytime soon. That gave the creature a small amount of pleasure at least.

Legolas fingered his torn tunic gently. The morgul beast’s talons had ripped deeply into his shoulder muscle and the cuts stung sharply. The wound would need to be tended to, but not right now. His attention was redirected as the warg that had fallen on Aragorn shifted slightly and the human groaned, struggling with the weight of the dead creature.

Stumbling forward, Legolas heaved the bulk of the carcass off the ranger and glared down at the man.

Aragorn grinned a sheepish greeting, but there was no answering spark in the elf’s steely gaze.

“Legolas, I...” Aragorn started to speak but was silenced as the elf stalked away a few paces, silencing the man with a short sharp gesture. Whatever the human had to say, the elf wasn’t ready to hear.

Pulling himself upright, the ranger wove unsteadily on his feet. His head was pounding. The warg had crushed the air out of him. His chest ached with the act of breathing, and his heart ached at the anger and disapproval in his friend’s eyes. Grimacing, Aragorn leaned over and steadied himself against the dead beast.

“Legolas...” the ranger tried to get his friend to turn around and look at him.

“Why?” The emotion charged word ripped from the price when he did turn back towards the man.

Aragorn resisted the urge to step back under the force of the elf’s withering glare. He leaned a little more heavily against the dead warg.

“What where you thinking?” Legolas demanded harshly. “What were you trying to do? Did you
think I wouldn’t follow you? That I would simply return home as if nothing had happened? Maybe
send word to your family, ‘oh, so sorry, Estel felt the need to go die in Angmar alone, so I let him?’
Is that what you wanted? Is it?! I thought we already discussed this! I thought we were in
agreement! We promised to always stand by one another. I trusted you! I let you share my soul,
Estel, and you *left* me!” The elf was practically yelling.

“And this?” He held up the broach Aragorn had given to him. “How did you think to keep the
promise that this was given with? Do you think I value my life over yours?”

Legolas was trying his hardest not let his emotions get the best of him, but it wasn’t working. He
had thought of all the things he wanted to say and would say when he had finally caught up with the
ranger. He had put it together very diplomatically and reasonably in his mind. But after seeing
Aragorn run down by the wargs and the fear of having lost him already, the elf’s weary heart could
take no more. It overloaded and Aragorn got the full brunt of the prince’s confused and roiling
emotions. Legolas’ words were edged with a fear-induced harshness but he had barely finished the
angry tirade before tears slipped from his eyes and slid down his face.

Taking a shuddering breath, Aragorn kept his eyes focused on the ground. He was so glad to see his
friend and at the same time so afraid of what would happen to him because of where they were
headed.

“No,” he whispered, his voice low and soft. “No, you do not think enough of your own life and
*that* is why I left.” Slowly Aragorn raised his gaze to meet that of the elf’s.

The bright blue eyes facing him were filled with tears and accusations. The ranger realized how
much he had hurt his friend and it echoed achingly in his own heart. He hadn’t wanted to cause this
pain, but what was he supposed to do?

“I have told you before, I am mortal. I *will* die. You don’t have to. Not now, and not here in this
wasteland at the mercies of an evil that I *know* you fear more than death itself.” Aragorn pressed
on doggedly, trying to make his friend see his point of view.

His decision to leave had not come as quickly or as suddenly as Legolas might think. The ranger
had been considering it ever since they had set out together. Visions of Legolas’ cold, dead eyes in
the forests near Rivendell when the Nazgûl had bent him to his will, and of the broken elf that had
begged Aragorn to end his life in Mordor filled the ranger’s heart and mind with horror. How could
he take the elf back into that kind of darkness? It had nearly destroyed him twice.

“I cannot stand to see you destroyed by the Witch King,” he continued softly. “The first time was
hard enough. You give so freely that I am frightened for you. Do you not realize what he will do if he captures us both? How he will use us against one another if he can? How he will destroy one or both of us slowly if it gets him what he wants? I cannot watch him do that to you.” The anguish in Aragorn’s eyes was deep.

“And do you think that I am such a coward that I would turn my back on you and allow you to go through whatever lies ahead alone? Did you learn nothing from the mistakes of your brothers?” Legolas took a step forward, his brow furrowed in a deep frown.

“Do you even remember what you told them in the mountains? When they thought they were better off without us? What will it reward you to go on your own? What will you accomplish? You walk into certain death. But if there is help and you refuse it, where is the wisdom in that? It is folly to me. We cannot defeat this unless we are together. Together you and I have a chance. Alone you are dead. Do you think I can watch *that* or allow that to happen to you anymore than you would to me? Don’t turn me away, and don’t you dare try to tell me to leave, because I will no more listen to you than I would to Dehlfalhen and Glamferaen.” There was no room for argument in the prince’s tone.

Silence fell in the small glen and Aragorn dropped his gaze once more. His heart warred within him. He desperately wanted his friend near. With the elf around it was so much easier to endure the havoc that the poisons wreaked in his system. Legolas gave him hope when his own began to fail. Yet he could not watch the fair being destroyed. They had been on the brink of that too many times before for him to endure it now.

“Estel, please.” Legolas whispered, breaking through the human’s thoughts. He knew Aragorn wanted to protect him, but what the human had to understand was that, to leave Aragorn now and let him face this fate alone, would destroy the elf as surely as any darkness.

Everything was so wrong. Aragorn’s thinking was fuzzy and his resolution wavered. The world blurred around him and the ranger found himself suddenly on his knees, breathing heavily. He held his head gingerly in his hands until the throbbing abated, willing the world to stop spinning.

“Estel!” Legolas cried out in alarm as he watched the human collapse. He raced quickly to the ranger’s side. Aragorn was holding his head and his breathing were labored as though he was in pain.

Kneeling beside his friend, the elf gently brushed Aragorn’s hair back and pressed the palm of his hand against the man’s forehead. The ranger was burning up and his cheeks were flushed.
“Where is your pack?” Legolas asked softly.

“What?” The silver eyes that watched the elf were glazed with confusion.

“Your pack, where is it, Estel?” The question was repeated patiently.

Glancing slowly about them, Aragorn winced and stopped moving. “Over there.” He pointed to a partly constructed fire ring. The bag had been dropped on the far side.

It took Legolas a few moments to find what he was looking for and he found it a little odd that he recognized all the herbs he came across as he rummaged through the leather bag. There was a time he found Aragorn’s pack to always be a confusing jumble of supplies he didn’t understand. He supposed he must have been around Aragorn far too much and the human was rubbing off on him. He had just found what he was looking for and had retrieved Aragorn’s water skin when a small commotion behind him drew the elf’s attention back to where he had left the ranger.

The Wraith’s winged mount had returned. Dropping down through the trees, the large, winged creature alighted a yard away from Aragorn. It walked slowly, cautiously forward, sniffing the air and exclaiming small cries as it advanced on the human.

Thinking his friend was in danger the elf leapt to his feet and drew his bow, notching an arrow against the taught string. The mount’s attention snapped towards the elf and it hissed low and menacingly, raising up slightly and extending its wings. The right wing bone carried a white scar where Legolas had severed it in Mordor. Legolas could see it clearly now. The animal roared at the small being and dropped back down, using its winged claws like feet as it walked forward.

“Legolas, no. I…” Aragorn scooted back a bit as the creature advanced. “I think it’s just hungry.” He finished his sentence as Legolas dropped his bow and ran forward, grabbing the ranger from behind and hauling him to his feet. He pulled Aragorn back with him as the winged beast picked up the dead warg’s carcass in its mouth and vaulted skyward, disappearing back behind the line of trees.

Breathing a small sigh of relief, Aragorn relaxed in the elf’s grip. The presence of his friend was like a breath of fresh wind and he inhaled deeply as Legolas gently eased him back down to the ground near the unfinished fire pit. In moments the elf was pressing a mug full of cool water into the ranger’s hand. The liquid was laced with a fever reducing herb and the medicine went to work quickly, mercifully soothing the fiery ache that burned inside of him.
“You should be taking better care of yourself.” Legolas chided softly. “You have this for a reason, take it.”

“I was in a hurry.” Aragorn laughed softly.

“I imagine you were. To make sure I would not catch up.” The hurt laced into the quiet words caused the human to glance up sharply.

“I never meant to hurt you, Legolas. I saw what happened when you used the Togiuith, how much it took from you. I didn’t want to be that kind of a burden.” Aragorn was sick at heart that this had come between them so badly.

It was Legolas’ turn to drop his gaze as he tried to hear the truth in Aragorn’s words. He knew the ranger thought he had done the right thing for the right reasons, but the abandonment stung and his heart still ached from the fear of the perceived loss.

“Human, if you were a burden I would have left you in the depths of Moria with those orcs the first time we encountered them together. Actually, no, I would have left you to Raniean and Trelan when they considered you nothing more than another brutish adan who might hurt me, a worse fate than being left with orcs, trust me. Trelleps would have been the least of your worries.” Legolas glanced at Aragorn out of the corner of his eyes. He fought the smile that tugged at the corners of his lips. He was trying to release his hurt feelings and let the situation go. They were together, that was what mattered.

“You are the brother of my heart, gwador, you cannot leave me behind.” Legolas entreated softly.

“I didn’t want to. I was just afraid.” Aragorn placed the mug on the ground and leaned forward, pulling the elf into a tight hug. “I promise I won’t do it again. I really do not think I can survive this on my own, if I survive it at all.”

“You will survive. We will see to it.” Legolas winced slightly as the ranger’s arms tightened around him but the relief in his heart would not let him move from the embrace.

“I’m sorry, my friend.” Aragorn apologized softly. “I really am.”

Legolas didn’t answer, there was no need. Aragorn knew he was forgiven without words. The elf
simply nodded against his friend, holding the man gently.

“You have wounds that I would see to,” Legolas said softly after a moment.

The words garnered a warm chuckle as Aragorn pushed the elf playfully back.

“Oh I do?!” The ranger crossed his arms and stared at the elf. “And I suppose you would call those claw marks on your back simply scratches?” The question was sarcastic and garnered the desired smile from his companion.

When the elf started to protest the ranger checked him. “Ah! Think through that answer before you speak. I hold all the herbs, you know.” He smiled wickedly at the prince.

With a laugh Legolas conceded. “No, my friend, they are more than scratches I fear. But I would have a look at yours first. My heart needs to know that you are all right, Estel and I will be a much better patient if I know your pain is at least somewhat dulled.”

A brilliant smile decorated the man’s face. He felt better now that the tension between them seemed to be slowly easing away.

“As you wish,” he relented, shrugging out of his tunic and exposing the cuts on his upper arm and chest that the warg had dealt him. In all truth they were surface scratches only, but as they had both so painfully learned, warg inflicted injuries were not to be underestimated.

The Wraith’s mount had dealt Legolas a more grievous blow, and it took Aragorn some time to clean and bandage the deep cuts. Cruel talons had mercilessly slashed flesh and muscle, missing vital tendons only by inches. As soon as Aragorn got the prince’s shirt off, he realized the injury was much worse than he had originally thought. With anyone other than Legolas, Aragorn would have been surprised that they were still functioning around the pain.

Legolas merely sat on the stone on which Aragorn had directed him and gripped his knee tightly with his good hand, biting back the agony with well-trained stoicism. His breath hissed between his teeth, but he gave no other sign of distress.

“You will be all right,” Aragorn diagnosed quietly out of habit. “But you shouldn’t use your bow for a bit while this heals.” A mortal with such wounds might expect to never use the arm again with
any degree of accuracy and control, but Aragorn knew Legolas would eventually heal with no lasting damage.

Legolas gave a small snort. “Well I’ll tell that to any enemies we encounter.” His sarcasm was gentle, but Aragorn understood that the elf would not heed his advice. In their current situation he could not really blame him.

By the time the ranger was through, Legolas was stiff and sore and his wearied heart felt exhausted from emotional stress and physical pain. He graciously accepted Aragorn’s help getting back into his tunic and jerkin.

The two quickly finished setting up the fire pit and had a blaze merrily sparking in it in no time. They shared the last of Aragorn’s dried venison and the small cache of berries the man picked from the woods they walked through. The food might have been meager, but the companionship was pleasant. Though neither of them admitted it openly, they both were comforted by the fact that they were headed out together again. Slowly, the tension between them gave way to a kind of quiet relief. They had known each other too long to remain awkward with one another indefinitely. Reluctant to drop their guards immediately after the attack, they remained awake for a time and spoke of unimportant matters. Aragorn pressed Legolas on an explanation for his previous statement about Raniean and Trelan’s intended torment, which became a source of great amusement.

Eventually, silence fell across the fire. Aragorn threw another handful of small kindling twigs into the bright flames and watched as the pitch sizzled and sparked.

“Tired?” Legolas’ soft question caused the man to glance up and raise one eyebrow.

It was a few moments before Aragorn answered.

“Yes.” He stretched and lay down on his side, his eyelids heavy. The poisons were still wreaking havoc with his body, but his spirit felt lightened. He shivered slightly as a chill ran up his spine. It was difficult to tell how much of the cold ache was seeping up from the ground under him and how much came from the venom claiming him. He smiled softly as Legolas stood to his feet and rounded the fire, removing his cloak and spreading it out on the ground.

“Use my cloak, Strider. It’s warmer.” The elf stepped over the ranger as Aragorn rolled onto the soft cloth and pulled the edges around him. Legolas tossed the human’s blanket over the man’s shoulders and sat down next to him. With a sigh the ranger closed his eyes.
“I’m not going anywhere.” Aragorn mumbled softly, not moving from his place on Legolas’ cloak as he felt the elf gently reach out and touch his shoulder. Thinking the ranger was sleeping, Legolas had simply wanted to assure himself that the human was still there with him.

The elf didn’t answer.

Slowly opening his eyes, the ranger glanced at the prince and repeated himself. “I’m *not* going anywhere, I promise.”

Blue eyes glanced down at the man, watching him carefully.

Worried, Aragorn tried to rise up on his elbows but was pressed firmly in place by the elf’s hand. Wordlessly, Legolas lay down next to the human, facing the ranger.

“You promised to wake me too. You frightened me, Estel.” Legolas didn’t want to bring it up again, but the words came almost unbidden. Shaken trust took a little time to rebuild.


The elf silenced the man. They had been over this before. Legolas was not angry at his friend anymore and he did not want him to apologize again. He understood the ranger’s motives... he was just still getting over the fear and hurt of it all. Slowly he opened his left hand, allowing the ranger to see what he held in his palm. The small star broach Aragorn had given him sparkled softly in the dim light of the fire.

Aragorn started and reached out tentatively with his left hand, covering the silver pin. Legolas’ fingers wrapped around his and crushed the ornate broach between their palms.

“Le ú-nach erui,” the prince whispered. “You will never be alone.”

With a small nod Aragorn understood. “Never again.” He echoed the soft whisper. “Sleep my friend. We’ll be safe with that morgul beast watching our backs and I *will* be here when you wake.”
Legolas rubbed his injured shoulder and snorted at how ‘safe’ that was, but he knew Estel was right. The creature was probably under orders to see that no life-threatening harm befell them before they reached their destination.

Finally calmed in his soul, the prince nodded wordlessly, his eyes glazing over slightly as he gave in to his own extreme exhaustion. His grip on Aragorn’s hand lessened imperceptibly. He had nearly lost his friend; a part of him was not ready to let go just yet and the ranger wouldn’t mind.

Moving ever so slightly, Aragorn pulled the blanket over so that it draped the elf’s sleeping body, sharing the warmth between them.

A gentle rustling, like leaves being shaken by the wind, filtered through the camp, hushing the normal sounds of the night. Aragorn tensed, knowing fully well that it was their sentinel settling in for the evening. He could not see the beast but was certain that it was close. They were safe for the moment; they would be until they reached Angmar. Settling back uneasily he stilled as Legolas shifted closer, rolling onto his back and pulling Aragorn with him until the ranger’s hand rested against Legolas’ chest. A deep, soft sigh emanated from the sleeping elf and Aragorn resettled himself next to his friend.

“Le ú-nach erui,” He repeated the promise quietly before allowing sleep to steal over his weariness. His body hurt and ached and he felt terrible, but his heart was relieved. Tonight, the elf prince needed to know he was not alone almost as much as the ranger did.
Part Seven - I’ll Carry You

I know that look in your eyes
I see the pain behind your smile
Please don't hold it all inside
Together we can run to the finish line
And when you are tired...
I'll carry you
I can't walk this road without you
You cannot go it alone
We were never meant to make it on our own
And when the load becomes too heavy
And your feet too tired too walk
I will carry you and we'll be carried on.

-- Rebecca St.James

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Aragorn could no longer walk. He tried, again and again, but his legs failed him, refusing to hold his weight. Even with Legolas supporting him, the elf’s arm flung around the ranger’s shoulder and the elf’s musical voice a soft, constant encouragement in his ears, Aragorn could not push himself any further. He seemed to have no more control over his body and his mind was foggy. Moments of lucidness were becoming fewer and fewer.

Legolas could not stand watching what was happening to his once strong friend. It tore another wound in his heart every time Aragorn stumbled and fell, blanching in pain as his failing body absorbed even more hurt.

It was no good, they could not go on this way... but they could not afford to stop either. The ranger’s rapid decline meant that the end was inevitable if they did not reach their objective soon.
Legolas’ keen eyes sought the growing specter of the dark spire on the horizon. For what it was worth, they were almost there... if only that realization did not bring such a wave of dread with it.

Halting, Legolas crouched down to where his friend had fallen yet again. Aragorn’s skin felt deadly cold and yet his body radiated a fevered heat. The human trembled and his breathing was shallow. He couldn’t make it off his knees. Leaning heavily against the ground, Aragorn closed his eyes.

“Just a moment... just give me a moment...” his words slurred, belying the pretense of strength he obviously did not have.

Legolas shifted the ranger’s weight off his hands, supporting the man as he knelt on the stony ground. Quietly, he reached for the ranger’s right palm, fingering the fading scar he found there. The elf knew he had to do something or Aragorn would not be kept long in this world. Part of the elf hesitated, knowing the warnings that came with repeated blood transference. It was not meant to be a common occurrence. He was a little afraid of what it would do to both their bodies to force another infusion, but he would risk it for his friend’s sake.

Aragorn saw what Legolas was about to commence and jerked back, out of the elf’s arms. With what little strength he had, he batted his friend’s hands away from him. Scooting backward on the cold ground he cowered away from Legolas, shaking his head.

“No,” the man rasped decidedly. “No. Can’t... can’t let you,” he broke off coughing. He allowed Legolas to hold his shoulders as he choked but would not let the prince get near his hands.

“Estel, please, it’s all I can do for you...” Legolas pleaded with his friend but Aragorn refused.

“No, I thank you, dear friend, but... it’s not safe. Not safe for you. I need... need you to be strong for me.” The ranger was having difficulty forming words but Legolas understood what he was saying.

The ranger eyed the elf hesitantly. In his current state Legolas would be more than able to physically force him to accept his help, but he could not let that happen. He saw what the exchange did to Legolas and his healer’s instincts told him it was too soon. Legolas would do irreparable damage to his own injured body if he tried to share himself that way again so quickly.

“Don’t try to force me Legolas, I won’t accept it,” he warned and Legolas saw the truth in the ranger’s eyes.
The elf sighed, accepting Aragorn’s decision reluctantly. He really couldn’t force it upon Aragorn; both parties had to be willing or it was no good.

“If you will not let me share my strength with you that way, then at least allow me what I can do for you. We cannot go on like this. Haste is of the essence.”

The elf changed his hold on Aragorn. He positioned the ranger so the human’s chest, and his weight, rested against the elf’s back. Wrapping Aragorn’s cold arms so they clasped around his neck, Legolas hooked his own arms around the back of Aragorn’s knees and rose back to his feet, taking Aragorn up with him.

The elf grimaced sharply, gritting his teeth against the burning pain that flared across his torn shoulder and back muscles as his body accepted the human’s weight as well as his own. He made sure that Aragorn did not see his pained expression and quickly pushed the agony out of his features. It was at times like these that he actually thanked his uncle for teaching him how to smile no matter how badly he was hurting.

Legolas bent forward a little as he stood, letting the ranger’s weight settle more fully against him to get a better grip.

“Hold on Aragorn. That’s it, hold onto me. You’ll be all right,” the elf murmured softly as he began walking again, carrying the ranger as one would carry a child for a piggy-back ride.

Aragorn was not a light man, but Legolas had the strength of the eldar to aid him. Even with his injuries, his friend was not a burden that was too great for him to bear.

Aragorn’s head lolled against Legolas’ good shoulder as his hands clasped weakly around the elf’s neck. His lack of protest to being carried worried Legolas greatly; it showed how far gone he already was.

“Sorry...” Aragorn murmured wearily into his friend’s tangled gold hair. “I’m sorry, Legolas...”

“Shh,” Legolas shook his head as much as he could around the burden he carried. “If you apologize one more time about *anything*, then you won’t have to worry about the poison killing you. *I* will,” he jested lightly. Aragorn’s arm draped over the bandage on his shoulder was excruciating but the elf slowly blocked his body away from his mind and focused on the task at hand.
Aragorn snorted lightly. “You’d be better off...”

“I don’t think so,” Legolas cut in quickly. “I need you my dear thick-headed ranger; my life would be so dull without your presence.”

Aragorn chuckled weakly; Legolas felt more than he heard it from the body pressed against his back. Even so, it was a good sound, giving the elf a small amount of hope.

“Your brothers would agree, I’m sure,” Legolas added, attempting to maintain a steady dialogue with his friend as they walked, wanting to keep the ranger’s mind active.

Aragorn responded with another soft chuckle. Now that he did not have to expend so much energy walking, his spirits seemed to be reviving a little.

“Those two don’t need any help. You know, I think the last one to carry me like this was Elladan, when I was nine. I nearly broke my ankle escaping ‘the dungeons’ and he carried me home,” the human smiled faintly at the memory. “Ada was not pleased with us at all.”

“The dungeons?” Legolas raised his eyebrows as he carefully picked his way across the craggy earth. “You have dungeons in Rivendell? My friend, you missed those when showing me around.” The elf chuckled.

Aragorn shook his head a little against his friend’s tunic. “No, it was a game we used to play. I loved the old tales when I was a child. I lacked children my own age to play-act them out with, but fortunately for me, my brothers were usually up to it if it involved some kind of caper. Although I recall that recreating Fingolfin’s trip across the Grinding Ice in a partially thawed pond one winter was not one of our brighter schemes...” the ranger couldn’t help the warmth that filled his voice when he thought of home and his childhood. It brought him closer to the light that was being stolen away from him, so Legolas encouraged this train of thought.

“I can imagine,” the prince chuckled, shifting Aragorn a little higher up his back as he pressed resolutely onward. “My people had their own tales, including one about a long-ago warrior who discovered enemies planning to attack. They caught him and put out his eyes, leaving him far away in unfamiliar woods to wander in despair until death should take him. But he was clever and with the help of the trees he found his way back home again in time to warn his people. Raniean, Trelan and I invented a game from that where we would blindfold one another and try to find our way around. Eventually it met with results similar to what must have resulted from your ice-escapades.
Raniean almost drown and father forbid us from playing that game anymore. But what did you play in a dungeon?"

"Two of us would be Finrod and Beren in the pits of Tol-in-Gaurhoth, the other got to be the Werewolf. *I* always wanted to be the wolf, but they usually made me be Beren because they said I fit the roll better," Aragorn chuckled. "Big children, that’s what they were. Only, we changed the story, because in our story Finrod didn’t die after saving Beren. We didn’t have a Lúthien, so in our story Finrod and Beren escaped together, running while the wolf gave chase. Elladan liked being the Werewolf, trying to catch Elrohir and me... Unfortunately he was a little too good at it and I didn’t watch where I was going, hence the injured ankle. I felt so sorry for my brothers. Ada lectured both of them for an hour or more about who of us were supposed to be the elders that knew better than to go crashing around dangerous places like that,” Aragorn smiled distantly at the long ago memories. He loved his family dearly.

"Truthfully, I always hated that story though,” Aragorn mumbled thoughtfully as his semi-delirious mind followed its own randomly wandering track like a meandering brook.

"About your brothers?” Legolas was puzzled.

"No,” Aragorn didn’t have the strength to shake his head. "About Beren and Finrod. It was all wrong. Finrod shouldn’t have died, not for Beren, not for someone who would die anyway someday. I always hated that.” The ranger had never confessed this to anyone before, but it had been on his mind more than he wanted to admit since they left Barahir behind weeks earlier.

Legolas cocked an eyebrow. "You realize that if Beren had died instead, you would not be here. Lord Elrond, Elladan, Elrohir, Arwen, none of them would be here. The race of Númenor would never have been, and the world of men as we know it would not even exist.”

Aragorn sighed quietly instead a shrug for which he didn’t have strength.

“I suppose... but I still hate it. All my life, I have been compared to Beren,” he snorted quietly. "Even the... impossible way we both fell in love. When I hear that story I think of...” his voice trailed off.

Legolas closed his eyes for a moment, realizing what Aragorn meant and understanding afresh some of the reasoning that had gone into the human’s attempt to leave his elven companion behind earlier. "You think of your brothers or me, and what if it was one of us in Finrod’s place,” the prince finished quietly for his friend.
Aragorn barely nodded, pressing the side of his cold face against the back of the elf’s warm neck as his head swam dizzily. “I would never want you to do that for me. Promise me, Legolas, promise me you won’t ever be so foolish. Promise me I won’t lose you that way. I thought I lost you once... It would be a blow worse than death.”

Legolas did not respond for a few minutes. He felt Aragorn’s ragged breaths brushing his cheek and stirring his hair in irregular patterns. He felt the ranger’s body tremble lightly against his... Aragorn was so weak, it was frightening.

“I... can’t,” Legolas shook his head. “I can’t promise that, Estel, no more than you would promise it to me. We’ll make it through this mellon-nín, somehow... somehow we will. I believe that. I need you to believe it too, Estel, please, my hope has never been as bright as yours.”

Aragorn smiled faintly. “You’re wrong, mellon-nín,” he breathed quietly. “If that hope was not inside of you, you would not have survived this long. Please... hope for me my brother, because I have not the strength for it anymore.”

Legolas’ eyes clouded with tears and he had to blink fiercely in order to get the landscape back into focus once more. He could not afford to trip with his precious cargo. “I will,” he whispered. “And we will escape this darkness my friend, both of us, together... somehow... I swear it.”

“Mm, somehow,” Aragorn echoed his weak assent. “Together.”

“Yes, mellon-nín, together we can do anything,” Legolas murmured encouragingly as he felt Aragorn’s body go limp against his back, indicating that the human had passed out once more.

Pausing only to shift Aragorn’s lolling head back into a secure place against his neck and shoulder, Legolas pushed swiftly onward towards the ominous spire of iron and obsidian that grew ever larger before them. He had hoped that when they got here they could arrive unnoticed, perhaps finding a way to get that which they sought without an outright surrender to darkness. In Aragorn’s current state however, Legolas knew they stood no chance. The ranger did not have time for subterfuge, even if they could have tried to escape the watchful eye of the fell beast tracking them from above.

The elf squared his aching shoulders. If they had to walk into the mouth of doom, he would do so with his head held high and trust that they would be able to escape again somehow.
For several hours they journeyed on like this in silence, the determined elf and the unconscious ranger. Angmar loomed large before them and the trees around them began to fail. Legolas had never felt as exposed as the moment when he walked out of the cover of the trees and into the wide, barren plain of snow and icy stone that lay before the forbidding mountain fortress of Angmar.

The elf’s grip on his unconscious friend’s knees tightened. Desperate, nameless fear churned in his gut. Ahead of him he could see a huge, recessed door in the face of the mountain. The gaping mouth stood open. The plain before the mountain was eerily quiet.

Then, almost without a sound, a black stream of orcs issued from the doorway, streaming towards the two friends.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

From his vantage point high in the mountainous castle of Angmar, the Witch King spotted his new arrivals when they reached the edges of the granite field just beyond the woods. He gazed out the window with sightless eyes and watched as the elf stopped just on the outskirts of the forest. He did not ‘see’ as he had done in life. But his unique perspective of being neither alive nor dead gave him the advantage of being able to view living beings as they truly were.

The elf was a luminous being. The light he exuded was so pure it almost hurt the Wraith to look at him too long. He hated the eldar. They were everything he was not and never would be.

The orcs that poured of the castle at his command were dark in his twilight vision. Blacker than the world around them, they were like a void wave that moved forward to intercept his guests.

The human on other hand was somewhere in-between the two extremes. The light that marked him was soft and dim as though unaware of its true nature and calling. The human was waking to his destiny but it had not yet occurred. The ranger that lay against the elf’s back on the edges of the steppes was barely alive and his dim light faded even as the Wraith watched.

The fell beast dove down into the open plain, skirting just above the heads of the orcs as they advanced towards the two newcomers. The creature skimmed the cliff-face of the castle. Crying out
in a throaty, screeching language it told its master that it had returned with his new slaves.

Arching upwards, the mount headed for its cave high above and entered its lair with a triumphant scream. It was pleased to be home where it was warm.

Legolas watched as the winged beast circled the spires of Angmar before returning to its resting place. He turned his gaze on the advancing orcs warily. The black tide of creatures had stopped only a few paces away from the elf.

“You bring that human in and we’ll let you live a few moments longer, pretty thing,” the leader of the pack commanded, much to the delight of his comrades. He pointed a wicked looking scimitar at the elf.

Keeping his eyes on the foul beings, Legolas crouched into a kneeling position, gently allowing Aragorn to slip from his back. The ranger had not recovered consciousness and right now the prince was glad he had not. This might not go well.

Now that they were here, now that he was faced with the prospect of submission to the orcs before him, the prince wasn’t sure that he could. Everything in his being, every fiber of his body tensed and rejected the very thought.

Stepping away from his friend, but remaining between the ranger and the orcs, Legolas deftly pulled his twin fighting knives from their sheaths on his back. He took up a defensive stance. The elf did not trust the dark creatures. Never surrender to an orc. It was the first thing that was drilled into every wood-elf warrior’s head from the time they were children. Orcs had no honor and it was better to die fighting them than to become their toy.

“No, we can do this hard, or it can go easy,” the orc leader cautioned the obviously reluctant elf before him. The wicked being’s grin widened. They didn’t get much of a chance for a good brawl and it looked like this elf just might give them one. He relished the idea of killing the fair being; it would be a thrill indeed. He knew his master wanted these two alive, but if they wouldn’t come willingly...well, then it wasn’t his fault if the elf died accidentally, was it? Using force was something Retzhrak enjoyed.

“You will not touch him or I will kill you,” Legolas warned. His voice was low and his tone was lethal. He hadn’t come all this way to watch the ranger be destroyed by orcs. If that was how it would come to be, then maybe it was best if they both died here and now.
“Very well then, hard it is. Take them, boys!” Retzhark gave the command, sending his troop rushing towards the elf.

From his vantage point, the Wraith watched as the orcs tried to take the elf and ranger by force. He growled softly as the count of dead orcs multiplied rapidly. He knew that the elf out on the steppes was probably capable of killing the whole compliment of them single-handedly, if trying to protect the unconscious ranger did not impede him too much. The Wraith had seen the warrior do it before. Even though he did not care for the lives of his servants, the Nazgûl did not want to lose too many of the creatures. He could always get more, but he despised useless waste like this. Besides, he was concerned that one of his idiot minions would land a lucky blow. He *needed* the human alive and he intended to at least interrogate the elf himself before he let the orcs have their way with him.

“Yrinvan!” Rising from his seat, the Witch King stormed out into the hallway, seeking out his head servant. When he found the man instructing a few of the newer slaves in the kitchen, he immediately summoned him.

The human that stepped into the hallway and bowed low before the Wraith was a tall man. He had not yet reached middle age, but his dark brown hair was already streaked with touches of grey. Angmar aged people before their time. Yrinvan had been in the Wraith’s service the longest of any of his surviving servants. The man served his master well. He obeyed quickly and had a sharp, clever mind. His usefulness had kept him alive.

“How may I serve you, My Lord?” the servant asked, keeping his eyes averted from the empty black hood that stared at him. Even at his height, the Wraith towered over the human.

“Out on the steppes there is an elf and a man, a ranger. I ‘invited’ them here. Retzhark was sent to bring them in and he has been unsuccessful. Go bring them in at once,” the Witch King ordered darkly. He handed the man a small glass vial. “The human will need this soon. See to it that they are alive and unharmed when you retrieve them, but do not give the human the antidote until they are safely secured in their new quarters.”

When Yrinvan bowed in compliance, the Wraith stormed out of the passage, heading back for his study.

Yrin stood in the hallway watching the Wraith go. Visitors? That meant new slaves, or worse. Now it all made sense.

“Oh, Tynair... you had to obey to the last, didn’t you?” he thought sadly. He understood, but...

Sighing deeply Yrinvan turned to leave.
“Did the master say that one was an elf?” A quiet voice questioned the headservant.

Yrinvan started and turned back, looking down into the eyes of a young woman who stood behind him. She was younger than Yrin by no small span, but like the other servant, she too had aged beyond her time. Her back was stooped from years of abuse and hard life, but her eyes held a glimmer in them that had never been quenched. It was what had drawn him to her in the beginning and why he had married her here in this terrible wretched place. She was the spark of light that kept him going.

“Don’t you worry about it.” He smiled at the woman. It was best *not* to let her get started on elves. “Get back in there before the master finds you taking a break,” he urged her. “I can’t afford to have anything happen to you. Now get.” He attempted to shoo her away, but she wasn’t intimidated by the taller man.

“You’ll need blankets and hot food for the newcomers. You know what it’s like coming to this place.” She eyed her husband wryly, challenging him to argue with her. They always tried to ease the shock a little for the new ones.

With a nod, he agreed. He had the uncomfortable feeling that the Master had plans for these new arrivals that went beyond merely adding more numbers to his slaves, but he kept those thoughts to himself. It would only distress his wife. He was surprised when she turned back and called another girl out and instructed her to quickly bring blankets and warm food to the cell a level down.

“Ahnna,” Yrinvan growled out his wife’s name, realizing she intended to accompany him.

“Go, quickly.” She shooed him in front of her. “The Master won’t wait long. If you don’t hurry those dumb beasts will kill both the newcomers and then you’ll suffer for it. I won’t lose you because of their stupidity.”

“What would I do without you to state the obvious, my love?” Yrinvan muttered as he hurried along. She was right of course. He knew that and so he ran quickly towards the lower entrance. He glared at the woman who ran beside him as they headed for the front gate. His wife could be very stubborn when her mind was set.

Yrinvan stopped on the castle’s threshold and took in the grim sight across the way. The orcs were swarming around the elf, but making no headway. The fair being turned with lighting speed and slit the throat of an orc that had slipped around him and tried to pick up the unconscious human.
Spinning back around, the elf cut a wide swath between himself and the orcs, forcing them back with his double edged blades.

“Oh, Yrin, it *is* one of the eldar,” Ahnna whispered in distress.

“Go back in, Ahnna,” the headservant commanded, trying to dissuade her.

“Yrin, you cannot let him be taken. He will not live in this place, he cannot. Look at his clothes; he is one of those that lived near my people. One of the wood-elves, those are their colors. Look at him,” she implored her husband. “He is light and this place is darkness. The master will destroy him.” Her voice was strained and it was obvious that this new twist of events distressed her greatly. “Please.”

Yrin sighed deeply and kissed her on top of the head. “There is nothing we can do for them now, you know that. Go back in. I know how your people felt about the elves, but *you* are all I care about. I will go out and stop Retzhrak before he kills the elf. Otherwise I can only do as the Master bids. We’ll talk about this later.”

“We *will* talk about it later,” the woman agreed. She wasn’t going to let him off the hook that easy. Her lips drew a thin line across her face as she stared at her husband. Turning to leave, Ahnna nearly bumped into Tinald, a younger male slave that Yrin had taken under his wing after the death of most of his relatives. He was grooming the other man to take his place when the time came that death finally freed him from this prison. The two men were good friends and Tinald had come to see if he could be of assistance.

Tinald’s mouth dropped open as he watched the elf fighting the orcs. Two more dropped dead at the fair being’s feet, one gutted and the other decapitated. “What are they doing here?” He asked softly. These didn’t look like any of the new slaves he had ever seen brought here.

Ignoring the question, Yrin pushed the Ahnna and Tinald back across the threshold. “I’d better get out there. Tinald, go help Ahnna get the room ready for our guests and then both of you get back to work before I have to explain your absences,” he warned them sternly as he stepped out onto the granite walk and approached the fight.

So it was true. He had overheard the master speaking to Retzhrak several months ago about a ranger and an elf that he wanted to question. If what he suspected were true, then there had been several foiled attempts at gaining the two prisoners already. What he could want with them the slave had no idea. There was no time to ponder such questions as the fighting escalated.
"ENOUGH!" Yrinvan’s voice carried across the rocky way and echoed in the woods behind Legolas.

Retzhrak heard the command but didn’t call his men off immediately. An orc on the elf’s right jumped forward, swiping out at the fair being’s legs and trying to catch him unaware.

Legolas jumped over the low arcing blade and caught the orc’s neck between his knives, spinning hard to the right as they cut through the tough hide. The orc squealed and dropped dead to the ground.

"Retzhrak! I said that was enough," Yrinvan warned as he finally reached the remaining small group gathered around the elf and the human.

“All right boys,” the orc leader growled, reigning his forces in. “Let the slave through.” His words were mocking and arrogant as he glared at the headservant.

Choosing to ignore the foul beast, Yrin stepped over the dead bodies near the elf and approached Legolas slowly, his hands held out in a placating manner. He himself knew little of the elves, but Ahnna, who had been born free, had grown up near them. She had entertained the servants many a nights with tales of her home and the fair beings that occupied the woods nearby.

The elf stepped back nearer to the ranger that lay behind him. He watched warily as Yrinvan stepped into the loose circle of orcs and approached him.

Glancing behind the elf, the servant noted the shallow breathing of the human he protected. The man was in bad shape and needed the antidote quickly. He recognized the signs.

“My name is Yrinvan, I run the master’s household,” he offered by way of speedy greeting. Judging from the look of the ranger, they didn’t have too much time for pleasantries. “If you will come with me, we have prepared a room for you and your friend,” the servant instructed. He kept his tone even and did not drop his gaze away from the elf’s. There was only one way out of this alive now for all of them. If he failed to bring these two in, the orcs would kill them and his master would take out his wrath on his headservant. That was not a situation that Yrin intended to allow.

“We do not belong here,” Legolas answered cautiously. “We cannot go in there.”
Clasping his hands behind his back, Yrin sighed softly, they didn’t have time to argue.

“You have no choice,” he answered evenly. When he stepped forward, the elf raised his blades a bit higher. Legolas stepped farther back until his boot heels touched the man behind him.

Nervously the orcs shifted around them, tightening the ring ever so slightly.
Part Eight - Inescapable Summons

Be.
Wish there was somewhere else to be.
Go.
Wish there was somewhere else to go.
Run. Wish that I knew how to run from here...
But there’s no running now, when you’ve hit the wall
Nowhere to go once you freefall
  Fire or ice who can decide? I just need to keep you by my side.

If we never see the light again Will you blame me for this choice, my friend?

-- Cassia ~~~~~~~

“You do not understand what the Úlairë desires from us,” Legolas hissed, his imploring voice barely above a whisper. “If you did you wouldn’t ask us to...”

Callously repeating himself, Yrin cut off the elf’s words. He hated this part of his job. He hated most of the tasks the Wraith set for him, but acquiring and conditioning new slaves was the worst. He had adopted a closed exterior to those around him, trying to keep his emotions as dead as possible. Unfortunately, unlike the Nazgûl he served, he still had a heart and it still ached sometimes at the plight of those who were caught up in the evil that surrounded them.

“We have a room for you...” he tried to explain.

“You mean a cell,” Legolas growled at the man, cutting off his explanation in turn. He had not relaxed at all, his knives still being held in a defensive position. He did not trust this human anymore than he trusted the orcs. “Will you not help us then?”

Yrin did not respond to the comment, for he knew what awaited the two newcomers. “Your friend is dying,” he said calmly, without much emotion. “I have seen many in his shape and he is not long intended for this world now without help. Inside I can treat him and give him the antidote he needs to stay alive. There will also be blankets and clothing should you need them and we have hot food.” The human glanced at the ranger lying on the ground behind the elf. “May I?” He questioned softly, indicating the prone man.

Legolas barely nodded and stepped slightly aside, watching the servant carefully. He was not ready to give into these people, but Yrinvan was unfortunately correct. Aragorn did not seem to be in any
shape to survive without their help.

The orcs around them settled uneasily in a large circle about the elf, awaiting further instructions.

Yrinvan knelt next to the ranger, gently pressing the back of his hand against the man’s cheek. The ranger was burning up; they had little time left. Tilting Aragorn’s head to the side the servant felt the erratic pulse beneath his fingers.

Turning on his heels Yrin glanced up at the elf. “Your friend is failing very fast. He needs the antidote immediately or it will be too late and he will not survive.”

“I will not turn him over to orcs,” Legolas whispered fiercely. The hopeless desperation of their situation screamed inside his chest.

“You won’t have to.” Yrin glanced behind them at the creatures that pressed in close. “They also obey the Master and will not harm you if you pick up your friend and follow me. I’ll lead you to your room.”

For half a heartbeat the elf entertained the thought of refusing, but he could see no other way. Resheathing his knives with a bit more flair than normal he cleared the space around the two humans and himself, causing the orcs to step back and flinch slightly. Dropping down next to the servant he pierced the man with a clear, hard stare.

“You can save him then?” Legolas questioned further. “You promise this is not a trick? If I follow you in there, you will give him the antidote?”

“It’s no trick. The Master wants him alive and I will help him. You have my word,” Yrin answered honestly, piercing the elf with an even stare.

It seemed the wood-elf stared straight through him into his soul, touching on a place the servant thought was hidden from the world.

In truth Legolas had glimpsed into the man’s soul. There was no hope for their escape out here; he read the hopelessness of such an attempt in the other man’s gaze. Yet perhaps once Aragorn had been given the antidote and they had a little more time... perhaps then they could find a way. It was the best chance they had. No, it was the only chance they had.
“If you want your friend to live, you must bring him now,” Yrin said quietly. He knew it was hard for the elf, but the human’s time was running out swiftly.

“You do not know who this man is,” the elf’s tone was anguished as he realized submission was their only hope. Legolas’ hand rested gently on Aragorn’s chest. “Perhaps you do not care, but it matters to me. And it matters to you more than you can understand. The one you serve wishes to destroy him. That cannot be allowed to happen.” Legolas risked a lot by saying even that much, yet something in him told him that as strange as it seemed, Yrinvan could be trusted, at least to a certain extent. He had seen it in the man for only the briefest of moments, but it was there.

He could only hope he was right and the servant would not turn his confession against him. But the reality was that they needed any and all help they could get. When one is about to walk into his own tomb, one must be willing to gamble. For Legolas and Aragorn, the stakes were very high.

Yrin swallowed hard and glanced to his left, into the woods. How many times had he heard families beg for their loved ones, as if there was something he could actually do about any of this? As if he wanted to be part of the Dark One’s malicious schemes... how many more pleas would he have to endure? Standing swiftly to his feet the servant looked back down at the elf, the firstborn’s piercing gaze causing him to glance away again just as quickly. Everyone thought their loved one was someone special. The truth was that all of their lives combined meant nothing here.

“There is no other choice. You can come inside with me, or your friend will die and these orcs will kill you. I cannot help you or do as you ask. I cannot make your friend better if you don’t follow me. We have tarried long enough as it is.” Yrin glanced back at the castle’s turrets; he knew his master was watching them. The Nazgûl did not understand delays, nor accept tardiness easily.

“Let’s take your friend inside and get some of the antidote in him and then...” With a sigh Yrin stopped speaking. “Accept my help; it’s all I can give you right now. If you do not, you will both be destroyed.” The servant whispered harshly. “Please.” He held his hand out towards the elf.

Rising slowly to his feet, Legolas did not take the proffered hand. He knew the servant was doing as he was told. He knew there was no other way out... but his heart balked fiercely. He could barely keep the dread from choking him. With a short nod the prince agreed to the inevitable and stooped to pull Aragorn up with him. It surprised him when Yrin dropped to one knee and gently cradled the ranger’s head with his right hand as he shifted the Dûnadan into a standing position. Yrin helped the elf support the ranger’s weight as he walked the two strangers through the castle’s main entryway.

The orcs trailed behind the trio, unwilling to get too close to the elf but still forming a constant threat if the prince tried anything.

As they stepped through the darkened portal of the Nazgûl’s home, a shudder ran through Legolas and he caught his breath. Yrin tried not to notice. He could still remember the day he was brought
here as a child and he saw that fear echoed on the fair face of the elf that walked opposite him.

Legolas held more tightly onto Aragorn. It felt as if they were walking into a deep black void, worse than any cave he had ever entered. Here the forests were silenced, the songs of the earth and sky were dimmed and an evil pervasiveness chilled his soul. He remembered the touch of the Nazgûl, the way it had felt, the way it smelled, the way it slowly sought to kill his soul and poisoned all it touched. The familiarity faltered his steps.

An orc behind the prince shoved him roughly forward, causing all three to stumble.

“Stop that.” Yrin barked the command in the dark tongue, one of the few words he had learned in his internment with the evil creatures. “The Master wants them well and untouched. Don’t you have other work to be about?” His voice was low and menacing as he stared down the orc that had pushed Legolas forward. “Leave us with Rhzaq; he is more than capable of seeing us to the... quarters.” He stopped himself from using the word dungeon. All of Angmar was one big dungeon really.

Legolas watched the exchange between the orc and the man curiously. He had never seen a human work so easily and so fearlessly with the evil creatures before. The alliance between Paxcyn and the orcs that had followed them into Eowioriand many years ago had been distrustful and uneasy at best. If Drelent hadn’t killed them all they would have surely killed each other. But here was a man totally un-intimidated by the vile creatures and they in turn were in full obedience of him.

With a grunt, the orc Yrinvan had addressed led the contingent down the hall in the opposite direction, leaving one smaller-sized orc behind. The dark skinned creature watched the headservant curiously.

“Rhzaq, we’re heading to the empty room. I’m going to need some salve and bandages. See that they are waiting there, we’ll follow you,” Yrin ordered the orc softly.

With a nod, the creature limped down the hall, eager to obey.

“He is not all there,” Yrin remarked to the elf next to him, tapping his forehead with the fingers of his free hand. “I have heard there were complications when he was birthed and the Master has experimented on him...” Yrin watched the orc shuffle away. Ironically, the creature’s damaged mind seemed to have taken the brutality out of his nature. “Of them all, he is harmless. Sometimes the master tampers with things. He has a laboratory where he works...”
Yrin shifted Aragorn a bit as he helped carry the ranger down the hall. He didn’t know why he was telling the elf any of this. He didn’t even know these people and he had no desire to become better acquainted. The less he knew, the less it would hurt when they were destroyed by the Nazgûl. It was better to not make friends in Angmar, especially not with newcomers. They rarely lasted.

“You do not approve. Why do you stay?” Legolas asked quietly.

Yrin turned a quick, hard look upon him. “I do not question the Master!” he hissed. He did not know if they were being watched or not. He could not afford to have it ever get back to the Nazgûl that he had shown even the slightest inkling of disagreement.

The elf wisely judged he should not press that line of conversation and continued in silence. He walked with the human, following the orc down a flight of stairs and into a small, softly lit room. Small lamps in the four corners cast a warm light on the makeshift beds that decorated the far corner. The beds were really blankets piled on meager straw mats. Unused manacles decorated each of the four walls, dark and ugly in the firelight. The elf balked, realizing that it truly was no more than a cell.

“No, please come in.” Yrin pulled Aragorn’s limp body away from Legolas and into the room. Laying him down on the blankets, he ignored the elf for the moment.

Rhzaq, standing near Legolas, gently pushed the elf forward, causing the prince to flinch and move away from him.

“There is food and antidote just as I promised. No one will bother you tonight. I doubt the master will come around until your friend has recovered sufficiently. It will be a day or so before he is coherent,” Yrin explained, moving around the small room and gathering supplies from a shelf that had been cut into the rocky face. He spoke to Legolas as he went about his tasks. Kneeling near Aragorn, he pulled the man’s cloak and tunic back from his shoulder and lathed a pungent lotion over the festering wound.

The pain of the gentle touch reached into Aragorn’s stupor and the Dûnedain opened bloodshot, blurry eyes, trying to focus on the face that swam before him.

“Legolas?” he whispered, his voice cracking.

“No. My name’s Yrinvan, you may call me Yrin, if you wish,” the servant answered, moving aside
as the elf dropped quickly beside him. Yrinvan instructed the prince to hold the ranger up in a sitting position. Legolas complied readily, speaking softly to his friend in the grey tongue.

“I need you to drink this for me.” Without explaining further, Yrin pressed a glass vial to Aragorn’s lips and tipped the man’s head back, forcing him to swallow the contents.

Aragorn flinched and pressed weakly back against the elf that sat behind him. He tried to breathe, but a coughing fit caught him instead. His head was pounding and he couldn’t catch his breath. The room seemed to spin out of control and he could not handle the input. With a sigh Aragorn passed out once more.

“What did you do?” Legolas demanded, pulling the ranger back into his lap in alarm.

“Nothing. He’ll be fine.” Yrin took the man’s hand in his own and felt the pulse in Aragorn’s wrist. Already the Dúnedan’s heartbeat was beginning to calm. The only good thing about the foul antidote was how quickly it took effect. “Your friend is strong, I feel certain he’ll survive.”

While the elf focused on his friend, Rhzaq had stepped behind the prince and quickly pulled Legolas’ knives from their sheaths, disarming the lethal being. The small orc jumped back as the elf spun halfway around in surprise. With Aragorn in his arms, Legolas was unable to move fast enough and the orc shifted towards the door.

“Let him take them, and your bow and quiver as well. It will be easier for you if you give them up voluntarily.” Yrin motioned Rhzaq back towards them.

“Why are you doing this?” Legolas asked. His haunted question touched those places in the servant that still balked at his own enslavement.

“I don’t have a choice.” Yrin answered quietly as he stood and placed the now empty vial in a large pocket sewn on his tunic. Carefully he removed the elf’s quiver and handed the weapons to the orc before taking Aragorn’s hunting knife, sword, bow and quiver as well.

The elf stiffened, but in the end did not fight as Yrinvan relieved them of their weapons. They were deep inside the fortress now. There was no escape possible and defiance without hope of success would only diminish their chances of survival.
“Everyone has a choice.” Legolas answered more bitterly than he had intended. He couldn’t help the feelings of helplessness that washed over him. If given the opportunity he could fight his way out of here, he would. He just could not leave Aragorn to suffer the Witch King alone.

“No...” Yrin glanced down at the elf. “Not everyone does.” Handing the weapons to the orc standing next to him, the servant pulled his tunic off his left shoulder, allowing the prince to see the jagged, partially healed scar that marred his flesh. The cut on the human’s body was very similar to the one on Aragorn’s, but looked much, much older. It had closed for the most part, but looked as if it had never fully healed. It was not raw and inflamed like Aragorn’s, but the signature dark tendrils laced the outside of the mostly healed wound in spider-web patterns. This was an old injury and Yrinvan’s body seemed to have accepted its presence, but it was still frightening to look at.

Legolas drew his breath in at the sight.

“The Master gives us enough antidote to keep us alive from week to week. Even if I ever was foolish enough to try to run away and somehow miraculously lucky enough to succeed, I would die like your friend nearly did,” Yrin said flatly. These were the facts of his life, and here in Angmar you either accepted them or you died, it was just that simple. “My wife and children are enslaved here as well. The Master would take out his wrath on them.” Pulling his shirt back over the black cut, Yrinvan pushed Rhzaq out into the hallway before him. “So you see, there is no choice. It was taken away a long time ago. Just like yours has been. I’m sorry.”

“I won’t accept that.” Legolas tightened his grip on the ranger in his arms.

Ignoring the elf’s comment, Yrin continued. “I have left food for the both of you. Your door will not be locked, but it will be guarded, if you try anything, that will change. I would advise you to stay here and rest while you may. If you have any needs simply tell your guards and one will come and find me.” Legolas could see four orcs positioning themselves against the far wall in the hallway, outside their room.

“I’ll be back in the morning to see how he fares.” Yrin nodded at Aragorn before turning and walking away. Rhzaq quietly closed the door behind them.

Yrin sighed as he walked away. He did not know what the Nazgûl wanted with these two, but it could not be good. He should have known the Master was up to something when Tynair was sent out. The fellow servant had been dispatched some time ago with a missive for the Wraith’s compatriots in Dol Guldur. The slave had asked for enough antidote to make the trip, but the Wraith had restricted Yrin from being generous with the medicine. It was a hard, fast trip to make. The Witch King barely gave his messengers enough antidote to keep them alive until they returned. If the Wraiths delayed the messenger down south, which they often did, the slaves rarely made it back alive. Yrin had done it once and it had nearly killed him.
The headservant had known there was more to Tynari’s mission than just a delivery. The Nazgûl had given Tynair a special mixture of poison and instructions that he was not allowed to share, even with Yrinvan. When he left, Yrin was certain he would never see the man again. Something about the look Tynair had laid upon him as he had ridden out had touched Yrin’s heart. His friend was saying goodbye.

Two weeks ago the master’s steed had returned without a rider. The poison was gone, as was the antidote. The horse carried a return package from Dol Guldur in the saddle bags, but Tynair was never found. They were forbidden to go looking for him. Yrin had known deep in his heart the man had carried out his errands and probably died along the road, trying to get home before the toxins killed him.

Now he was certain of it and quietly cursed his friend for following through with the Wraiths plans. Because of Tynair’s obedience there were two more that would unwillingly be forced to take his place. If the roles were reversed though, Yrinvan knew he would have done the same, hoping against hope to make it back to his family alive. It had broken his heart to tell Tynair’s wife and children that he wasn’t coming back. Did the elf and the ranger have family somewhere? If they did there were now two more families out there in the midst of heartbreak because of his friend’s actions. It was such a hopeless circle.

Yrinvan shook his head. Sometimes it hardly seemed worthwhile to continue breathing. In the darkness of Angmar, there was no room for hope.

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True to his word, Yrinvan checked on Aragorn the next day. The servant was responsible for the care and training of all new slaves and prisoners. He took his duties seriously.

Aragorn was in a deep sleep, but he looked better than he had when the elf carried him in here the day before. Yrin brushed the human’s hair away from his forehead, checking his temperature.

Legolas hovered protectively nearby. “Are you going to give him more antidote?”

Yrin shook his head. “No. The Master allowed him one dose only for the present.”
The elf watched the servant carefully, gauging him. He wasn’t sure yet what to make of the human. He decided to risk a bold question and see how the man reacted.

“What’s the best way out of here?” Legolas expected Yrin to be angry at the question, or not answer him at all, but neither proved to be the case.

“Death,” Yrin said quietly as he pulled a blanket over Aragorn’s sleeping form. “But make no mistake, the Master rations even that exit sparingly. I will give you the advice I have given many others: do not fight the Nazgûl. You will always lose and death will not be the easy option it seems. Accept your situation and you may survive. If you do not, you will discover there are worse things than death. I do not say this in an attempt to frighten you, but to help you.”

Legolas folded his arms, fixing Yrin with a steady gaze as the human rose to his feet. “We can never accept *this*.”

“Then you condemn yourselves,” Yrin said plainly, turning to leave.

“Yrin, wait,” Legolas halted the man before he could reach the door. “I know it would seem foolish to help us, but I do not ask the unreasonable. Help us, and we’ll help you. My friend... he is a healer. He knows about medicines and how to make them. If he were well enough and could study the antidote, he could recreate it for all of you. Your people could be free. Don’t you want that?”

Legolas hoped he did not over-extend himself with that promise. He had seen Lord Elrond analyze and pull apart a pre-made concoction element by element in order to recreate it. He had to believe that Aragorn would have learned some of this from his father. He had ultimate faith in his friend’s abilities.

Yrinvan turned back for a moment. “Always the new ones talk of freedom. It brings only suffering. You do not know the Master as I know him. Everyone thinks they’re different, but they all die the same. I would not see that happen to you, but the choice is in your hands.” With that, he left.
There were days when Raniean thanked his lucky stars that he was not the Prince of Mirkwood. Most days actually, but today was one of those that made him particularly grateful.

Thranduil was in one of his quietly livid moods. The kind where all that could safely be said was ‘yes, Sire’ and ‘no, Sire’... but mostly ‘yes, Sire’.

“Raniean, I want you to take this to Rivendell,” Thranduil’s voice was deceptively quiet as he placed the dispatch pouch into his Captain’s hands. “Take Trelan and Brenyf with you.”

“Yes, Sire.” Raniean accepted the charge.

“Deliver it to Lord Elrond personally,” Thranduil continued. “Do NOT leave him until he gives you a response.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“And if you find my son there, or along the way...” the King seemed to be considering what he said. “Bring him home immediately.”

“Yes, Sire,” Raniean agreed yet again. He hesitated, unsure if there was more since he had not been dismissed.

“What are you still here for?” Thranduil asked, not unkindly, but definitely impatiently. “Go!”

“Yes, Sire, at once.” Raniean bowed swiftly and left to find his friend and his second-in-command. As he passed through the throne room doors, he decided he did not want to be in Legolas’ shoes right now.

“Are we finally going to look for Legolas?” was the first thing Trelan said when he saw Raniean approaching with a courier satchel slung over his shoulder. They were surprised that Thranduil had waited this long.

Brenyf fell in behind the two elves wordlessly. He’d been here before as well and knew the routine. He had just been talking to Trelan about the prince when their captain approached them.
Raniean nodded in answer to Trelan’s question. He was not yet as worried as he could tell his liege was, but he could not deny a creeping sense of unease. Legolas should have been home over a month ago. He had *promised*...

“Oh, Legolas,” Raniean couldn’t help thinking as they rode away down the forest road, heading for the Misty Mountains. “If I had a horse for every time I’ve had to come after you... what have you gotten yourself into this time, my friend?”

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Aragorn’s strength did not return fully, but the next few days brought definite improvement. It was a temporary reprieve and the two friends both knew that, but they held onto their hope that, while they were alive and together, they still had a chance.

The first several days of their stay were truly not that bad. They were fed and ignored for the most part, while Aragorn recovered. On the fourth day the antidote’s potency reached its full effect before it would start going into decline again. What peace they had came to an abrupt end.

“We need to find a way out of here,” Aragorn whispered, unsure if there were guards in the hallway.

“You weren’t given enough antidote,” Legolas countered softly, “We need to discover where it is stored or how to make it and treat you fully first.” The elf rotated his shoulder stiffly. The injury the fell beast had given him had finally closed over on the outside although it felt as if it still had a fair bit of mending to do on the inside before he would be able to move the arm without feeling the ache.

“Grand, if you have any suggestions on how we’re supposed to do that. There must be a way. What have you discovered since we arrived?” Aragorn pressed further. He felt better than he had in days although the ache had never fully left his bones. He didn’t like just sitting here waiting for the hammer to fall. He wanted to act.

“I have spoken with...” Legolas’ answer cut off as the door to their cell opened. For the first time it was not Yrinvan who stood there.
“Enough rest for you,” the hulking orc in the doorway barked with a cruel smile. “The Master will see you now.”

Several of the dark, twisted beings entered the cell. Grabbing Aragorn by the arms, they pulled him towards the door. The ranger did not fight them, knowing all such resistance was futile. The orcs cuffed and slammed him from side to side just the same.

Several more of the dark creatures approached Legolas. If their eyes gleamed with hatred for the human, they positively glowed with loathing for the elf.

Legolas felt a flash of dark panic when their clawed hands closed on his arms, his shoulders, his hair. They were being intentionally rough and their twisted nails dug into the exposed flesh of his neck. Legolas bucked and tossed his head to clear their filthy hands from his head. He hated them. He hated these beings. His senses screamed when they touched him. He was in Mordor again, and he could not go back there.

“Don’t touch me,” Legolas growled, yanking away from the orcs and stepping further back into the cell. Yrinvan was in the hall, overseeing the handling of the prisoners. The deadly tone in Legolas’ voice made him pause. There was something in the elf’s disturbed, almost panicked motions that said he would take drastic measures before letting the orcs lay a finger on him.

Aragorn heard the tone as well and looked back over his shoulder at the elf in alarm as he was dragged out of the room. “Legolas, sídh mellon-nín, pân natha mae! Be calm my friend, it will be all right,” he tried to reassure the elf as the orcs manhandled him roughly away. Aragorn understood his friend’s reaction, but he feared it was going to get the elf into a world of pain and trouble. He could not catch Legolas’ eye and the orcs seemed intent on brutally separating them.

“Do not touch me!” Legolas’ second warning was more desperate and much darker as the orcs surged around the prince, their clawed hands pawing all over him. Things were about to go badly.

Yrin stepped quickly into the room, pushing his way through the orcs. “Enough!” he barked, managing to back the orcs off with a glare and a fair amount of pushing and shoving. “The Master is waiting.” The human took the elf’s arms firmly but without malice, prodding him towards the door.

“You won’t be helping yourself or your friend if you fight now,” the human hissed quietly in the elf’s ear when Legolas started to resist him.
The Prince did not react as badly to Yrin’s proximity and finally allowed the human to hold his arms and lead him into the hall. He understood that Yrin was trying to help by putting himself in place of the orcs that the elf could not seem to abide. As far as the gesture went, the prince appreciated the thought. It was hard to be very grateful however as they were led down the long, dark hallway and the evil presence ahead of them swelled out like a thundercloud, enveloping them.

At the end of the hall a steel door as black as obsidian loomed like the entry to a tomb. The mental comparison made Aragorn shiver. The cold perspiration that gathered on his brow made his hair cling to his face. He did not feel well and the invisible dark cloud they were entering only increased the effects of the poison already coursing through his veins. He had the sudden, horrible feeling that his death lay beyond that door. The ranger shivered.

The door opened before the human and the orcs dragged him inside. Legolas started to follow, but Yrinvan held him back. “Not yet. The Master has not summoned you both yet.”

Aragorn’s heart jolted as he was quickly dragged through the doorway alone. He twisted frantically in the orcs’ grip. No! His heart cried out against what was happening. Not alone! He did not feel ready or able to face the nameless terror ahead without the elf at his side.

“Legolas...” the whisper was soft, but the momentary gleam of fear in the human’s cloudy eyes was very clear. Legolas felt his heart lurch to a stop. He was unused to seeing such abject terror in his friend’s eyes.

“Strider!” Legolas called his friend’s name in alarm, surging forward as the door banged shut between them, shaking off Yrin’s firm grip. The elf pulled away from his captor easily, pounding his fists against the dark, unrelenting door. Evil like a liquid malice flowed through his fists and up his arms when he touched the door, making the elf’s eyes widen and his heart race. Yanking away as if disconnecting from an electric current, the elf reeled back a pace. The orcs bristled around Legolas, more than ready and willing to restrain him if Yrin could not.

“You must be still,” Yrinvan commanded sharply, his hands falling to rest on the elf’s shoulders again. He knew the orcs would take over if Legolas created a scene. “The Master will summon you shortly or he would not have had you brought here. If you do not behave we will have to take you back to the cell.”

Legolas quieted, still a little stunned by the malevolent contact with the door. “No,” he whispered, shaking his head. “I need to be near him, Yrin...”

Yrin’s grip tightened almost painfully on the elf’s shoulders and the servant gave him a hard,
warning glare. Alone in the cell it was all right, but Legolas could *not* be that familiar with him in front of the orcs.

“Then you will obey the Master and wait without protest,” the slave’s voice held a steely tone.

Legolas realized he had overstepped the line. The servant had been sympathetic to them to this point, but he did not want to alienate Yrinvan or get him into trouble. They may yet need his continued consideration in the future. Slowly, the prince acquiesced, allowing Yrin to bind his hands around one of the iron torch sconces set into the wall.

The elf fixed his eyes on the door, straining to hear what happened beyond the portal. To his frustration, whatever dark magic lay upon this place dulled his elvish senses and Legolas could hear nothing from the other side. The lack of information was nauseating and Legolas shifted anxiously.

“Oh, Strider, where are you? What’s happening?” The elf wondered silently. Not knowing was torture.
Aragorn heard the door bang shut and found himself surrounded in darkness. The orcs themselves seemed a little fearful and that did nothing to alleviate the ranger’s concerns.

Sure-footed in the darkness, the beasts pushed him forward into what felt like a cold, grey sea. The ranger knew it was a room of some kind, but he could discern no visible features. He could not distinguish walls, furniture, or even the floor. Not even his ears could help him. The feet of his captors did not ring against the floor, nor did their harsh breathing create any kind of echo. It was as if the darkness around them was absorbing all the sound, as well as the light. The pitch black was so total it was disturbing... It was unnatural.

A voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere wrapped around the ranger’s senses.

“So you have come...” the voice said. It was toneless, metallic.

Aragorn turned his head sharply, looking around for the source of the voice. It seemed to come from inside his own head. Goosebumps chased themselves up and down the ranger’s arms and his flesh crawled. There was a gnawing terror here, the kind of fear that could drive men mad. It reminded Aragorn vaguely of being trapped in the barrow after the fight with Kaldur’s bandits. Yet it was different. The evil there had exuded a nameless fear meant to strike terror into anything that lived. The presence here was purposeful and focused... focused on him.

“Who are you?” Aragorn demanded. He spoke boldly, but his voice sounded small and hollow in his ears, swallowed up in the immensity of the evil cloud.

The voice laughed. “You know who I am. I am the one that will destroy you. The question, mortal, is who are you?”

Aragorn squared his shoulders. Yes, he did know who it was that had lured him here. And he refused to be intimidated. The ranger defiantly glared into the darkness. He couldn’t even see the orcs. He could only feel their hands on him. Some part of him knew this wasn’t real. It was an illusion inside his mind. He would not let the evil one see his fear.

“I? I am the one who sent you flying away in flames, and if I ever get the chance, I shall do it again. Is that why you hide from me, in the darkened shadows?” The answer was bold, foolhardy even, but Aragorn was hardly worried about his future at the moment. He had been a dead man since the
attack by the river.

The darkness intensified for a moment before suddenly clearing and fading away, like mist burning up under morning light. Aragorn found himself standing in the center of a large room. Scrolls and bottles lined one wall and various tables sat about them at random angles. A man in slave-garb stood quietly in one of the corners. He was so still and quiet that Aragorn was startled to realize he was a living being.

A vent in the ceiling above penetrated the rock face of the mountain that the castle was built into, admitting a cold, pale ray of light that shone down upon the human. It was not a friendly glow and its harsh cast fell upon the ranger like fingers of ice.

Before Aragorn stood a figure completely robed in black. He had seen the Lord of the Nazgûl before, but never quite like this. The ragged black robes were thrown back, revealing powerful arms swathed in thick armor plating that rippled like dragon scales. The steel hauberk was covered from the elbow down by the spiked, multi-jointed gauntlets that the Wraith favored. A pale silver armband like a ravenous serpent snaked up his right arm, disappearing under his black robes and a red-gemmed ring glowed dully visible on his hand. The cowl of his robe covered the dark area where his head should have been, but the faint glimmer of a pale crown showed in the shadows of the hood.

This was the Witch King of Angmar, at home in his own realm of old. Power and terror flowed freely from him.

Aragorn met the empty gaze of his dark hood without wavering, but inside, his blood ran cold.

“You are foolish to challenge me, mortal,” the Wraith hissed, his voice both quiet and frightening at the same time. “You will pay for that. You will not find me a forgiving master.”

“That is well, for I am not your slave,” the ranger retorted with a greater level of calm in his voice than he truly felt.

The Nazgûl laughed, walking forward slowly to tower over the human. He was a little surprised that the man was feeling strong enough to be this much of a nuisance. He would have thought the poison had taken care of sapping excess strength. Obviously, he had miscalculated. The human needed to be brought down in tone a few notches before anything useful could occur between them.
“You think not? All who are in this mountain are my slaves...” The Wraith ran the back of his ribbed knuckles down the side of the man’s face. “You have accepted my hospitality, partaken of the life-saving measures that only I can give... your gratitude is sadly lacking, ranger. But no matter, you shall learn better with time. I had it in mind to question you, but I find you in an unresponsive state of mind. Instead I shall teach you what it means to serve me.”

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Legolas twisted uneasily in his bonds. It seemed an age since Aragorn disappeared through those doors. Every so often, he thought he could almost hear something that sounded like a scream in the distance. He didn’t know if it was real or an illusion coming from the darkness, but in either case, it filled the elf’s heart with dread. He fidgeted restlessly, tugging at the ropes holding him and testing the strength of the wall sconce to which he was fastened. Both were unfortunately more than adequate.

Yrin shot the elf a glare that told him to be still, but he could not blame the elf for his restlessness. The slave did not enjoy this waiting game either. However, his long time under the Nazgûl had taught him patience. The results of impatience were painful at best, deadly at worst.

Legolas stopped fidgeting and fixed his gaze intently on the door once more when the dark portal suddenly swung open. It was eerily silent, not even creaking upon its hinges. Yet an invisible vapor flowed out that turned blood to ice in one’s veins.

A man stepped out of the darkened portal, dressed in a grey slave tunic of the same style as Yrinvan’s. This man was a little shorter than the head-servant. He made his way quickly to Yrin’s side and whispered something into the other slave’s ear. Legolas heard them, but did not understand the tongue they used.

Yrin nodded, a sad, resigned look coming over his face. “Very well, Tinald.”

Legolas’ anxious eyes watched the two humans closely, begging them to tell him what was happening.

Yrin unbound the elf from the wall. “Your friend has upset the Master; he will not see you today. You must go back to the cell and wait.”
Legolas’ heart clutched. “No! Where is Strider? What’s happening?” he protested in alarm.

With a sigh, Yrin signaled the orcs to take the elf into custody. The Master required his presence, so he was forced to turn Legolas over to them. “The orcs will see you back to your cell to wait. Don’t fight them and they won’t harm you,” the servant tried to reassure.

Legolas shuddered as the orcs pulled him into their midst, but right now his overwhelming concern for Aragorn was more pressing than his loathing of orcs. Suddenly a deep, dark shiver made the elf freeze.

*He* was here.

The Witch King entered the hall with Aragorn before him. The human looked bad. Blood ran down one side of his face and his steps fumbled slightly.

“Strider!” Legolas called his friend’s name, struggling against the orcs that held him. He refused to have a visible reaction to the Nazgûl’s presence, focusing on his friend.

Aragorn looked up, his gaze instantly searching out the elf. He nearly fell when the Nazgûl shoved him from behind, pushing him into Yrin and Tinald’s hands.

“Take him!” the Wraith commanded. “Put the elf back in his cage. I will see him later.”

The two servants accepted their charge obediently, seeming to already know what their master wanted.

Legolas thrashed, fighting the orcs dragging him bodily away. “Stop! Where are you taking him?! Strider!”

The Nazgûl did not turn or slow his steps. “To learn prudence,” he answered coldly.

Aragorn struggled with the two servants holding him and they were forced to manhandle him down
the hallway. He tried to glance behind him but the Nazgûl blocked his view. He desperately needed
to see for himself that Legolas was all right but even that small comfort was denied him.

The servant on his left smacked the ranger hard alongside the head as Aragorn struggled against
them.

“Stop it,” Tinald growled darkly. “It will go easier if you come with us willingly.” The last statement
was barely a whisper, meant for the captive’s ears only. He was frustrated that this man seemed
insistent on bringing the Nazgûl’s wrath down upon himself.

The unexpected note of fear under his guard’s gruff voice gave Aragorn pause and he glanced at the
man that dragged him along. The servant would not return the ranger’s gaze but his fingers lightened
up slightly on Aragorn’s arm.

After a few turns, they stood before a large wooden door. A small window had been built into it and
was covered by a steel plate that could be opened to view the interior.

Neither of the men holding Aragorn would look him in the eye; instead they turned him around to
face their lord. The Nazgûl watched, pleased to see the fear that shadowed the ranger’s gaze.

“Prepare him.” The black lord’s voice whispered seductively; a soft hissing laugh accompanied the
command.

Every one of the servants who lived in the palace had spent time in this very room and each one
knew exactly what they could expect. Reluctantly, Aragorn’s guards stripped the ranger’s coat and
outer tunic from his body, hanging the clothing on pegs beside the heavy door. They allowed the
man to retain his light undershirt. His hands were pulled in front of him and bound together before
being manacled by heavy metal cuffs placed over and around the ropes.

Feelings of helplessness edged into Aragorn’s mind and he began to fear what the Nazgûl had in
store for him. The anxiety released adrenaline into his system and before he had thought through his
options he kicked out at the man on his left, bringing Tinald down and leaping over the fallen slave,
trying to get past the servants. He had no idea what they had in mind for him but the servant’s
hesitancy spiked a fear through his system that he could not explain. The slaves tried to keep hold of
the ranger but Aragorn was faster than they were, even bound. Escape was the only thing he had in
his mind.
Yrin and Tinald reacted a trifle too slow. In the black lord’s home no one resisted when told where to go or what to do, even if it was to a punishment cell such as this. The Nazgûl was simply obeyed.

The ranger was far from compliant.

In moments it was obvious that the household servants were not going to be able to control Aragorn. The Witch King was growing impatient; he had other things he needed to attend to and this diversion was slowing his plans. Moving swiftly, the black-robed Wraith hooked his gloved fingers in the ranger’s hair and forcefully pulled the human back. With his left hand he pressed the tip of the metal spike on his forefinger into the wound in Aragorn’s shoulder.

The slightest pressure by the dark lord spiked the latent poisons and the ranger dropped to his knees, crying out under the paralyzing pain. Bands of agony wrapped his body in steel bonds and the breath left his lungs in a rush.

“Now get him in the cell.” The Witch King commanded darkly, shoving Aragorn back towards his servants. “Remove his shirt as well. That can be his punishment for his foolish resistance.” The dark lord hissed.

“My...my lord...” Yrinvan shifted nervously as he gently helped Aragorn to his feet. The ranger was too dazed to put up much opposition now. “It was my understanding, My Lord, that you wanted him to live. He will not survive without some protection.” The servant winced as he softly protested. It was not wise to cross the Nazgûl, but the headservant could not help pointing out the obvious. Sometimes when the Wraith was provoked, he did things he later regretted. Usually that meant that, whatever he had done, instantly became Yrin’s fault as he expected the chief slave to see to his concerns even better than he saw to them himself. It was a difficult and dangerous edge for the underling to navigate.

“You question me.” The dark, hissing answer was a statement, not a question.

“No, My Lord. I would not deign to cross you, ever. Forgive me my simple mind. I just thought you wanted him to live until the morning.” Yrinvan glanced at Tinald.

The other servant was shifting nervously; his fingers hesitantly fumbled to unbutton Aragorn’s shirt while his friend talked to their master. He hoped Yrinvan knew what he was doing, his friend took far too many risks and he feared what would happen. If the Witch King was in a bad mood he could order them all into the cell. He knew for certain he would never survive the night there again, he barely had the first time his lord had thrown him in there. Conditioning they had called it. A little discomfort went a long way in garnering obedience.
Aragorn slumped against Yrinvan, falling to his knees as Tinald bent over him, removing the light shirt he wore. The ranger was trying to catch his breath, trying to still the pain that was still keeping him nearly paralyzed in the dark lord’s presence. A soft sob escaped his lips and he bit back the tears that formed. Just the touch of the evil Wraith was enough torment; he could not understand what the servants feared so much.

“Of course I want him alive, fool.” The Nazgûl answered as if that were obvious. He glared at the ranger, the heat of his hatred an almost palpable wave of anger in the passageway. “Sometimes I forget how little your pitiful mortal bodies can withstand. Very well, you can give it back to him at midnight. IF I do not change my mind.”

Tinald sighed softly; closing his eyes as he quickly unbound the ranger’s hands, removed the shirt completely and refastened the ropes and manacles. Eru, that was close. Their master must really want this prisoner for something.

“I’m sorry.” Tinald whispered softly to the ranger as Yrinvan opened the door and he pushed Aragorn over the threshold.

As soon as the wooden hatch was opened, a blast of icy cold air barreled down the tunnel, blowing the robes of the Nazgûl about him like a dark whirlwind. With a sudden shock of clarity Aragorn realized why the servants had been so afraid for him.

He glanced up to where the ceiling of the small cell should have been and instead saw the bright, clear, starry night high above. The room, no larger than ten paces in any direction, looked as though it had been bored straight down through the rock of the mountain itself. The shaft had a grate that enclosed the top of the vertical tunnel, keeping out any predators or large animals. The wind blew down viciously into the cell without impediment however, bringing with it liberal showers of the snow and ice that collected against the outside of the grill.

Loosed by the draft created by the open door, a freezing cascade of white fell down upon the ranger, coating his shoulders and hair. Aragorn flinched, shaking the snow off him and onto the ground that was already thick with the frozen precipitation. The snow stung his exposed flesh like a million painful needles. It clung to him when he tried to shake it off, burning like frozen fire. He wished he could brush the snow away, but his bound hands did not allow it.

The door clanged shut and the small window opened. Yrinvan glanced in hesitantly. “Try to keep moving. Whatever you do, don’t fall asleep,” he cautioned quietly, his tone even and emotionless in front of his Master. “I’ll be back after midnight.”
The Nazgûl pushed his servant aside and glared through the portal. Hissing laughter issued from somewhere beneath the dark, empty hood. “I would use this time to think long and hard about what you are going to say to me tomorrow when I question you... I would suggest the truth.” Slamming the window closed, he turned and pulled the human’s clothing from the pegs near the door. Stalking down the hallway he followed the passages back to the elf’s cell.

Legolas jumped when the door to his prison scraped suddenly open and he stepped forward, hoping beyond all hope that Aragorn was being brought back. The small oil lamp on the back wall barely illuminated the four corners of the cell and with the morgul darkness blanketing his senses the elf could not see the Wraith as the Nazgûl crossed the threshold. He could, however, feel the dark one’s presence and pressed back against the recess behind him. He was not such a fool that he could not admit his own limitations to himself, and the truth was he was more afraid of this being than anything else on Middle Earth.

A black gloved hand tossed a wad of familiar looking cloth into the cell.

“Your friend won’t be needing these tonight.” He laughed darkly as he left. The door swung shut ominously behind him and the lock clicked loudly into place.

Picking up the bundle, Legolas turned it over in his hands. His heart froze in his chest as he realized he was holding most of Aragorn’s clothing. Oh no, Valar no... What had they done to him? What might they still be doing?

Panic bubbled in the elf’s chest. He realized that when he came here, he had been afraid of all the wrong things. He had feared seeing the Witch King again, he had feared losing Aragorn, he had feared torment in the dark... but the real terror here was helplessness. All he could do was sit here. All he could do was wait. He didn’t even know where Aragorn was or what was happening to him.

Legolas buried his face in Aragorn’s shirt, clenching it in his hands until his knuckles turned white. “Bring him back. Please, I don’t care what’s happened, just bring him back...” he whispered softly into the dark fabric.
When the Nazgûl had slammed the small window closed, it shut out all light save for the bright pinpoints of the stars high above in the heavens. Aragorn’s eyes adjusted slowly to the dimness. The room closed in on him, the walls pressing in claustrophobically. It wasn’t just the cold. There was evil here, shrouding, choking, terrifying evil, the kind that could whisper in a man’s mind until he wanted to claw his ears off to make it stop. The ranger glanced around nervously, expecting something, anything. The servants had been so fearful of this place... it unnerved him. However, nothing stirred, save the night winds and the snow that constantly rained down on him.

The stone walls were too cold to rest against and the ground below his feet was thick with snow. There was no place to sit, no place of comfort, no place to rest his weary body. Aragorn’s shoulder ached mercilessly and soon his fingers and toes followed suit.

Voices whispered constantly in his ears. At first he thought it was the wind, but eventually he realized it was not. Fell voices murmured maliciously around him, barely audible. They spoke of defeat, despair, death... they turned Aragorn’s own thoughts against him and shredded at his waning strength. It wasn’t long before the ranger realized why the servants feared this cell so much.

He tried walking in circles, running in place... anything to keep himself warm, but as the night temperatures dropped, they sucked away any remaining heat that the room retained.

To Aragorn it seemed he had been pacing numbly forever, although some part of his sluggish brain was telling him it had only been a few hours at most. Violent shivering had taken over sometime ago and he could no longer feel his legs or arms. His hands, bound as they were in front of him, were useless in staving off the freezing cold, he couldn’t even rub them together for what warmth that would create. What little sweat his body had generated now coated his face and hair in a thin layer of ice. He stumbled over his own feet, falling to his knees. It seemed that he vaguely remembered being here before. Wasn’t almost freezing to death once in a lifetime enough? Apparently not.

“What are you fighting for? Give up, you’ve lost, there is no hope left in the world, just give up...”

Clumsily Aragorn tried to gain his feet again but his body wasn’t listening to him anymore. He couldn’t stop moving. He would die, he knew that.

“Would that be so bad? The snow is soft and you can just lie down for a minute. It won’t hurt at all.” The small thought echoed treacherously in his mind.

Aragorn nodded slowly. Yes, that’s what he really wanted. He couldn’t remember anymore why he was here or where ‘here’ was. He collapsed in the collected drifts on the bottom of the cell, the compacted snow pillowing his head. It wasn’t cold anymore; in fact it was oddly comfortable and
even warm. He smiled slightly and sighed through lips that were tinged an alarming shade of blue. Slowly, the human closed his eyes and his breathing slowed as his body began to shut down.
The tip of a boot woke Yrinvan out of a dead sleep. Tinald stood over him, glancing nervously about them.

“Go to sleep.” Yrin growled.

“It is midnight.” Tinald’s hesitant answer brought the other fully awake.

Grabbing the thin blanket he slept on, the servant jumped to his feet and pelted down the stone hallways with Tinald following quickly behind. He was out of breath by the time he reached the massive wooden doors and threw the small metal plate open, looking quickly about the tiny room.

“Tinald! The light, bring it here.”

Yrinvan grabbed the light from his friend’s hands, shoving the blanket at the other as he tried to see the prisoner.

“Ranger! Ranger?” he called into the darkness. There was no response. Setting down the lamp he fumbled with the keys that hung on one of the pegs by the door and pulled the entryway open.

Tinald gasped quietly as he leaned around and glanced into the cell. The blanket slipped from his fingers.

Slowly, Yrinvan knelt in the snow. The ranger was curled in a fetal position, his head tucked into his chest, his sweat slicked hair iced firmly to his features. The man’s lips were tinged a frightening shade of blue and the color of his skin matched the snow under him.

“Is he dead?” Tinald asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Yrinvan had seen many a servant end his time in Angmar in such a fashion. He hated it: it was such a waste. Carefully, he touched the prisoner. Aragorn was cold to the touch, too cold, but the slave pressed on, feeling the man’s jugular for any signs of life. A slow, erratic beat pulsed beneath his fingertips and Yrin sighed in relief.
Turning quickly, he pushed Tinald out of the way and grasped the blanket where the other had dropped it on the ground. Moving further into the cell, Yrinvan carefully stepped over Aragorn and began to sweep the snow away from the man, draping the blanket over him.

“He lives yet. Help me, we have to get him out of here.” Yrinvan ordered.

Tinald’s eyes went wide with fear and he glanced up and down the passageway, expecting the Wraith to appear from the shadows at any moment and condemn them all on the spot.

“We dare not!” He swallowed hard, shaking his head as Yrinvan’s gaze snapped up to meet his. “Do you know what the Master will *do* if he finds us helping them? Remember what happened to Tavin? We heard him screaming for a month before the end! A *month*, Yrin!”

Yrinvan’s gaze was unmoved. “Do you know what the Master will do to us if this one dies while under our care? You heard him earlier. This is just the beginning. He wants him alive. I don’t know why, but he needs him for something.”

Gently, Tinald touched Yrinvan’s hands, stilling the other’s urgent movements. “Master ordered him in here; it won’t be our fault if he dies. Yrin, perhaps it is better that he does not live. He is nearly gone. Let him go. Would you want to come back to this place?” He swept his hand behind them, indicating the dark lord’s house. “*That* would be mercy.”

Yrinvan glanced down at the ranger. The man’s breathing had become shallower as he worked to save him. Perhaps Tinald was right, what kind of future did the man have? It was better to die a quick death than to endure the long torment of their Master’s malicious attention.

And yet...

He remembered the desperate way the elf had pleaded for his friend. They seemed very close. The ranger had at least one thing for which to return to the living and he was not sure he should take that choice away from him yet.

With a shake of his head, Yrin pulled the ranger up against his chest and wrapped the blanket around the cold body. “It will always be our fault, Tinald. Remember that, because it will never be *his* fault, trust me. Help me get him back to the elf’s cell. I’ll tell the Master myself.”
When Tinald hesitated Yrin glared at his friend. “Do you really want him to suffer the same fate as your brother? He must have a family somewhere; at least he has a friend. Wouldn’t you have done anything to bring Givon back, to even have a few more days with him? Help me.”

With a sad sigh of resignation, Tinald moved forward and helped his friend pull the ranger into a standing position. “I hope you are right and that the Master is in a good mood. As for friend and family... you are all *I* have now, Yrin. I am not sure these two are worth this risk.”

“It will be well, Tinald.” Yrinvan kicked the door shut and walked slowly up the passageway, supporting the ranger between them. “I know what I’m doing. Trust me.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Legolas paced from one end of the small cell to another. Back and forth, back and forth... there was some amount of hollow comfort in the repetitive motion.

There was no sleeping tonight, not when worry for Aragorn’s wellbeing ate at his heart constantly. The human’s clothing lay folded neatly in a small pile near the back of the cell, far from the reaches of anyone who might enter. They would have to take them from him. Legolas stood in the cell staring out the high window that served as a vent for the prison. Cool air fell through the narrow slit but the thermal heating system kept the prison at a decent temperature. It was much the same design as they used in Mirkwood, harnessing the natural warmth of the thermal flows beneath the mountains. That reminded him of how much he missed home. His father must be worried sick about him by now. He hoped Thranduil could someday forgive him if he never came back... Despite what his father thought, he hadn’t chosen for it to end up this way.

The elf sighed. He knew that wasn’t quite true. Actually, he *had* chosen this path. Estel tried his best to leave him behind, but he did not regret his decision to follow his friend anywhere, even into this eternal darkness. He hoped his father could forgive him anyway, even if Thranduil might never understand.

“Take care of Ada, Raniean. You’re the only one who can. Trelan, make sure Raniean doesn’t forget how to laugh, you know how he is. Please someone take care of my ketrals. Don’t just put them out in the woods, they aren’t used to the wilds anymore...” Legolas mentally commended his family, friends and responsibilities into one another’s hands. He didn’t mean to entertain a defeatist
mentality, but it was strangely comforting at the moment. He could not hold onto his worry for all of them as well as his worry for Aragorn and their situation here at the same time - one had to be temporarily laid to rest.

The door to the cell scraped open slowly and three figures stumbled into the dimly lit chamber.

The elf had been prepared for anything, even for the chance to attempt an escape, but the sight that met his eyes was far from anything he had imagined.

Aragorn’s unconscious body was supported between Yrinvan and Tinald. A thin, worn blanket was draped around his unclothed upper body. Ice shimmered in his hair and clung to his pants and boots, he was coated in a powdery covering of snow. What scared the elf more than anything was that it seemed his friend was not breathing. The human’s slightly parted lips were blue and his skin was alarmingly pale.

Yrin spoke first. “He’ll need your help if he’s to make it. I’ll have Ahnna bring up some heated water and some soup if there’s any left. You’ll need to get him warm and fast. I’m sorry.” He apologized quietly as the elf stepped forward quickly and accepted the ranger from the guards. The prince wrapped his friend protectively in his arms and pulled him back into the corner, away from the humans who had brought him.

The look in the elf’s eyes nearly broke Yrin’s heart. He’d seen that same haunted gaze before on so many faces. That combination of fear for a loved one and condemnation towards those who had done this... the barely masked question of how these slaves could be so cruel.

Dropping his gaze from the accusingly piercing blue eyes, Yrinvan draped his arm around Tinald and led the man out of the room, quietly closing the door behind them. The truth was they had saved Strider’s life tonight, but that never absolved them of the blame of endangering him in the first place. Yrin was used to that fact.

Legolas could hear their voices through the thick door as he gently laid Aragorn down.

“I’ll go tell the Master, you return to Ahnna and ask her to fetch the things I told the elf we’d bring.”

“Yrinvan...” Tinald’s voice wavered. He was afraid, but not for himself. He was bitterly terrified of losing the other man. Legolas recognized that familiar ache in the human’s voice all too well.
“Don’t worry, my friend,” Yrinvan assured quietly. “The Master will understand and if he doesn’t...”

Legolas couldn’t see the big man shrug but he recognized the tone of his voice – a man on the verge of giving up, a man with no hope.

“Make him understand.” Tinald’s whisper was barely heard by the prince as the two humans walked off in separate directions.

The servants wanted to help them. That revelation gave him hope. Yrin had thus far been decent towards them, but the fact that he seemed to have taken such a risk in bringing Aragorn back to the elf surprised Legolas. Perhaps there was still room for a ray of hope for them yet.

Quickly, Legolas grabbed the ranger’s clothing from the corner of the room and draped the heavy leather coat about Aragorn’s shoulders as he pulled the human more comfortably into his arms. He needed to get the man warmed up and wakened.

Holding Aragorn against him, Legolas briskly rubbed his friend’s arms and legs, brushing the snow and ice from his body and clothing. Aragorn was freezing to death; the elf recognized the symptoms by now.

He laid his cheek against Aragorn’s cold face, rocking the man gently and talking to him. The ranger started to shiver in his arms, small tremors at first and then more violent shudders followed as the elf’s body heat began to warm him.

Aragorn’s breathing became more labored and disrupted by the shaking of his warming body. Legolas clung to him tighter, pulling the coat and blankets over the two of them to trap their heat beneath the coverings. He winced. This was going to be painful for the man. Waking would not be pleasant.

“Wake up, mellon-nín. Tolo, come on Aragorn, come back. We’ve survived worse blizzards than this mellon-nín, you can’t walk out on me now,” Legolas whispered sadly. He did not notice when the door scraped quietly open and a small, stooped-over woman entered hesitantly. Gently rocking his friend, the elf continued to whisper in the grey tongue, encouraging the human to fight and return to him. He would not be able to continue living in Angmar with the Witch King if Aragorn left him. He had come this far for his friend alone; if and when Aragorn forsook this world, Legolas would follow. It was not defeat or despair; it was simply a fact. Legolas would not linger to become like Yrinvan and Tinald, good souls trapped by evil they could not hope to escape.
A soft touch on his arm startled Legolas and he shied from the contact, pulling Aragorn more tightly against him. The ranger moaned softly as the elf shifted him.

“Legolas...” Aragorn whispered repeatedly as the elf gently shushed him.

Beside the prince, a human woman knelt. She was disheveled in appearance. Her hair hung in dark tangles around her face, but her eyes held a spark that had not yet been quenched and Legolas noted it before she quickly dropped her gaze. She carried a steaming bowl of soup and a pitcher of warmed water. Carefully she set them down near the elf and wordlessly removed a strip of cloth from her belt. Dipping the fabric into the warm water she moved forward hesitantly, asking for permission with her eyes.

Legolas watched her guardedly, not releasing the man he held. The prince didn’t move as she pressed the blankets aside and lifted Aragorn’s right arm. Placing the now heated cloth against his armpit she lowered the man’s arm and repeated the processes on his left side.

“Do this here as well.” The woman quietly instructed, touching the inside of Aragorn’s arms where they bent at the elbow. “It will help him recover.” She placed the blankets back over the man and shifted Aragorn in Legolas’ arms, pressing the human’s chest against that of the elf. Aragorn’s chin rested on Legolas’ shoulder and he held the man’s face close to his own.

“Hold him closely; your body will heat him better that way.” Standing stiffly the woman backed slowly away, “Talk to him. It will hurt when consciousness returns and this is a fearful place in which to wake.” She pushed the soup bowl closer to the elf with the tip of her worn shoe before turning to leave.

“How le, Ahnna.” Legolas whispered softly.

Startled by his words Ahnna turned and bowed slightly. “Avo bedo o hannad, hîr nín. You are most welcome, my lord.” She answered just as quietly, unwilling to meet the elf’s gaze. The words were halting, as if dredged from long distant memory, but they were perfectly understandable, even if ungrammatical.

Turning, Ahnna left quickly, although she could hear the prince calling her back. The woman’s response had surprised Legolas as much as seeing a wood-elf that first day on the plains before the mountain had surprised her.
Aragorn stirred against the elf, coughing as consciousness pulled him back to the present. Speech continued to elude him however. Aragorn felt restrained. He could not move and it frightened him.

Legolas felt the ranger tense in his arms and softly began to speak to his friend once more, leaving the mystery of the woman behind for the moment.

“Estel.” Legolas rubbed the ranger’s back in a soothing pattern as he talked. “You are safe now. Just relax.”

The ranger’s teeth chattered as he drew in shaking breaths, trying to still his body that was trembling with the effort of returning to normal temperature. Aragorn cried out softly, burying his head on Legolas’ shoulder.

“It hurts, Legolas,” he ground out through gritted teeth. His fingers and legs had begun to warm up and the painful tingling of his blood circulating through the cold extremities sliced through his awareness.

There was nothing the elf could do to lessen Aragorn’s pain. Moving carefully, Legolas removed the wet cloths from the ranger’s armpits and dipped them back in the warm water, placing them on the sensitive skin of his inner elbows and forcing the human to cross his arms to keep the fabric in place.

“Felt better when I was sleeping.” Aragorn chattered, trying to still the tremors in his body.

Legolas smiled softly as he glanced down at the human he was holding. “Yes, I can imagine how good it must have felt sleeping in the snow.” The elf teased lightly. He brushed the wet, tangled locks of hair away from Aragorn’s face. “Considering it is the second time I know of that you have been found thus, I could think you wanted to make a habit of it. At least the cold seems to have halted the poison for a little bit,” he said, noting that the dark tendrils spreading from Aragorn’s shoulder wound had actually receded a little.

With a snort of laughter Aragorn smiled, his mirth turning into a grimace as he clenched his eyes closed and turned his face towards his friend. He let the elf’s heat warm his cheeks; it was the only part of his body that didn’t hurt at the moment.

The door to the cell clanged open harshly and darkness descended in the room, dimming the light
from the lamp and blotting the stars out completely. Legolas held his breath, pulling Aragorn instinctively closer to him.

The Nazgûl stepped into the chamber and glowered at the elf and the ranger. The pitcher and soup bowl were just behind Legolas. The elf pulled the edge of the blankets over them, hiding them as the Witch King entered. He did not want Ahnna, Yrinvan or Tinald into get in trouble for showing them kindness.

Yrinvan stepped in behind the Wraith and glanced around his master at the two occupants in the cell. He was slightly relieved to see the ranger turn slowly towards them and glare at the Witch King. He had been a little worried that it might have been too late anyway.

“You live?” The words chilled the room by degrees and Aragorn involuntarily began to shiver again. “That will be the last act of mercy you witness in your stay within my palace. If the poisons don’t kill you first your stubbornness to my lordship over you will.”

The dark hood turned towards the servant that edged alongside the Wraith. “Slave?” The Witch King questioned.

Yrinvan dropped immediately to his knees, touching his head to the floor before looking up to acknowledge his master.

The word and the force behind it brought back painful memories to Legolas and he sucked his breath in, flinching as the dark power of the Nazgûl brushed through him.

The Wraith did not miss the elf’s reaction.

“You remember your name as well.” The Nazgûl turned back at the elf, dark amusement in his voice. “Good.” He purred before turning back to the other human.

“You were right in your decision Yrinvan, I will let it go unpunished...this time.” He pushed the man out of the cell by the darkness that encased him like a cloak. “Next time you try to decipher my will without asking me, you will not be as fortunate. Remember that.” The door to the chamber closed and the shadows fled from the room, following their master out into the hall.

“I will come back for you later.” The echoes of the Wraith’s voice resounded down the passageway,
laden with dark promises. “Pray I call for you before the poisons do their work.”

The room was silent for a long time as the inhabitants of the cell rested in the shared warmth of their body heat. Legolas finally broke the stillness by scooting the bowl of soup out from underneath the edge of the blankets.

“I think I have never hated an enemy as I hate him.” Aragorn whispered. He was worn out and did not even fight it when Legolas tipped the soup bowl to his lips. Lying in the elf’s arms he simply drank the warm, thin broth, feeling it all the way down to his stomach.

“Do not hate him, for he feeds on hate. Pity him.” Legolas answered quietly, after laying the bowl back on the floor. He gently touched the back of his fingers to the ranger’s now flushed cheeks, redirecting Aragorn’s gaze. “He was a man once. Now he is dead but cannot rest. He can kill our bodies, but where we will find light and hope again on the other side there will be only terror for him. There is no place for him in Mandos’ halls or beyond. His soul is corrupted and will find only agony beyond the circles of the world when it is released. He will live out eternity in the void with his master. He exists in torment and it is all he will ever know.” Legolas knew of what he spoke. What kind of creature might he have become if he had remained the Nazgûl’s thrall?

“I will not pity him.” Aragorn glanced up at his friend. It was a terrible fate, true, but one that the Nazgûl had at one time chosen for himself. No one had forced him to accept one of Sauron’s rings and swear allegiance to the darkness in return for power and supposed eternal life.

“Very well,” Legolas answered softly. He picked the bowl back up, forcing the ranger to take another sip. “But you should not give him your fear either. Hate and despair are his chief weapons. He wants you to lose yourself to them so they will destroy your soul and then he can win. Faith and hope are what he cannot fathom and cannot stand up against. That is why and how we must resist him.”

Aragorn’s eyes fluttered shut and he breathed deeply as his body gave into its weariness.

“He cannot overcome hope.” Legolas spoke softly, talking to himself now. “And together we will make sure that hope is not lost.”

Setting the bowl down once more he gently cradled Aragorn’s head with his free hand. Soft humming filled the cell. The sweet, low tune filtered through the heating vents, carried on the warm currents of air, and the servants on the floor just above the prison heard a sound they had not imagined they would hear in Angmar – an elf singing a lullaby to warm his friend’s heart.
Legolas held Aragorn all through the night, but morning came too soon. Dawn brought Yrinvan back into their cell. The servant moved quieter than most men Legolas had ever observed, but it seemed as if all his movements were tinged with sorrow. The elf admitted to still feeling angry with anyone who would willingly serve the Witch King, but he knew that he of all people should have some understanding about what it meant to be the slave of a Nazgûl.

Yrinvan pressed his hand against Aragorn’s forehead, judging his temperature before he urged him to his feet. The slave did not allow the orcs that accompanied him to enter the cell this time.

“You must come,” Yrin said quietly.

Aragorn started to rise, but Legolas’ arms tightened around him. “He almost died last night; you cannot expect us to...”

Yrin straightened up. “It does not matter what I think or expect, don’t you understand?” his voice was flat, but there was a little bit of regret behind the words. “The Master has sent for you, you must come.”

Aragorn struggled to sit up. He didn’t want to go, but it was not a choice that any of them had to make.

Legolas tried not to react as badly today, but it was no easier than the day before when he and the ranger were separated, save that they had expected it this time. Again, Legolas was left to wait in the hall while Aragorn was taken into the dark study.

Yrin remained with the elf, letting the orcs go ahead with Aragorn.

When the doors closed behind the ranger, Legolas closed his eyes and let his head rest against his bound hands. Wasn’t it enough that he had been here once? Did they have to do it all over again? He bit the inside of his lip. The orcs were not with them this time, so he risked speaking to his
“What is going to happen today?” the elf asked quietly, trying to keep any bitterness out of his tone. “What will they do to him?”

“I don’t know,” Yrinvan admitted. “You must not worry about him so much. You need to worry more about yourself. The Master will send for you soon.”

“He is my friend,” the elf said with a slightly flinty tone.

Yrinvan looked at him long and hard. The elf didn’t understand the way things were here. “He is your weakness. And you are his.”

Aragorn found himself standing before the Nazgûl a second time. The experience was no more pleasant than the first. If anything, he was weaker now, his body worn down from his experience in the ice cell. Of course, that was exactly what the Witch King had intended.

The orcs pressed him to his knees, holding him in place as the Wraith considered his captive. “I trust you enjoyed your evening?” No one could say that the Nazgûl did not have a twisted sense of humor.

Aragorn closed his eyes. He gathered his strength. It was hard to find.

“I have had better,” the ranger admitted dryly. The orcs did not allow him to lift his head and he did not feel up to fighting them. So he stared straight ahead, watching the Nazgûl’s gloved hands. There was something almost evilly mesmerizing about the way the joints on his gauntlets flashed and clacked like fish scales in a dark lagoon.

A thin, silver rod rested in those hands. A short, narrow ribbon that might have been made of leather hung from the tip of the rod, falling down to dangle above the tops of the Nazgûl’s sharp-toed boots.
Something about it made Aragorn uneasy.

“Good. Then perhaps you will be in a mood to answer my questions honestly this time.” His hand came to rest heavily on the ranger’s shoulder.

Aragorn could not resist shuddering at the evil touch. The reaction obviously pleased the Witch King who emitted a low hiss of satisfaction. His grip tightened, causing the human to gasp sharply.

“We shall start with something simple,” the Wraith purred, driving his sharp thumb against the poisoned wound. He knew the ranger was already past time for more antidote, but he had no intention of giving him any more yet.

At an order from their master, the orcs holding Aragorn removed his outer jerkin and tunic.

“And the bandage too,” the Wraith instructed.

Aragorn shivered slightly from the cold in the room as Legolas’ carefully applied bandage was roughly peeled back from the semi-healed wound. The dressing clung to the injury and he winced as the orcs yanked it away. A small trickle of blood ran down his chest from the swollen injury. Glancing down he was disturbed to see that the blood was tainted black. His wound seemed to be visibly darkening in the presence of the Nazgûl. The pain of it throbbed like a living creature inside his body.

The Witch King looked down at the human. He turned the rod in his hands over slowly.

“I could take you into my world, mortal. I could pierce your heart and destroy everything you ever were, erase it and form you anew in the shadow... Perhaps I shall. But not yet... there is much I want to know about you first.” He circled Aragorn with deliberate steps.

“I promised to start with something simple, and so I shall. Who are you? What is your name?”

Aragorn’s gaze fixed on the stone wall across from him. He had been through this once before with the Wraith. “I told you years ago. My name is Strider, ranger of the north.”
The Witch King sized Aragorn’s chin, gripping it tightly in his gloved fingers and tipping it up to stare into his dark hood. “And I think you remember my response to your answer then, mortal,” he hissed. He unfurled the flexible end of the rod in his hands and dragged it slowly up the side of the ranger’s neck.

Aragorn’s face twisted in unexpected agony. There was more to the instrument than met the eye because the sheer, pulsing pain its mere touch imparted was staggering. The human gasped, closing his eyes until the rod was removed.

“That is not a proper name. I would know who your sire was,” the Nazgûl’s voice was toneless, but demanding nonetheless.

Aragorn gauged his next words carefully. He did not wish the Wraith to become too convinced he was hiding something about himself, but neither did he wish to give too much away.

“My parents perished when I was a child, I never knew them. I was fostered in Rivendell for a time under Lord Elrond’s care. The elves call me Estel. My own race calls me Strider.”

The Wraith considered this information. “You are a leader among your people?” he questioned.

Aragorn flinched when hesitation bought him a sharp snap across the back of his shoulders with the ribbon-end of the Nazgûl’s rod.

“Yes,” he grit out between his teeth, knowing there was no good denying what the Nazgûl could eventually find out through his own sources if he tried hard enough. “I am one of the captains of the northern Dûnedain.” The human downgraded his position a bit.

“The elf, who is he?” The Nazgûl was wary of how easy he was obtaining answers to his questions. Something inside him doubted their truthfulness. There was something about this man that was more than he presented himself. He was a wielder of power. The pupil of a Wizard perhaps? The Wraith had reason to believe that this human had been friendly with Gandalf the Grey... what had the Istar been teaching him? Why did Wizards and elves count this human among their number?

“Legolas is a wood-elf from Mirkwood. He is my friend,” the human answered warily. He dared not lie because he did not know how much the Wraith already knew, but neither would he give away anything harmful. He was very aware that the Dark One was testing him.
“Then answer me this, Dúnadan,” the Wraith pressed. “What were you and he doing in Mordor? What were you and he doing in the Barrow Downs disrupting my people and destroying their homes? These are the actions of a spy... but why? What do you hope to achieve? What are the elves and the Istari planning?”

Aragorn licked his lips. His head was spinning. He needed more antidote, it had been too long since the last dose. “I went to Mordor to save my friend, and the Barrow Downs were an accident. We are not spies and to my knowledge no one is planning anything.”

Three leisurely strokes from the Nazgûl’s excruciating instrument made Aragorn hunch forward against the hands of the orcs that held him captive. He hissed in pain. He hadn’t thought the Nazgûl would appreciate that answer. The ironic thing was it was the truth.

“You would have me believe...” The Wraith struck him sharply. “That it is *coincidence* that you have darkened my path so many times?” He struck the human again, this time drawing a thin line of blood.

“Say rather, extreme bad fortune,” Aragorn gasped through clenched teeth. The actual blows themselves were sharp and left small welts, but it was the strange, hot charge that crackled from the rod which made the contact unbearable.

“Your bad fortune, mortal, was the moment you decided to lie to me, for that is all I have heard from you,” the Nazgûl growled.

Aragorn’s fists balled tightly and he let his head drop forward as the Wraith punished his unsatisfactory answers with a cruel, thorough switching. Moving from back to front, the Nazgûl did not spare the ranger’s chest and stomach. He paused over the human’s slowly oozing wound. Very deliberately, he pushed the end of the rod into the jagged cut.

A ragged scream was torn from Aragorn’s throat, although he did not even remember opening his mouth. Dark electricity pulsed through him, altering the rhythm of his heartbeat and searing through every cell in his body. The Wraith twisted the rod cruelly, wringing another hoarse cry from his helpless captive. When he pulled back, Aragorn slumped forward limply, unable to even kneel on his own for a few moments.

The Nazgûl leaned in close to the trembling prisoner, close enough that Aragorn’s heaving breaths stirred the tattered edges of his cowl. “I think you will answer more truthfully after you have been better trained. I had hoped that yesterday might have taught you something and we could avoid all this... but if you do wish to be difficult, I can oblige.” A cruel amusement echoed in the evil being’s
Aragorn had only a moment for the ripples of terror to chase one another up his spine before the Wraith plied the rod to him again and rational thought was banished in favor of blinding agony.
There was no mistaking the sound of cries coming from beyond the closed door today. Yrin tried to calm the elf, but Legolas would not be pacified. He jerked and tugged against his bonds, nearly ripping the iron sconce he was bound to out of the wall.

Estel’s cries from the other room shredded the elf’s heart. He glared at Yrin because the human was the only one around upon whom he could vent his wrath.

“How can you do this?! How can you just stand there? Help him! Let me go,” the elf raged. He released a shower of dust upon them both as the sconce pulled a few more inches out of its moorings.

Yrin backed away a few paces. He was beginning to be alarmed about what would happen if the elf got loose. He was about to summon some of the orcs to help him when the dark door before them opened.

Legolas stopped struggling for a moment, battling the dread that oozed out of the room.

Yrinvan knew the summons for what it was and didn’t know if he should be relieved or apprehensive. He grabbed the elf’s wrists and gave him a small, firm shake.

“Do *not* give me any trouble,” he warned as he swiftly unbound the prince from the wall, escorting him towards the menacing gateway.

Every sense in the elf’s body screamed to run away from the darkness flowing from between the open doors. He knew it and he feared it more than almost anything. One thing kept his feet moving steadily forward: Aragorn was in there.

Once they were inside, the door shut behind them without being touched.

The elf forced his gait not to falter when he saw the Nazgûl standing in the center of the room. What did cause his blood to rise and his steps to halt, was the figure that lay at the Nazgûl’s feet.
Aragorn lie curled on his side, facing away from Legolas. His chest was heaving and his whole body trembled. His hands were bound in front of him with a thick twist of rope. His exposed flesh was covered in a multitude of crisscrossing red lines.

Legolas’ heart raged at seeing his friend like this and he tried to rush forward, only to be held back by Yrin’s iron grip on his upper arms.

The Nazgûl looked from Aragorn’s shaking form to the elf that had been brought to him. He shook out the flail end of his rod, now stained dully with the ranger’s blood. “Your friend does not know how to answer questions, elf. Do you, I wonder?”

Legolas was silent, his attention focused on Aragorn. He could really only see the man’s back, but the ranger looked bad. Very bad.

The Wraith kicked the ranger roughly, rolling Aragorn over so that he was facing Legolas. With a start, Legolas was caught by his friend’s hurting gaze. Aragorn’s eyes, although dulled by overwhelming pain, were almost fever-bright with awareness. They locked onto Legolas like a lifeline and the elf felt his throat swell shut. The ranger’s shoulder wound was bleeding freely. The black, poisoned blood staining his friend’s pale skin turned the elf’s stomach.

“I have been trying to figure out what you two are hiding. Why is it that this man, this mortal ranger inspires the loyalty of elves and wizards? Either he holds a great secret, or you are all part of some conspiracy against my Master. Do you wish to answer this riddle for me, elf? Either for your sake or his?” the Nazgûl inquired, almost conversationally.

Legolas’ lips tightened as they always did when he was upset. “I find it useless to answer questions when the person asking them will never be satisfied,” he replied bluntly. “I am certain Strider told you everything there was to tell. If you are not satisfied, I can add nothing more.” The elf did not know what his friend had said and could not risk contradicting the human. They should have worked their stories out ahead of time, but the thought came too late to help them now.

The Nazgûl put his foot on Aragorn’s side, holding him to the floor as he pressed his cruel wand against the flat of the ranger’s stomach.

Aragorn cried out and turned his head harder against the stone floor. Crushing the side of his face against the clammy stones he clenched his eyes closed. He had no strength reserves left with which to fight the pain. His body was worn down and exhausted.
“What are you hiding, ranger?” the Nazgûl questioned, his voice showing how much he enjoyed what he was doing. “If you won’t tell me, perhaps your friend will, for your sake.”

Aragorn’s back arched and he whimpered in intense agony. He twisted helplessly on the floor as the cruel rod struck him again and again.

“Stop it!” Legolas jerked out of Yrinvan’s grip on his arms. The slave scrabbled desperately to hold him, but he was no match for the elf. Throwing himself forward, Legolas dropped to his knees, wrapping his body protectively around Aragorn’s shuddering frame. “Leave him be!”

The Witch King glowered, both irritated and amused. He jabbed the blunt tip of his rod between Legolas’ shoulder blades. The elf cried out into Aragorn’s hair, gripping his friend’s shoulders tightly as pulsing agony swept through his being. The Nazgûl kept the wicked prod in place, turning it in a slow circle and making the elf cry out helplessly as he punished the prince for interrupting him.

When the Wraith finally pulled it away, Legolas slumped forward against his friend’s body, trembling lightly. Valar, was this what Aragorn had been enduring all this time? The very thought made the elf want to weep. He should have been here.

“What, and let you take his place? Is that what you want? Your valiant concern will get you nowhere with me, elf,” the Nazgûl warned darkly. “You forget how well I know you. Your own pain means nothing to you. But I will crush him slowly before your eyes and we’ll see which of you breaks first.”

Aragorn felt Legolas’ body tensing defiantly against his own. The ranger realized with sinking certainty that the elf was determined to steer the Nazgûl’s attention away from the human and focus it upon himself. His friend had done it for him before, in other situations, but the ranger could not allow it now. The price Legolas usually paid for such action was far too heavy. Aragorn’s pain-fogged eyes sought his friend’s face in agonized concern. He was too gone, his system too overloaded from the Wraith’s wicked torture to even speak, but his eyes begged his friend not to get in the way, not to put himself between the Nazgûl’s wrath and its intended victim.

That was one plea Legolas could not honor. The elf panted raggedly for breath, still reeling. “Leave him be,” Legolas gasped out after a moment, when his voice came back to him. “You think you know everything, but you are a fool! He is not the one who’s hiding something from you.”

“And you are, my rebellious little slave?” The Wraith purred, his voice suggesting that that was not a surprise.
“Yes,” Legolas nodded, straightening up a little. Aragorn tried to shake his head, his eyes widening as he vehemently protested what his friend was about to do. The elf ignored him.

“You ask who he is, but you miss the point. Why not ask who I am? Or do you suppose because you owned my body for a time that you know me? You do not. I am Legolas Greenleaf, son of Thranduil, Elvenking of Greenwood the Great,” Legolas confessed his own identity without reservation. Of the two of them, he had less to lose from a revelation of royalty. “If my friend is hiding anything, he was doing so on my behalf.”

Aragorn’s heart sank. Dol Guldur had long been attempting to swallow Mirkwood whole. The wood-elves and their allies were the only reason the Wraiths and other evil things that dwelt there had not yet succeeded in making another Mordor out of the once fair woods. The knowledge that one of the most deadly servants of darkness now held the prince of those wood-elves in his clutches was no small thing.

The Witch King chuckled darkly. “Well my little princeling, you *have* been holding out on me... but you think I did not already know that? I know so much more than you think... but I am glad to hear it from you.”

Legolas couldn’t tell if the dark creature was telling the truth, or lying to manipulate their fear of him, but it barely mattered. Legolas knew the Wraith would try to use him against his people, but he also knew that he would die before he would betray them. His father loved him and would bargain for his life if he could, but he was a King first and foremost. No matter how much it would hurt Thranduil, Legolas knew his father would choose the good of his people over the life of his son if it had to come down to that kind of choice. That knowledge relieved the Prince, who would have had it no other way.

The Wraith circled them. “But the question still remains... who is *he*?”

“He told you,” Legolas snapped slightly, irritated by the constant return to that question. “He is Strider, one of the Dunědain.”

The Wraith shook his shrouded head. The answer did not please him. “Yes, yes, so he has said over and over. So you both told me many years ago. Then, I believed you, but now... No. I am certain that is what he is... but it is not *all* he is. The fire in his eyes has grown. I cannot get into his mind and he refuses to fade... you cannot tell me he is merely another mortal, even a normal west-man. What is Imladris up to, breeding mortal elves? What do they hope to prove? For what mission have they molded him? Who or what is he?” the dark being inquired again, stroking the tip of his rod down Legolas’ spine. The prince’s clothing did nothing to dull the pain of the contact.
The elf could not muffle his gasping cry as he hunched sharply forward, clinging tighter to Aragorn’s body.

“What are you both so desperate to hide from me?” the Nazgûl demanded, rotating the cruel instrument down around Legolas’ ribs and then back up the elf’s back, pressing it hard against the side of his neck. “Who is he, that a prince of the Eldar would face torment and death to protect him?”

Legolas almost screamed, but didn’t. A white-hot haze of pain enveloped his consciousness and for a few moments he knew nothing else but the searing agony pulsing from the touch of the Wraith’s rod.

Legolas sobbed for breath when he was finally released. All his senses were screeching and he could see nothing, hear nothing and feel nothing but the searing aftershocks of the Nazgûl’s torture. The Wraith’s soft voice hissed through the fog of his agony, seductive and soft this time. “Who is he?”

“He is my brother,” Legolas gasped out hoarsely, picking his head up with difficulty so he could glare at the Witch King. Not even the evil one could deny the fire of honesty in the elf’s burning gaze.

The Nazgûl hissed in anger. The elf seemed to be speaking the truth, but it was not possible. “Do not take me for a fool. This human is no relation of yours.”

Legolas smiled defiantly. “Once again, you are wrong.” He clasped his left hand with Aragorn’s right, letting the almost faded scars on their palms press together before pulling them apart to show the Wraith. “His blood runs in my veins, and mine in his.”

The Witch King’s aura darkened. He did not like the way the elf challenged him. “I will break him,” he promised.

Legolas’ eyes sparked and crackled with an inner flame. “Never,” he said with certainty. He knew his friend would die before allowing darkness to devour him.

At a nod from the Witch King, Yrinvan took Legolas by the shoulders and pulled him away from Aragorn. The elf reacted violently. Yrin fought to hold him for a moment before he was knocked
back sprawling. A second later the prince’s struggle was sharply checked by a jolt of burning pain that froze him in place as the Nazgûl’s rod connected with the back of his head and neck.

As the yellow haze before his eyes cleared, the elf found himself being snapped firmly into a set of wall-mounted manacles. Yrin would not meet his eyes as he clicked the cuffs in place. The servant was only doing his job. That didn’t mean he liked what it entailed.

Yrinvan flinched, but did not seem surprised when the Nazgûl snapped the blistering thong on the top of his rod across the servant’s shoulders, delivering a blinding shock of pain even through his clothes. The servant endured several more such blows without sound or movement before the Nazgûl shoved him to the side. “Control the prisoners, idiot!”

“No...” The Nazgûl turned back to Aragorn. “I give you another chance to speak the truth to me. If you chose to ignore it, I will rescind that opportunity until after your next lesson.”

Aragorn turned his face to the floor and closed his eyes. He would tell the Nazgûl nothing. His fate would not lighten if the Wraith learned the true answer to his puzzle. It could only get worse. The ranger had no desire for a personal meeting with Sauron himself. He was sure the Witch King would turn him over if he knew he held the last Heir of Isildur.

“Very well.” The Nazgûl almost sounded pleased. It was enjoyable to face a challenge. His slaves would perish in terror at the mere hint of their Master’s displeasure. Sometimes he tormented them to amuse himself, but they presented him no obstacles and there was no sport in such pastimes. The ranger and the elf were a different story.

Dragging Aragorn to his knees again by a hand in the ranger’s hair, the Wraith shoved him into the arms of the waiting orcs. Striding over to one of the tables, the Nazgûl sorted through the various wicked looking items strewn across the top. When he found what he sought, he returned to his waiting prisoner.

“The refusal to speak gives you a control of this situation, Ranger, is that what you think?” he inquired casually. “Many think so. They believe silence is their weapon...” The Nazgûl dangled a strange looking contraption of leather straps and rusted buckles from his right hand. Something that resembled a medium-sized pear was visible among the other trappings. “But they are wrong. It is my weapon. When you are silent, you are mine. When you are silent you are offering me nothing
that will ease your torment.”

Before Aragorn realized what the Wraith was up to, the Nazgûl put one hand on the back of the ranger’s head and forced the hard pear into the human’s mouth.

The oddly shaped ball was covered with leather, but seemed to be fashioned out of wood or metal underneath because there was no give to it as it was forced between the human’s jaws. Aragorn gagged and tried to spit the intrusion back out, but the Nazgûl’s hand clamped roughly on his chin, holding the gag in place as he pushed the straps behind the human’s head and pulled them tight.

The ranger tossed his head, trying to dislodge the gag, but it was very secure. One end of the pear was connected to a thick leather strap that covered Aragorn’s lips and wrapped around his head, fastening in the back. The pear was too large to fit comfortably in the ranger’s mouth and his jaw protested being stretched so hard. He gagged again, almost throwing up when the wicked device pressed too deeply into his throat. He could make no sound around the gag; he could barely breathe around it. His eyes watered and stung. He couldn’t swallow and ended up bruising the roof of his mouth painfully when he tried. Panic made his heart race.

“You see?” the Nazgûl patted Aragorn’s head as if the ranger were a disobedient dog he was training. “Silence is now my weapon. You can not make a sound, not even to scream, until I release you. You couldn’t stop me now even if you would.”

The Wraith pulled a long, black hood down over the human’s head, covering Aragorn’s face. The ranger was engulfed in complete darkness. The air in the hood quickly became stuffy, making breathing around the gag even more difficult. Now mute and blind, the ranger was dragged to his feet and made to stand in the center of the room.

Legolas watched with apprehension as Aragorn’s bound hands were pulled over his head. A large hook on a chain dangled from the ceiling. The orcs forced it between Aragorn’s wrists, snagging the ropes. Several of the creatures grabbed the other end of the chain and pulled. The chain slid around the beam it was slung over with a groan of protest, lifting the ranger off his feet.

Aragorn moaned softly around the gag as his wounded shoulder was strained. The pressure on his lungs did not help his breathing.

“Now,” the Nazgûl’s voice spoke to the ranger from beyond the darkness confining him. “You are mine. I control all your senses, and I choose to allow you only one...” He ran the tip of his rod along the strong curve of the ranger’s spine. “Pain.”
Aragorn jerked, nearly choking himself when he bit down too hard on the gag in his mouth. He dangled helplessly in a vacuum, devoid of light, speech and sound. He could do nothing but feel the blazing waves of agony sweeping through him. The hood and gag could not account for his entire sense of isolation. Some part of his mind that was still clear enough to think rationally knew the Nazgûl was clouding his perceptions again.

The Wraith continued running the prod up and down the human’s spine until everyone in the room could hear the soft, strangled cries half trapped behind the mask and gag.

“Strider!” Legolas cried out his friend’s name, twisting violently in his bonds as he was forced to watch the cruel scene playing out before him. Aragorn’s body dangled from the ceiling, tensing and arching under the Nazgûl’s relentless torture. The elf could feel the dark cloud emanating from the Wraith. It was not directed at him, but it still made him shudder. It burned his heart to know that that malevolent darkness was being focused upon his friend.

Aragorn did not seem to be able to hear the elf. The only voice he could hear in the darkness was that of the Nazgûl, constantly whispering in his ears. The words became almost as much a torment as the pain wracking his body. He wanted to scream, to get away... but he could not make a sound. His throat constricted and his heart raced. In desperation, he tried to scream Legolas’ name around the gag.

The word came out an indistinguishable whisper, but the elf tensed in his bonds. He recognized the syllables of his name, even if the ranger could not form the exact word.

“I’m here! Estel, I’m here!” Legolas replied, his heart aching. He twisted his wrists harder, but to no avail.

Aragorn did not respond, it sounded as if he were still trying to choke Legolas’ name over and over, although it was quickly turning into incoherent sobs and gasps.

The Nazgûl turned towards Legolas for a moment, and the elf could swear the creature was smirking, even though such a thing was impossible to see. “He can’t hear you elf. He’s in my world and nothing and nobody can reach him.”

The Wraith turned back to his work, snapping the supple tip of his rod under the ranger’s chin. Aragorn’s head jerked back, but the Nazgûl did not let him escape, delivering another blow, this one lower down across the man’s collarbones.
“You are alone,” the Nazgûl hissed in the ranger’s ear as the man’s head fell forward, his chest heaving. “You are alone in the dark, and you are mine.”

Legolas’ eyes blazed. “Pêd ú-thenid! He lies!” The elf’s voice was just under a shout. “Lasto beth-nín, Estel. Pêd ú-thenid! Le ú-erui! Im sí. Im sí! Listen to me, Estel. He lies! You are not alone! I am here. I am here!”

The elvish words seemed to penetrate the darkness that Aragorn was trapped inside. He turned his head in Legolas’ direction, latching tightly onto the elf’s presence.

The Nazgûl’s aura darkened as he whirled around to face the elf. “Silence!” he thundered in his own dark tongue. He was incensed at having anyone interfere with his work. The elf’s bond with the human was strong, but he would tolerate no interruptions.

“You will not speak that tongue again in my presence!” his voice was a deadly hiss.

Legolas flinched slightly at the assault of the Black Speech on his ears, but took a small amount of satisfaction in knowing that the Nazgûl found his own Elvish words nearly as repugnant.

The Nazgûl turned back to the ranger, and Aragorn whimpered softly, feeling the return of the dark presence crush down upon him.

“Im innas na dínen! I will not be silent!” Legolas’ eyes snapped fire. “Ú-caro lasta, Estel! Do not listen to him, Estel!”

The Nazgûl turned quickly, closing the distance between them in a few paces. “If you cannot hold your tongue, Slave, I will silence it for you,” he promised. His glare turned and fell upon Yrinvan who almost flinched. “Bring me a bridle,” the Wraith commanded.

Yrinvan obeyed, knowing what his Master desired. He repressed a swell of disgust as he picked up an intricate collection of metal and leather from the same table the Nazgûl had gone to before. He hated being part of proceedings like these.

The Witch King trapped Legolas’ chin in hand, glaring into the elf’s steely blue eyes. “Have you
ever seen the way a rebellious horse is broken, elf? His handlers will bridle him, to accustom him to the bit. If he refuses to submit, they will deny him food and water until the fire has gone out of his eyes.”

Legolas restrained a small shudder. He understood what the Nazgûl meant to do to him.

The Wraith took the bridle from Yrin and handed it to the orcs standing beside him. “Muzzle the elf,” he commanded. It was an order they were only too happy to obey.

Legolas pulled back, trying to twist his head away as the evil, gnarled fingers grabbed at him. The chains left him nowhere to escape and the orcs pinned him brutally against the wall. Trapping his head, they forced the leather straps of the contraption over his head. Thick fasteners were tightened around his forehead. They pried his jaws open with grasping, pinching claws and a sharp, barbed bit was shoved between his lips. Legolas bucked and fought them, but they pressed the device further into his mouth. It clanked painfully against his teeth as he thrashed. Finally it fell into place. The thick, barbed bar pressed down painfully against his tongue, trapping it to the bottom of his mouth. The snaffle and horizontal bars leading away from the bit dug deeply into the corners of the elf’s mouth as they curved out to join the leather cheek straps. The cheek straps connected to the browband and to another band running behind the back of the elf’s neck via a series of buckles. The orcs fastened the last clasp behind the elf’s head and cinched the buckles resting against his cheeks tight, firmly trapping Legolas into the despicable harness.

When they released the prince he tossed his head from side to side, very much like a wild stallion trying to shake off the stinging bridle placed upon him. He attempted to speak, but found that he could not. The bar in his mouth prevented him from forming words and gouged his tongue sharply when he tried.

The mute frustration and hint of shame in the proud elf’s glare when he finally had to drop his head and admitted defeat made the Nazgûl laugh. Taking hold of the left cheek strap he gave the prince’s head a vicious shake, making the bit bang against Legolas’ teeth and cut the inside of his mouth ruthlessly.

The prince tried hard not to let the pain show in his face; he already felt more than adequately humiliated. He attempted to swallow the blood in his mouth, but the bridle did not allow him to fully close his lips or jaw. It was a little gesture, but his sheer helplessness to do even such a small, natural motion, ate at the pit of his stomach. One of the orcs took the opportunity to punch the elf in the gut and Legolas doubled forward. When he came back up again, bright trails of crimson blood snaked down the sides of his chin, following the line of the bars and straps that were digging harshly into his flesh.

This amused the Nazgûl greatly. He patted the elf’s cheek. “I will have uses for you later, Slave.”
For now, my business is with your friend.”

Legolas watched in agonized, enforced silence as the Nazgûl stalked back to where Aragorn dangled. The ranger shifted anxiously in his bonds, trying weakly to shake the hood off his head so he could see what was happening.

Aragorn was confused, disorientated. When the Nazgûl’s attention turned on Legolas he was able to hear what was going on, but he wished he could see as well as hear. What he could hear told him that Legolas was in trouble. The satisfied growl of orcs sent shivers down the human’s aching spine. Whatever had been done to take Legolas’ voice away was doubtless no less brutal than what had been done to him and he feared for his friend.

When he felt the Nazgûl’s hands brush his back his whole body cried out for escape. He did not know how much more of this he could take. The Wraith did not speak to him, but jabbed his rod between the human’s shoulder blades. Behind the layers of restrictions, Aragorn sobbed.
The long hours of torture blurred together after a while. Aragorn did not remember losing consciousness. He did not remember being taken down and brought back to their cell. When he awoke he did not know where he was and all he was aware of was his pounding headache. For half a wonderful moment, he thought he was home and half expected Elrond or one of his brothers to come check on him presently, to see if he was feeling better. Then he opened his eyes and reality crashed down upon him once more.

His blurry eyes struggled to bring the dim room into focus. The first thing he could see was Legolas’ faintly luminous form across the room from him. The elf was sitting against the wall. Manacles on short tethers of chain held Legolas’ arm’s up a little above his head. A thick iron collar around his neck, also tethered to the wall behind him, provided a third point of restraint. Aragorn saw for the first time the ugly bridle that still marred the elf’s fair face. The cruel, bulky harness was crusted with blood where it dug into the prince’s skin and looked terribly out of place upon the fluid lines of Legolas’ body.

The prince’s eyes were closed, but he must have only been conserving his strength because, when the faint sounds of Aragorn stirring reached his ears, his eyelids lifted. Clear blue orbs looked out from under his dark lashes, fixing the ranger in their gaze. It looked as if the elf wanted to speak, but of course he could not.

Aragorn automatically tried to go to his friend’s side, but found he too was restrained. His own hands were fixed to the wall above his head and he realized the weight upon his shoulders was an iron collar similar to the one around Legolas’ neck. It seemed that their days of freedom in the cell were over for the time being. The Nazgûl was not pleased with them.

“Legolas?” the ranger rasped his friend’s name and was momentarily surprised that he could. He swallowed raggedly, feeling how sore his mouth and throat were, both from the gag and, more shamefully, from his own screams. A wave of dizzy weakness made the human’s vision waver. The Nazgûl’s long torment had taken its toll on his strength.

Legolas inclined his head towards his friend. His large, sad, blue eyes spoke the concern that his muzzled tongue was not allowed to voice. The prince made a soft, murmuring sound but had to stop and close his eyes again for a moment. His tongue was cut and swollen. His whole mouth felt afire from dehydration and the chafing of the cruel bit.

Aragorn’s face clouded with pain, this time for his friend rather than himself. Unlike true horse bridles, there were no guard-rings to keep the snaffle from pinching and cutting the corners of the elf’s delicate mouth. Aragorn could barely stand to look at Legolas’ face. The ranger hadn’t realized he had looked away until he felt himself compelled to look back once more. Legolas’ eyes were
boring into him, intense in their concern.

“I’m fine,” the human whispered hoarsely, knowing his friend’s unspoken question.

Legolas snorted softly.

“All right, so I have been better,” Aragorn admitted with a weak attempt at a smile. He wanted to ask if Legolas were all right, but aside from it being a stupid question there was no way the elf could answer him.

Footsteps in the hall heralded a visitor even before the door to their cell scraped quietly open. Yrin paused in the doorway for a moment before he entered. Aragorn could see the evil glint of orc eyes in the hall peering in through the opening. It was a small mercy that the dark creatures remained outside and only the human entered the room.

Yrinvan set the tray he carried on the floor and unlocked one of Aragorn’s manacles, freeing his right arm. He placed a cup in the ranger’s free hand and pushed it towards the man’s lips. “The Master allows you a little more antidote. Drink.”

Aragorn did drink, ignoring the bitter taste of the medicine. He knew by now to be grateful for all he could get. Not having it was excruciating. Yrin gave him a mug of soup, some bread and water to wash the potion down. When the ranger finished, the servant locked his arm back into the wall restraints.

Gathering up his tray, the man prepared to leave.


A brief look of sorrow and perhaps even guilt flitted quickly across Yrinvan’s face.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I am not allowed to give him anything. Those are my orders.” His gaze flickered to the orcs in the hall. The Nazgûl trusted him with his household and the orcs obeyed the human over them, but they also hated him and would gladly report any disobedience directly to the Witch King. Yrin walked a very dangerous tightrope.
“But...” Aragorn began to protest.

Yrin shook his head decidedly, forestalling any argument. “I’m sorry. I truly am,” he said before leaving and shutting the door behind him.

Aragorn leaned his head back against the wall. “Legolas, I’m sorry...” he murmured his own apology, his eyes seeking those of his friend. He felt guilty having eaten and drunk when the elf was being forced to go without.

Legolas shook his head quickly, his brows furrowing. He did not want Aragorn feeling sorry for him. All things considered he was better off than the human. He wasn’t poisoned and he wasn’t the one who had been tortured by a Nazgûl for the past few hours. Legolas was just glad that Yrin had been allowed to see to Aragorn. He was not worried about himself. He only wished he could tell that to the ranger.

Aragorn’s head was spinning and he felt as if he had been slow roasted over a hot fire. Almost every inch of his skin was on fire. Last night he had been frozen, today he had been burned; the contrast was too much for him. The Nazgûl’s long ministrations had left him hypersensitive and the very air itself was painful.

Suddenly he felt a faint tug on his consciousness. A moment later he recognized Legolas’ presence. His eyes flew open, expecting to somehow see the elf next to him.

Of course Legolas was still chained to the opposite wall, but his eyes were fixed intently on the ranger.

Aragorn felt it again, the faint but distinctive feel of Legolas’ consciousness brushing his. It was a reassuring touch and he relaxed slightly as unconsciousness slowly claimed him once more.

Legolas watched his friend’s body slump back against the wall again, the ranger’s head falling to his chest. Aragorn was worn out. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, so was Legolas. The elf automatically tried to lick his parched lips. Of course he couldn’t. Legolas sighed and leaned his own head back against the wall. He had a nasty suspicion that their stay in Angmar was only going to be getting worse.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
Night had fallen hours ago and the castle slept. The orcs prowl the lower levels, keeping the hallways clear of servants. The nights were theirs. They had free roam of Angmar when the darkness settled in. They had been restricted from the servant’s quarters and the cells, but otherwise were free to roam at will. They did not require the aid of glow globes or light to see their way in the dark. They belonged to the night; they were most comfortable there. A group of four shuffled down the stone passage outside the cell that housed Aragorn and Legolas. They didn’t bother with the captives. They had been told to leave them alone. The orcs were talking amongst themselves, joking about a cruelty they had been privileged to hand down earlier in the day. Such things amused them. They did not amuse the one who hid in the shadows of an alcove in the passage not fifty feet from the newcomers’ cell.

Ahnna waited until the sounds of the orcs had diminished. Yrin would be terribly angry with her when he found out where she had been. Right now, she didn’t care. She wasn’t too pleased with him either.

She had heard disturbing things about the two newcomers. Her position and duties fell with the kitchen staff or cleaning crews. She had nothing to do with prisoners and the Nazgûl’s affairs, as her husband did. She had learned a long time ago not to ask Yrin about what he did when they were apart, or what he had seen when he was with the Nazgûl. Yrin never would tell her and she could see it pained him when she asked. Yet there was gossip, even here in Angmar, and rumors trickled down to the women. They were fully aware of the cruel nature of the one they served and she had heard whispered tales about what the Nazgûl was doing with the elf and the ranger.

Breaking her own rule and asking Yrin for the truth behind the rumors had gained her nothing except an irritable husband. So she had taken it upon herself to find out how they fared. Yrin was dispensing antidote to the slaves tonight and would be back late, giving her plenty of time to sneak into the cells unnoticed.

Quietly, she crept to the cell door and eased it open. She hardly made a sound as she gazed into the small room. The tiny lamp they were afforded barely lit the interior.

Alerted by the small sounds, Legolas blinked and turned towards the cracked door. His luminescence cast a pale blue light gently around him. It reflected dimly upon the cruel bit that protruded from the edges of his mouth.

“Óh, ḥîr nín,” Ahnna whispered in horror. It broke her heart to see the elf in this state. He reminded her of the others, so long ago. She could still remember their fair faces and musical voices. The way they had laughed and humored the little human child in their midst. Seeing one of them like this felt like having that precious part of her childhood desecrated. She had thought there were some things
in the world that the evil which had taken her life away could never touch. She had been wrong.

Legolas recognized the woman as Yrin’s wife. He looked away in shame. He knew what he must look like. Her words were gentle and filled with pain, but he could not stand her pity.

Seeing the elf’s torment, she moved farther into the room. Bowing low and touching her hand to her heart she swept it out before her in the formal greeting of the elves. Quietly she continued speaking, “Sīdh hîr nîn, sin ú-innas brona an-uir. Gwestan. Peace, my lord, it will not last forever. I promise.”

The elf’s blue eyes latched onto her, his heart soothed momentarily by the sounds of the grey tongue. As it had been the first time, her speech was somewhat slow and halting, but she had obviously had a very good grip on the language once. The way she spoke was like a school girl reciting a carefully practiced phrase. The small question in her tone was asking if she got it right.

Legolas would have smiled if he were able.

The soothing speech woke Aragorn. His chains rattled against the stone wall behind him as he shifted and turned toward Legolas.

“Legolas?” Aragorn called groggily to the elf. “Is that you?”

Startled, Ahnna pressed into the corner of the small room. Aragorn saw the shifting movement and shied away from it, fearing the shadow that he could not identify.

“Who are you?” the ranger questioned fearfully.

Before she could answer, their attention was drawn to the elf as Legolas kicked out at Aragorn, trying to silence the man. Understanding quickly what the elf wanted, the man closed his eyes and rested his chin on his chest as though he was sleeping. He slowed his breathing and relaxed in the manacles.

The door scraped open and two orcs leaned in, glancing between the elf and the ranger. Legolas had turned his head away from the door as he was want to do and feigned sleep. The orcs often came and looked in on the prisoners. They were not allowed into the cell but that did not prevent them from verbally tormenting the captives often. Tonight they simply glanced inside. Grunting in satisfaction, the door was pulled shut, revealing once more the form of the small woman cringing
behind it in the corner.

Ahna glanced fearfully at the door and crept back to the threshold, testing the handle to make sure the orcs had not locked it. It wasn’t common for them to lock the door when the prisoners were in shackles but it wasn’t unheard of either. Fortunately, they had not. Slipping the thick door silently open the woman pressed back into the hallway with one last look in at the elf.

“Forgive us,” she whispered and then disappeared. Stealing stealthily out of the lower level she headed for the servants quarters. As she climbed the back steps up to the common space her ire rose steadily.

“Who was that?” Aragorn questioned softly once the woman had left. He had been unconscious when Legolas met the woman before and did not know she was Yrin’s wife. He did not expect an answer from the muzzled elf, but his friend was watching him closely.

Was that hope in the elf’s eyes? He had barely heard the woman say something about ‘not lasting forever’. Had she been speaking of their captivity? He wanted to believe she was. At the very least, it seemed they had more sympathizers to their cause. That was always good.

Aragorn leaned his head against his arm and sighed. He wished Legolas could talk to him. He wanted to hear the elf’s voice.

“You are going to have a lot of explaining to do when that thing comes out,” the human teased quietly.

Legolas tried to smile around the bridle but was unsuccessful. Instead he simply nodded. No one was looking forward to getting rid of the cruel harness more than he was.

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When Ahnna reached the servants’ level and stepped inside the open living space, a shadow detached from the wall on her right and stepped into her path. Yrin towered over his wife, his arms crossed over his chest and his lips pressed into a tight, thin line. The small woman started, but recovered quickly and glared up at her husband. The fire in her eyes matched his and her hands moved to rest on her hips.
“Woman, where were you?” Yrinvan questioned Ahnna angrily.

“Where you should have been,” she replied hotly. “You did not tell me that they had been so...” her voice trailed off. Both the elf and the ranger had obviously been seriously abused. “You knew, didn’t you? Did you do any of that?” Her voice rose slightly and Yrin grabbed her arm, dragging her into the semi-privacy of the servants kitchen.

“Shh! You had no business going down there,” the man hissed. “You do not have permission to be on those levels!”

He didn’t answer her question. He never answered her questions. Ahnna regretted having asked it in the first place. She knew better than to say things like that. It was just that sometimes she couldn’t reconcile the caring man she loved with the heartless role she knew he had to shoulder.

“Have you seen what the master has done to that elf?” The woman demanded. She knew he had.

“Ahnna, you could have been found out. Do you know what would have happened to you?” Yrin tried to use logic on the woman, knowing full well that she was beyond listening to him. He had seen that look in her eyes before. He tried to soften his voice in an attempt to placate her as her frown deepened.

“He is an eldar, Yrinvan Tormiad!”

The man cringed at the use of his full name. Ahnna was not going to listen to his reason. He understood her fascination with the memories of light and beauty she associated with elves. There was nothing light or beautiful about this place, and the memories were special to her. Right now however, he was not in the mood for her elf fixation. Turning away from the woman he paced to the far end of the kitchen, running his hands through his short, graying hair. He hated his job, his life, this place and right now most of all he hated the one who had caused this conflict between them – his master.

“He looked bad, Yrin. There’s no way he can eat around that thing. You carried only one plate out of the kitchen earlier, I saw you. When was the last time he was given food or water?” The woman pressed her husband. She didn’t follow him as he walked away, but kept talking. “Why is the Master doing this to them? What have they done to him that he wishes to destroy them?”

“The Master doesn’t want either of them dead,” Yrin finally relented. He didn’t discuss his work
with his wife, but he could tell there would be no living with her now unless he gave her some answers. “He thinks they are spies or something worse. He wants to question them. The elf made him angry. He wouldn’t... He wouldn’t obey and now the Master intends to break him,” the man’s voice was softly. His back was still turned to his wife and he closed his eyes tightly as images of what he had witnessed in the Nazgûl’s chambers earlier came to his mind. He carried too many memories like that. Sometimes he found it hard to sleep at night.

“Break him?” Ahnna repeated incredulously, “Do you know what happens to an elf when you break them? They die! Yrin you have to...”

The head servant rounded on Ahnna. He was sick of her acting like she was some kind of authority on elves. He understood her concern, but what did she want from him?

“To what? What would you have me do?! What Ahnna? Tell the Master that I think he’s making a mistake and he should just let them go? I’m sure that would go over very well. Maybe I should give you to the Nazgûl in place of the elf, or perhaps Mahdi or Larnis? How about Tinald, maybe I’ll just throw him to the Wraith instead!” His voice rose as he lashed his frustration out at the only person available.

“Lower your voice, Yrinvan,” Ahnna cautioned, glancing around them worriedly. She walked around the island station to her husband’s side and glanced up into the dark brown eyes that frowned down at her. “I understand the situation. I just... I would that there was something we could do. I don’t know why, but I feel differently about these two than any of the others we have seen come through. We can’t let them die.”

Yrin leaned back against the counter behind him, closing his eyes.

“And...?”

“And what? Everyone who comes in here begs for his life or the life of his family. Nothing makes them any different from the rest and few of them are alive today. Their promises are empty, desperate attempts to escape. Can you blame them? They would promise the world if I would let them go. But I *can’t*.” He opened his eyes and stared down at the green orbs that held his gaze.
Gently touching her husband’s arm with a small hand, Ahnna nodded. “Of course not. But, Yrin, you should know that if the elf said the man is a healer, then he *is*. The Eldar are not given to lying.” Her voice was a mere whisper. “I’m not asking you to do anything stupid. The last thing I want is for you to get yourself killed. Just... help them, for me. I know you have a heart, husband, does it not still ache when you see your kindred in pain?”

“He is not my kindred,” Yrin spoke the lame excuse knowing it was unacceptable.

“He is a living being, a creature of light. He is your kin as surely as Tinald is. He does not deserve to be tormented, nor does his friend,” Ahnna pleaded.

“Does anyone? Yet that doesn’t stop it, Ahnna. Wishing does not make it so - neither does dreaming. And neither does getting oneself killed,” the man’s voice was hushed. His tone was sad and resigned. With a sigh, Yrin turned Ahnna towards the door and pushed her out ahead of him. He handed her a vial of antidote and encouraged her to drink. When she was done he re-pocketed the tiny glass container.

“I’ll see what I can do, all right? I can make you no promises, you know that,” he warned her as they moved into the common area and headed to their small, door-less sleeping room. His children were snuggled together under a heavy blanket lying on top of the thermal vent opening.

Larnis was small for ten years of age, and Mahdi was big for three. The older boy held his little sister protectively in his arms, his chin resting upon her curly head. They were born slaves, like Yrin had been. Ahnna remembered times of light and life in a world so far removed from here that it seemed a fairy land. Yrinvan had no such memories, no real idea what freedom meant beyond what his wife had told him and what his heart secretly craved. He had not been born in Angmar, but his parents had already been slaves when they were brought here. Everyone wants to give something better to their children, but Yrin knew they would be lucky if they lived long enough to inherit even his sorry lot here.

He let his hand skim lightly over his children’s heads. They slept soundly tonight. They always did after medicine doses. It seemed to affect the young ones that way. They were so little, so defenseless, and yet already they were addicts, dependent upon the Wraith’s brew to keep them alive. It made Yrin’s numb heart ache.

Lying down beside his wife in the darkness, he stared into her eyes, wondering how he could risk his family for the two strangers. When he returned the smile Ahnna laid on him, he wondered how he couldn’t. She was right; his heart had begun to die in this place. Perhaps the elf had told the truth, but was it worth the risk? He was not sure, and despite what his wife said, he was not yet ready to trust.
Holding Ahnna closely to him, he thought long into the night. Every day his walk became harder. Every day there was more to consider and greater fears to overcome. He wondered idly how long he would have the strength to keep facing them.

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Aragorn came to fear footsteps in the hall. More often than not they preceded the Witch King. Almost daily now, Aragorn was dragged from their cell for another session with the Nazgûl. After that first time, Legolas was usually not allowed to be present. The elf’s bridle had not yet been removed, nor had the restriction on his eating and drinking been lifted. The Witch King did not make idle threats. He would force the elf to concede to him or he would destroy him slowly.

Aragorn missed the musical sound of his friend’s voice. He wondered if the Nazgûl realized just how much he had taken away from them when he stole Legolas’ ability to speak and sing. He probably did.

Legolas hated his enforced silence, but even more he hated watching Aragorn dragged out of the cell day after day and being helpless to stop it. Every time they brought him back, the ranger looked worse. Today Aragorn couldn’t seem to stop shaking.

The Nazgûl dropped him in the middle of the room and Aragorn dragged himself into his corner, pressing his trembling body back against the wall. Yrin was there to put the human back into his manacles and Aragorn accepted even the chains readily if it got him farther away from the Wraith. Today had been particularly hard. He hadn’t even been beaten this time, but there were some things just as terrifying. He had spent hours gagged, bound and blind, trapped upside-down in a box barely big enough to accommodate his body. The claustrophobia had been terrible. Aragorn could still break into a cold sweat just remembering.

The Witch King laughed at how desperate Aragorn was to get away from him. Then he turned towards Legolas. He silently appraised how the elf was enduring. Legolas’ eyes were acquiring a glazed sheen. His breathing was rapid and shallow. His lips were badly cracked. It had been four days since he had been allowed any water. His body was showing the signs of severe dehydration.

Satisfied, the Nazgûl swept out of the room. In another day or two he would consider allowing the elf to drink again. He didn’t want the creature to die; he had plans for him. It would be a shame to
lose the prince before he received an answer to his latest communication with Dol Guldur.

When the Nazgûl left, Yrin remained behind to give Aragorn his meal. The human ate and drank because he knew that denying himself would not help his friend, but he could not help feeling guilty anyway. He was really worried. Food Legolas could do without, almost indefinitely sometimes, but water was a problem. The elf had already gone longer than many humans could have survived, but every night the sound of Legolas’ breathing in the darkness was becoming more rapid and uneven. The prince was sleeping with his eyes closed and dozing very often.

“Please, Yrin,” Aragorn begged the servant quietly. “Please... my friend, he needs water. The Wraith is killing him. No one has to know.” He inclined his head towards the closed door. They were alone in the cell. “Please.”

Yrin hesitated for a few indecisive moments. Glancing quickly at the closed door, the servant made up his mind. Crossing the room he placed the water pitcher in his hands against the elf’s dry lips. “Drink, but swiftly, please,” the human urged.

Legolas did not have to be told. His thirst had become unbearable. He gulped the water desperately, feeling welcomed moisture in his dry mouth for the first time in days. It was painfully difficult to swallow around the bridle because of his trapped tongue and the way he could not fully close his mouth. Water dribbled down his chin and wet his tunic, but he tipped his head back and choked most of the liquid down any way he could. The rim of the pitcher clanked sharply against the metal pieces of the harness as the elf struggled to drink. The sound was painfully loud in Yrin’s ears, but he forced his hands to steady. He carefully tipped the pitcher until it was empty. Legolas managed to drink most of it, although a fair amount ended up spilling down his front.

The door to the cell opened without warning. Yrin jerked back so quickly he nearly dropped the pitcher and had to fumble to keep it from crashing to the stone floor. Panic made his movements clumsy. He knew he was a dead man.

Fortunately for them all it was not the Wraith or any of the orcs that entered the room. It was another human. His dark, worried eyes darted about the cell, taking in the situation. He quickly pressed the door shut behind him with a soft click.

Yrin looked relieved and let the empty pitcher hang loosely from his fingers as he leaned against the wall for a moment. “Tinald, you scared me near to death.”

“I should think so. What are you doing? You know what the Master said! What if someone other than I had come in?” the other servant remonstrated, glancing nervously towards the door at his
back. He leaned against it a little harder as if to prevent that very occurrence.

Yrin ignored his subordinate’s question. He already knew he was a fool. “Why did you come? Is anything wrong?”

Tinald nodded with a grimace. “The orcs have gotten into a brawl again over something. I was going to let them just fight it out amongst themselves. With any luck there’d be a few less of them. But some of the other slaves got pulled in and they’re in trouble. We have to break it up quickly. They won’t listen to me.”

“I’m coming.” Yrinvan nodded, swiftly scooping up his tray. He paused long enough to gently dab away the glistening trails of moisture on the elf’s chin with his sleeve. Then both the slaves left.

Aragorn watched them go. This place was such a contradiction. He wished he could discuss it with Legolas. He missed conversing with his friend. He still talked to the elf, but Legolas could not reply. Looking over, Aragorn caught the prince’s gaze and he realized the elf missed it too.

Legolas felt a bit better after the water and shifted in his bonds, trying to ease the muscle spasms seizing his back and arms. His dehydrated mouth tingled and burned after having been wetted. He tried how the man’s trembling slowly eased. The prince knew that the Nazgûl wanted to make the ranger feel isolated, even when they were together in their cell. Legolas hated that he could do nothing, not even speak.

The silence was deafening and oppressive. It seemed to scream with everything the Nazgûl could take away from them, weaving a tapestry of despair about their hearts.

Aragorn drew a shaky breath. The cell was dim and he was afraid to close his eyes. Too often lately he was forced into the terrifying blackness of the Nazgûl’s torment. Silence and darkness had become his enemies, but he could not escape them, not even here. The ranger focused on Legolas, the only semi-bright spot in the room. He drew in another breath, this one more determined. He could not escape them, but he could fight back.

“Legolas, did I ever tell you about the time Elladan and Elrohir brought a wounded bear cub home and tried to hide it from father?” he asked. His voice was weak, but his tone spoke of happier times. Legolas could not speak to him, but the ranger would fill the silence between them if he could.

The prince smiled a little around his bridle and shook his head. Actually, he had, but he liked
hearing Aragorn’s voice, it didn’t matter what he talked about.

Aragorn smiled as he launched into the tale. The darkness couldn’t have them. Not yet.
Legolas was forced to wear the bridle for two more weeks although he was eventually allowed water every few days. By the time the Nazgûl was finally ready to release him, the elf was ashamed of how very desperate he was to be rid of the cruel harness.

The Witch King crouched in front of him, considering the bound elf. He held a bowl of water in his hands, taunting Legolas with his own helpless thirst. Yrin covertly supplemented the elf’s meager water ration whenever he could, but it still was never enough.

“Slave, have you learned to mind me yet? Or do you wish to remain like this for the rest of your stay? I might like that. I believe you could become accustomed to it, given a few years. Other creatures do.” The wraith laughed softly. “Creatures who are significantly more useful than you. What say you, Slave? Do you wish to keep it?”

Legolas shook his head, his eyes unintentionally reflecting horror at the thought of being left in the bridle indefinitely. He wanted it gone. It wasn’t the most painful thing he had endured in his life, but it was one of the most difficult ones.

This was the reaction the Nazgûl desired. He placed the bowl of water on the stone floor beside them.

“Then you will obey me better? And I shall not hear that vile language of yours in my home again?” Hooking his gloved fingers in the cheek strap, the Nazgûl gave the elf’s head a vicious little shake, as he seemed fond of doing.

Legolas wanted to be defiant. He wanted to spit in the Nazgûl’s face, but he couldn’t. The truth was he was desperate to be freed. Unfortunately, the Wraith seemed to know that. With an acute feeling of sickening shame, Legolas dropped his head forward and gave a small nod.

“And when I give you your voice back, you will thank your master for this lesson?” the Wraith pressed, obviously enjoying this far too much. The bridle wouldn’t kill the elf. He could eventually be taught to eat certain things around it. If Legolas did not offer him some serious concessions in return for removing the harness, then the Nazgûl was just as pleased to leave it on forever except when he wanted the prince to speak. It pleased his twisted fancy to see the elf treated like a beast.

Anger made Legolas’ vision haze, but his rage was laced with despair. The vile creature had him in
a hopeless position and was using the advantage cruelly. Unable to believe that he was doing this, Legolas nodded again. There was a time in his life when Legolas would have refused despite the consequences, but age and experience had tempered his stubbornness. Pride could go only so far when it was at odds with survival. In his current state he was of no use to Estel or himself.

Across the room, Aragorn’s heart ached as he saw the defeated slump of his friend’s shoulders. He had been mortally afraid that the elf would refuse, knowing his friend’s willful nature. He was glad when Legolas acquiesced, but he knew the toll it took on the proud prince. He could clearly see how much Legolas hated himself right now.

Hot fire burned in the Dúnadan’s chest. Despite what Legolas had told him, he hated the Nazgûl with a passion that was unsurpassed. His own torture left him hurting and ill, but watching the Wraith torment his friend was what kindled Aragorn’s unbridled wrath. He kept his peace with difficulty. He knew that any interference on his behalf would only insure the elf’s further suffering.

The Nazgûl unbuckled the bridle slowly. He slid it roughly off Legolas’ head, yanking it out of his mouth.

Legolas winced. It almost felt as if the harness had become a part of his flesh since he had been wearing it so long. His face ached fiercely where it had been chaffed and abraded for so many days. Blood rushed painfully back to areas long numbed. Even though it initially hurt, the sensation of freedom was wonderful. The elf would have never thought that so small a thing could bring this kind of relief, but it felt marvelous to be able to close his mouth and move his tongue again, to be master of his own body once more. He swallowed compulsively, trying to accustom his dry, abused mouth to working once more. His tongue felt three times its normal size and responded only sluggishly.

The Nazgûl had not moved away but still crouched before him, holding the halter. His silent gaze was demanding that the elf keep his word.

Legolas’ voice was hoarse and scratchy. He could barely get it to work. He tried and failed several times to form words and push them past his injured mouth and dehydrated vocal cords.

“I... thank you for this... lesson,” the elf finally forced himself to croak. Shame made his pale face flush hotly. Of all the things he could have been forced to make his protesting body say, that was the worst.

The Nazgûl’s hard gaze bored into him, waiting for the one thing the prince had omitted. He gave the bridle in his hand a slightly menacing shake, reminding the elf how easy it was for the Wraith to
“...Master,” Legolas rasped miserably, his voice barely audible. He didn’t mean the word, but he said it nonetheless. He had to close his eyes and drop his head. His eye sockets throbbed dully with an ache for tears that his dehydrated body could not produce. He should have been stronger. He should not have given the evil being what he desired, no matter the consequences. He felt like he had just sold his soul.

“Good,” the Wraith purred. “Everyone can be taught, given enough time.” The evil being picked up the bowl of water from the floor. He tipped it against the elf’s cracked lips.

Legolas was parched, but he hesitated. He did not want to drink from the Nazgûl’s hands.

The Witch King easily pushed the lip of the bowl between the prince’s teeth and tipped it, forcing Legolas to swallow or have the water run everywhere. The instant the liquid touched the elf’s mouth his body’s strong need for liquid took control and he gulped the water without much conscious say in the matter.

When the bowl was empty, the Nazgûl straightened up with a satisfied hiss. He patted the elf’s cheek lightly. The bridle had left red indents upon the pale flesh and the Wrath traced one with his thumb. “My slave begins to remember his place. Good.”

Legolas dropped his gaze and his head, staring down at the floor. If it were possible to die of shame he might have.

The Witch King was pleased. He retrieved the bridle from where it had been set aside and walked to the door of the cell. Being sure that Legolas could see him, the Wraith hung the contraption on a peg just outside, in the hall. “I shall keep this near at hand, Slave. Beware lest I decide you need it again.”

After he was gone, Aragorn watched his friend carefully. “Legolas?”

The elf had not lifted his head and would not meet the human’s gaze. “I’m all right, Strider,” he murmured with difficulty. His voice still cracked and broke painfully when he tried to speak. It was going to take him time to heal and get his voice back completely, but at least he *could* speak.
Aragorn knew that was not true, physically maybe, but not emotionally. “They were just words, Legolas,” he said softly.

Legolas did not look up. He appeared unconvinced. “Do you know how much I suffered once because I would not say those ‘words’?” His hoarse voice was bitter at the memory, bitter and ashamed. The strangely harsh sound of the elf’s voice and tone was like a self-inflicted blow. Aragorn flinched.

“I have become weak,” the prince said softly, disgust clouding his cracking words.

“No.” Aragorn refused to let the elf think that way. “You are not weak Legolas, you are realistic. I know how you feel, but trust me my friend, they *were* just words. You didn’t mean them. I know that. You didn’t have a choice. I would have done the same thing.” The ranger tried to reassure Legolas that he had not committed as horrible a concession as he thought.

“Would you?” the question was filled with such pain. Legolas’ eyes locked with his, begging for a truthful answer.

Aragorn nodded. “Legolas... you haven’t been there when I am alone with him...” It was the ranger’s turn to avert his gaze. “You don’t know what he’s forced from me when I can’t take anymore, when I just want him to stop,” the whisper was ashamed, but honest.

Gathering his courage and trusting that his friend would not despise him for his own weakness, Aragorn lifted his gaze again and let Legolas read the truth in his eyes. Let the elf see the echo of those dark, unspeakable hours when the ranger would scream anything the Nazgûl wanted, beg any way demanded, just to make the unbearable torment end.

The shame in Legolas’ eyes tempered as it mingled with compassion. Forgiving himself was one thing, but he knew that Aragorn was totally blameless. “I know what he can be like,” the elf whispered. “It’s not just the pain; it’s the evil, the consuming dark. Do not fault yourself.”

Aragorn smiled faintly. “I won’t, if you won’t.”

Legolas’ gaze drifted to the wall. “I will try, Estel,” he said softly. “I cannot promise, but I will try.”
Elrond shifted in a troubled dream. Darkness hedged his thoughts. Vague and illusive, the sense of evil was remote, but distinct. It wasn’t often that he was susceptible to disturbances in the night, but lately he had been seeing things. However, this was the first time it was so dark. Usually they were just... strange.

The images themselves weren’t always that troubling, but the strong sense of feeling that accompanied them at times was disturbing. In his dreams he saw strangers he thought he knew, but could not place, and the darkness of the night was filled with the soft, relentless sobbing of a child. At times, in his dreams, Elrond was that child, crying into his pillow, his body wracked by pain, guilt and fear. Such was the case tonight.

//The pillow under him was damp. He was afraid. There was a sound at the door. It wasn’t locked. He wished it was. Hurt, confusion, fear and self-condemnation all swirled through him in a frenetic frenzy as he clutched the pillow, burying his face in it until he couldn’t breathe. Did he want to black out? Maybe. He did *not* want to face whatever would come through that door. He was so alone; so crushingly alone with no one to turn to, no one to understand him, no one to stop what was happening. Hinges creaked. Panic surged through his entire body...//

Elrond woke up and found himself staring at his own ceiling. He didn’t awake with a start or a jolt, despite the intense emotions of the dream. Rather it was if he had simply opened his eyes from a long-buried memory.

1. Very strange.

The elf lord lay pondering the dream for several minutes, trying to place it in his long memory. He had felt certain at first that it had been conjured up from past experience, but now that he tried to pin it down he could not locate the reference that he sought. The first thing his waking mind had suggested, was that his subconscious was recalling some of the more traumatic moments of his childhood when he was a prisoner in the dungeons of Himring... but that didn’t feel quite right. In reality he had been with Elros, but in his dream he was always alone.

Elrond shook his head and pushed aside the covers of his bed. He might have expected troubled dreams after the Mirkwood envoys arrived with Thranduil’s carefully worded shout of alarm at his son’s absolute failure to return home. What he had not expected was that they would be so strange. The elf lord pushed his long, dark hair over his shoulder and let his breath out slowly.
He had often thought that Thranduil tended to overact in many situations, but he could not blame him for being disturbed this time. When Elrond’s youngest son had not returned home, he assumed that Aragorn had gone on to Mirkwood with Legolas. Now he learned that was not the case and that both of them were missing. He was not yet ready to panic, but he was troubled nonetheless. The dark, blank emptiness that met him when he tried to reach out and touch Estel’s consciousness set him on edge more than he wanted to admit. There was a cloud gathering and the Elf Lord could no longer see into the Ranger’s future.

He sighed. Brenyf had been sent back to Mirkwood with Elrond’s answer to Thranduil’s letter while Raniean and Trelan joined Elladan and Elrohir in searching for their missing friend and brother. The additional news that the three Mirkwood envoys had brought from the Beornings was at the same time reassuring and disturbing. Beoma and Pejor told them of the attack and the long chase north. That explained part of the time the ranger and the prince had been missing. However, if they had all started for home at the same time, why had the Beornings made it back already when neither Aragorn nor Legolas had returned? Legolas should definitely have made it back to Lasgalen by now and Aragorn should at least have been close to Rivendell.

It was all too likely that something innocuous had simply come up to detain the elf prince and the ranger. It was always something with those two. All the same, Raniean, Trelan and the twins intended to retrace the trip described by Beoma as closely as possible. Hopefully, they would come across one or both of the missing friends on their way home. At the very least they hoped to find news of them.

His dream fading into a barely recalled memory, Elrond moved to the basin on his dresser to wash his face. If only he could shake this nagging worry...

He cupped the water in his hands, bringing it to his face. As his eyes, nose and mouth entered the water, everything changed. Darkness swallowed his consciousness, banishing all light like the snuffing of a candle. For one supreme moment of panic he could not breathe nor move. Terror paralyzed him. He was suffocating, drowning. The sheer weight of the evil screeching around him was unbearable.

It wasn’t physical. The water had already run out between his fingers by the time he was jerking backward, disoriented and alarmed. The water basin fell from the dresser. Almost in slow motion, it tumbled to the floor. Landing with a startlingly loud crash upon the tiles it shattered into pieces, spilling water like a bloodstain upon the rug.

The sound of the breaking ceramic jolted Elrond out of whatever had taken hold of him. His chest heaved as he leaned against the dresser. Valar, he wished he could wonder what it was, but he knew. Somehow he knew. When Elladan and Elrohir almost died in the mountains as young elves, he had felt it from a distance. When Arwen’s horse threw her down the ravine and broke her leg, he had been the first one out of the house. He had a connection with his children that was deeper than...
most... all his children.

“My Lord?” Celboril rushed to the room in alarm. Elladan and Elrohir he expected to be breaking things, but not Elrond.

“My Lord!” the servant’s voice turned even more worried when he saw how white Elrond’s face had become.

“Something is very wrong,” Elrond said quietly, trying to still his frantic breathing. He didn’t know how, he didn’t know what and most maddeningly of all, he did not know *where*. With the others he had known where they were, or at least where they had been going. When he felt the warning, he could act. But this time...

Elrond released his hold on the dresser slowly. His hand was trembling. “Estel is... I don’t know. But it’s very wrong, Celboril. So very wrong...”

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Where do I take this pain of mine?
I run, but it stays right by my side.
So tear me open, pour me out
There’s things inside that scream and shout
And the pain still hates me
So hold me... until it sleeps

It grips you, so hold melt stains you, so hold melt hates you, so hold melt holds you, so hold me

Until it sleeps...

-- Metallica

Aragorn tried to flail, but he could not. His arms were pinned to his sides, fastened by iron cuffs to the board upon which he was being forced to lie. His ankles were similarly restrained.

The Nazgûl pressed the wet cloth back over his face, covering the ranger’s nose and mouth. The human sucked against the cloth, trying desperately to draw air through the weave of the fabric.

Slowly, deliberately, the Wraith poured water from a pitcher upon the cloth, soaking it and the ranger

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As the water saturated the fabric, it cut off any chance of breathing and pooled into the ranger’s mouth and nose. A blindfold around the ranger’s eyes kept him in the dark. Always, when the Nazgûl tormented him, he was kept in the dark.

Aragorn choked, trying to blow the smothering cloth off his face; he could not and wasted air trying. He was obliged to swallow the water to keep from drowning. Yellow bursts of light clouded his vision. His lungs screamed. Panic rippled through him in dark waves he could not control.

The Nazgûl continued pouring water onto the helpless prisoner. The cloth was fully saturated. The liquid the ranger could not drink or inhale ran down the sides of the man’s face, drenching his hair. The Wraith had long ago discovered how effective simply depriving prisoners of air could prove to be. He had had good results thus far by using air-deprivation on this prisoner. One benefit was that he could engage in such methods for hours without doing the human’s ridiculously fragile body mortal harm. He intended to continue employing variations of such tactics for as long as they served him.

The Witch King pulled the cloth away from the human’s face, allowing him a few moments of oxygen. The cloth came away soaked with water and stained with an increasing amount of blood.

Aragorn choked and coughed harshly. His raw throat burned. He could not stop coughing. He wanted to roll onto his side, wanted to clear his lungs... but he could not. His back arched uselessly, his head tossed from side to side as much as the iron band around his forehead allowed.

“Who are you and what is your purpose?” the Nazgûl’s persistent question pressed the human unmercifully.

Aragorn couldn’t have spoken even if he had wanted to do so. He was coughing too hard to form words. Right now, he was almost glad. The ranger feared what he might have said if he could have spoken. For a few horrible moments his resolution wavered. He felt like he was dying, but the Wraith continually brought him back from the edge. It was all the pain and terror of drowning, relived over and over and over again. He could not take any more. The darkness around him screamed with a thousand screeching tones of pain and terror.

The evil world the Nazgûl took him to when he tortured the human was nearly as unbearable as the torment itself. Twisted, evil voices shrieked in Aragorn’s head, filling him with terror and despair. They whispered in his ears, promising death and defeat. He wanted them to go away. He wanted to scream at them to leave him alone... but all he could do was choke up more water and blood.
“No?” The Nazgûl dipped his pitcher back into the barrel of water beside him. Pressing the cruel cloth back down over the ranger’s face he let the steady stream of liquid flow down once more.

Aragorn choked helplessly, his body wracked with uncontrollable jerking spasms. The demons in the dark rang in his ears, mocking him. While his body was reduced to its most vulnerable state, they assaulted his mind. Driving screaming panic into every corner of his thoughts they slowly robbed him of all rational thought.

Screaming into his own raw, waterlogged suffocation, the ranger convulsed spasmodically in his bonds. He wanted to die.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Shh, be calm, it is all right now...” Yrin was trying his best to pacify the nearly frantic ranger as he and Tinald walked him back to his cell, but Aragorn seemed past the point of listening to reason.

The ranger’s voice was hoarse, but he was babbling to himself. He was alternately talking nonsense and begging to be left alone. He thrashed weakly in their arms. They were carrying him more than he was walking and their words did not seem to be reaching him.

Tinald looked scared. “What did the Master *do* to him?” he asked, not at all sure he wanted to know.

Yrinvan shook his head. Tortured the ranger nearly all day is what he had done. The headservant had not been present and wasn’t sure of the details, but it wasn’t the first time he’d seen people in this state. It was an effect the Nazgûl could have on his victims sometimes. It was both horrible and frightening to witness.

“I don’t know,” was all Yrin said as he opened the cell door.

They sat the ranger down on the floor, but he pulled away from them. Folding into a ball Aragorn rocked back and forth. He clutched at his head, his fingers tugging painfully in his own soaked and
dripping hair.

“Shh, come on, give me your arm, Strider. Relax now, relax. He’s gone...” Yrin soothed, trying to take hold of the human’s arm so he could put him back in his chains.

“Estel? What’s wrong?” Legolas, still chained to his wall, was alarmed by his friend’s appearance and actions. The elf pulled against his restraints, trying to see Aragorn around the two slaves blocking his view.

Aragorn pulled away Yrin and Tinald, batting their hands away. He seemed completely disorientated. Suddenly he fixed a wide-eyed, pleading gaze upon the two slaves.

“Do you hear them?” he whispered hoarsely. “They’re laughing. Like a million daggers... Make them stop...”

“Estel! Estel!” Legolas was gravely disturbed by his friend’s strange words and the unearthly tone of his haunted voice. “What’s happened?” The prince pleaded for someone to enlighten him and his alarm grew as he received no answers.

Aragorn seemed to hear Legolas’ voice and tried to bolt towards him. Yrin and Tinald attempted to hold onto him half-heartedly, but the ranger’s near frenzy gave him more strength than his critically weakened body should have possessed. He pulled out of their hands and scrambled to the elf’s side on his hands and knees.

Legolas was more than frightened when he looked into his friend’s pale face. He was terrified. Aragorn’s eyes were wide and searching. Water dripped from the ends of his wavy, matted hair, drenching the edges of his loose, torn tunic. The human’s hands trembled as he wrapped them in the front of Legolas’ jerkin.

“Darkness, under the earth... do you know where it is? Do you know?” the ranger’s voice was haunted and barely understandable. He seemed to be having a lot of trouble speaking. His shaking fingers brushed Legolas’ face. They were like ice against the elf’s skin.

Legolas’ brows furrowed. He tugged ineffectually against his chains, trying to touch his friend. Unable to do so, he tilted his head to the side, trapping Aragorn’s freezing fingers gently between his cheek and his shoulder. He rubbed the side of his face against the human’s hand reassuringly.
“Know what? Estel, I don’t understand. Shhh...” he tried to calm the human with his voice.

“No! No!” the human’s whimpering voice was desperate. “So loud, so loud...” Aragorn’s words choked off in a sob. He pressed his face into the supple leather fabric of Legolas’ partially opened jerkin, his hands bunching in the silky silver fabric underneath. Touching the elf made him feel safe.

Legolas’ throat tightened painfully. “Oh, Estel...” he didn’t know what to say. “Yrin? What’s wrong with him?!”

Yrin swore quietly under his breath. “It was the Wraith. Terror and madness are not the least of his weapons. I have seen this before. If your friend is strong, it will pass... eventually.”

Tinald tried to pull the ranger back to his corner, but Aragorn clung to the prince with frenetic strength.

“No! Legolas... don’t leave me. Don’t leave me alone with them!” The ranger clutched at the elf’s shoulders and buried his face against his friend’s chest.

Legolas knew Aragorn was not speaking of the two slaves, but of the voices in his head that must be tormenting him, even now. The elf’s heart broke painfully.

“I’m here Estel, I won’t leave you. I’m here! Yrinvan... please...” The elf’s pleading eyes sought the older servant’s face as Aragorn clung to him. Curling into a tight, shuddering ball against the elf’s side, the ranger resisted all attempts to dislodge him.

Yrin laid his hand on Tinald’s shoulder, bidding the younger man to stop. Stepping forward, Yrin pulled a key ring from one of the large pockets of his smock. Without a word, he unlocked Legolas’ fetters. He knew the ranger needed his friend if he were going to make it through this.

Dropping his arms gratefully to his sides, Legolas quickly gathered Aragorn into his arms. He looked up at Yrinvan. “Thank you.”

Yrin just nodded, dropping the keys back in his pocket. “The door will be locked. Don’t make me regret this,” he warned.
Legolas nodded in understanding.

Tinald retrieved the seldom used key ring from its peg at the end of the hall. He locked the cell door from the outside before returning the keys to their place once more. He did not question Yrinvan. As long as the prisoners were secured, there was no need to quibble over how they were restrained. The Master had ordered the prisoners into the wall chains weeks ago, but he had never specifically said for how long or that they had to remain there until he said otherwise.

Tinald was beginning to understand the cautious method behind the many perilous grey areas that his friend and mentor navigated on a day to day basis. Yrin knew this and was pleased. If Tinald ever was to take his place someday, it was a skill the younger man would need.

Now locked in the cell, Legolas rocked Aragorn softly. The elf spoke quietly to the human until Aragorn finally began to calm a little.

“Make them go away...” the ranger repeated his plea, quieter this time.

“They aren’t real, Estel. They aren’t real. It will pass, my friend. Just hold onto me. Hold onto the light,” Legolas murmured softly in Elvish. He didn’t care about the Nazgûl’s restrictions. He would avoid speaking his own tongue in the dark one’s presence, but not when they were alone. The human’s wet garments leeched water into the elf’s clothing as he cradled him close.

“I can’t,” the human admitted in a whisper. His voice was frightened. “I can’t, Legolas... I can’t!”

The elf held the human’s head tightly against his shoulder. His long fingers smoothed the man’s dripping hair while his thumb gently rubbed over the stubbly bristle on his friend’s jaw. His other hand clasped Aragorn’s, rubbing warmth back into the icy fingers. The elf tipped his head forward, letting his warm cheek rest on the top of Aragorn’s damp head.

“Then I will hold onto you,” Legolas assured. “And I won’t let you go. Ever.”

Aragorn pressed his hands to his ears, clenching his eyes shut with a moan. “Make it stop!”

Legolas’ arms tightened around the man. He could feel the darkness tremor through Aragorn’s being and it made him so angry he wanted crush something. It did not belong there, it had no right! He told Aragorn it was nothing, but he knew that was not true. The Wraith had left this lingering cloud
of darkness to torment the human, trying to drive him mad.

The elf’s face steeled. He would not see that succeed. “Gwanno! Gwanno son!” the elf bit out sharply. “Depart! Leave him!”

The light around Legolas flared out to encompass the ranger, driving back the darkness here just as he had the night in the Barrow Downs. In that fleeting moment of radiance, Aragorn looked up to catch the elf’s eyes. For a blessed instant the voices fell silent and he could actually think again.

Legolas brushed his cheek.

“I can’t fight it all for you Estel,” he whispered, wishing he could. “You have to be strong. You have to want to fight... you can, Estel. You can. You are hope, hold to that. Hold it, mellon-nín, and no shadow can touch you.” The elf placed his hand over the human’s heart.

Aragorn nodded mutely. As the light around them faded back to normal, he clenched his fists. The evil was still all around them, but he pushed it violently away from his mind, refusing to give into the screeching panic that had been claiming him a few moments ago.

The effort exhausted him and he slumped limply against Legolas’ strong embrace. His body was completely drained. His mind hurt, his head hurt, everything hurt. Consciousness and reality wavered in and out of focus.

Legolas simply continued holding him and stroking his hair. At first the ranger was fitful and restless, but eventually his disturbed movements stilled and began to calm as the horror of what he had been through slowly receded. Aragorn was strong, he would get through this. Still, Legolas’ heart ached fiercely. How much was his friend expected to take? They had to get out of here. The elf’s heart ached. He felt responsible in a way. He had convinced Aragorn to come here, and now they seemed totally unable to escape the web in which they had become trapped.

Aragorn slumbered in a semi-twilight state for a long time. Finally, he stirred once more in the elf’s arms.

The human blinked a few times, trying to make sense of his surroundings. Something warm was wrapped around him. He felt safer and less alone then he had in a long time. Looking up, he found himself gazing into Legolas’ face. He stopped moving and smiled somewhat sheepishly.
“Better, *mellon-nín*?” Legolas’ soft voice was amused.

Aragorn nodded against the elf’s chest. “A bit. Legolas, how did I get here? I feel... I feel like I made a fool of myself somehow. What happened?”

Legolas smiled faintly. “Don’t you remember?”

Confusion drifted across the human’s face. The last thing he recalled was the Nazgûl’s torment. He did not remember coming back to the cell, nor how it was that he and Legolas were unchained.

“I... I don’t know...” he winced in pain and pressed his head tighter against the elf’s shoulder.

Legolas shook his head quickly. “Don’t try, Estel. Don’t try. It’s enough that you are all right.” Legolas closed his eyes as he shifted Aragorn to a more comfortable position. It was just as well that the ranger did not remember. Legolas wished he would not. The look on his friend’s face earlier had frightened him. He was afraid he was finally losing the ranger to the darkness.

Legolas took another glance down at his friend’s weary face. Aragorn looked painfully weak, but he seemed himself. The elf whispered a silent prayer of thanks.

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Yrinvan was getting a tray ready to bring the prisoners their dinner when a voice shouting his name from across the kitchen made him look up.

“Yrin! YRIN!” Tinald was fairly screaming his friend’s name as he raced across the uneven flagstones.

“Tinald! What is it, what’s wrong?” Yrinvan asked quickly, checking the other man’s forward rush. Catching Tinald by the elbows, Yrinvan spun him part way around so that the younger servant was facing him.
“Breathe, and then tell me what’s wrong.” Yrin instructed firmly, alarmed by the panic and pain in his younger friend’s eyes.

“IT’s Ahnna!” Tinald said urgently. Those two words struck icy terror into Yrinvan’s heart.

“They...” Tinald swallowed a half sob. “She... Oh stars, Yrin, come quickly!”

Yrinvan did not need to be told twice. Pushing Tinald ahead of him to lead the way, he raced after the shorter man.

Tinald collected himself a little as they ran and related his story somewhat more coherently. “The Kessling twins are down with the fever. They haven’t been doing well since the antidote shortage put them on half rations. Ahnna was smuggling food to them and... the orcs caught her.”

Yrin’s stomach knotted in fear. The rule was that if you did not work, you did not eat. The sick were not favored in this regard and as a result, they often died. Stealing more than your allotted portion of food was a considered a crime in Angmar.

Yrinvan swore silently to himself as he pounded down a flight of stairs, trailing Tinald. His wife had always refused caution. Yrin only took calculated risks when the odds were in his favor. Why did Ahnna always have to take on the lost causes? Merciful stars, what price had she paid? His heart took another dip as he realized they were descending to the orcs’ level. It pounded hard in his chest, and then froze into a lump of ice as they rounded a corner and he realized with certainty where they were heading. Death Hall.

The Nazgûl often let the orcs take care of disciplinary action among the servants, especially when he himself was busy with other things. Right now his attention was focused on his prisoners and he could not be bothered with slaves. The orcs were only too happy to oblige.

Yrin and Tinald entered the long, dim room that the slaves referred to as Death Hall. The walls of the passage were dotted with manacles. The slowly corroding metal leached dark rust stains down the stone walls, mingling the oxidation with dried bloodstains. Bones in various states of decay littered the passage. Yrin had to step over them or kick them aside in order to walk across the filthy floor. This was the orcs’ domain and it both looked and smelled the part. Disobedient slaves were taken here to die, ultimately tormented to death by the orcs.

The two servants covered their mouths and noses to keep from gagging on the foul air, but otherwise reacted very little to their surroundings. They had both been down here before on official business.
Their jaded response to the horror of the hall spoke volumes about what life in Angmar prepared you to accept.

Yrinvan saw a single form against the wall in the gloom. Pushing past Tinald, he hurried ahead. Ahnna dangled from a low set of chains, half sitting on the ground. Her head rested forward upon her breast. Her clothing was torn and disheveled. Dark bruises were already showing on her exposed arms.

Sinking to his knees by his wife’s side, Yrin took her face gently in his hands, tipping it up. He wiped blood from the corner of her sweet, pretty lips with his thumb. His hands trembled. Ahnna’s face was badly cut and bruised. For a moment he feared she was already dead, until her deep green eyes fluttered open.

The woman mouthed her husband’s name, trying to smile. She coughed and grimaced, turning her head away.

“Oh, Ahnna...” Yrin’s whisper was agonized. He wanted to ask her how she could do this, but he did not. Sadly, he knew she would not have been the woman he loved if she hadn’t taken the risk that brought her here.

“I know, you told me so,” Ahnna whispered hoarsely. “Yrin... I love you. Kiss the children.” Her voice held no self-pity. Slaves in Angmar knew how, and when, to say goodbye.

Tears spilled down Yrin’s face. This was one goodbye he could not make. He could not live without this woman; too much of his heart lay in her keeping. His fingers desperately sought the chains binding her, but they were fastened securely. It was cruel irony. These were some of the only locks in this whole mountain for which he did not have the keys. Only the Witch King had the key to these locks.

“I won’t let you die here!” Yrin promised, giving the vile chains a yank.

“Hey, you don’t belong down here, grubs!” a rough voice growled out of the darkness. Retzhrak’s lumbering form came into view. Behind him, the eyes of other orcs winked evilly in the darkness. “Get away from our dinner,” he said cruelly. “Only we get to play with the food.” Laughter rippled behind him.

Yrin straightened up, staring the head orc down. “I will kill you if you lay another finger on her,” he
hissed, livid with rage.

Retzhrak did not advance, but he did not back away either. Unfettered hatred gleamed in his eyes. The fact that this was a supreme chance to hurt the human with control over him was not lost on his small, malicious mind.

“The Master gave her to us,” he snarled. “She’s ours unless you want to trade.”

“Trade?” Yrin spat the word in contempt and confusion.

“Sure,” Retzhrak sneered. “You give us the Master’s elf, and we’ll call it an even trade, right boys?”

A mocking cheer of assent came from behind him. Having an elf in the castle rankled the dark creatures and they all would enjoy a piece of him if they were allowed.

Yrinvan gave a disgusted expression. Legolas was not his to barter with even if he would. He belonged to the Nazgûl. Of course, the orcs knew that. They did not really expect him to trade; they were merely toying with him in their sick way. They asked him an impossible request simply to mock him. Besides, in the end, the Nazgûl was still the only one with the keys for these fetters.

A small skirmish resounded behind Retzhrak and a short form darted around him. Rhzaq skittered behind Yrin and Tinald. He looked as if he had seen some fighting himself. One of his ears was torn and bleeding. Yrin knew he had probably tried to stop what happened had to Ahnna. The little orc liked her.

“I am going to speak to the Master,” Yrin’s rage did not allow room for fear at the moment. “And you had better not have done *anything* by the time I come back, or so help me Retzhrak, I will make sure you are boiled in your own blood. And you know I can make it happen!” he threatened viciously. Sometimes he had to rely very heavily on the weight he carried as the Nazgûl’s chief underling and Yrin feared that one of these days it was not going to be enough to support him. He just hoped that today was not that day.

“Tinald, Rhzaq, stay with Ahnna. Protect her,” he instructed.

“They’ll have to kill me to touch her,” Tinald said quietly and Rhzaq nodded. The orcs would of course enjoy doing just that, but they could only hope that fear of their Master’s possible displeasure
would hold them off for a little while.

“Yrin...” Ahnna’s weak voice made him look down. “Yrin, don’t do anything stupid,” she requested softly. Going to the Master was dangerous. The Nazgûl did not often change his mind about a slave’s punishment and attempting to get him to do so could be deadly.

Yrin caressed her face one more time. “I’ll be back,” he promised, hoping that that was true. Straightening up, his eyes caught Tinald’s. “I know you will make me proud,” he whispered. The implied meaning behind his words was clear. If Yrinvan lost this gamble, Tinald would be the new headservant.

Yrin hurried back the way he had come. To say he was not afraid would have been a lie. He was terrified of going to the Wraith, but he was more terrified of losing Ahnna. Love was still stronger than fear, even in this despicable place.

The Ringwraith was in his study when Yrin found him. He was seated behind a massive desk, contemplating a large, steel chest perforated with small holes. He did not look up from whatever he was doing when the slave entered. Small, skittering sounds emanated from inside the chest.

The servant bowed on the floor, touching his forehead to the cold stones. “Master?”

It seemed an age before the Nazgûl acknowledged his presence.

“You have come about your wife,” the Wraith said coldly. It was not a question. He knew very well why his head servant was here, and in such obvious distress.

Yrin flinched. He had hoped the Nazgûl didn’t know of his relationship with Ahnna. That could make this more difficult. “Yes, Master.”

“She was caught stealing. You of all my slaves should know the punishment for that... or do you condone such behavior?” The Wraith’s voice took on a harder tone. “I entrust much into your hands, Slave. I should not like to see my trust rewarded with frank disobedience.”

“No, Master, of course not,” Yrinvan’s voice was small and miserable. “You know my every thought is but to serve you. This won’t happen again, I swear to you on my life! Please, Master...” he swallowed hard. He wanted to beg the Wraith to have mercy, but he knew the Nazgûl had none.
“I have already given her to the orcs, find yourself another woman,” the Witch King said coldly. His tone indicated he wanted this conversation to end.

Yrinvan forced himself not to explode at those words. Panic tugged at his heart. “She is not guilty!” he protested. “I am. If someone must be punished let it be me.”

“You?” the Wraith’s tone darkened and the temperature of the room dropped.

Yrin licked his suddenly dry lips and pressed his forehead a little harder against the floor. The time for calculated risks was over. He would not back down. He would die before he lost his wife.

“Yes, Master. Forgive me. She was not stealing; she was acting on my command. I ordered extra rations for some of the slaves because of the antidote shortage. It’s claiming too many, too fast, my Lord. The work force is suffering great losses in productivity. I feared their poor performance would be a hindrance to you.”

The whole thing was a boldfaced lie, but since there was no one to contradict him, Yrinvan could only hope that it would work. One thing was true at least; the antidote shortage was beginning to cause problems.

The Nazgûl rose from his chair. He did not look pleased. He walked around the desk to where Yrinvan still knelt. “You did this without consulting me?” he hissed dangerously.

“Forgive me, Lord.” Yrinvan could not keep the slight tremble out of his voice. “You were with the human prisoner; you said you were not to be disturbed. Some of the workers were near death. I had to act.”

The Nazgûl gave a low hiss. “I was not aware this situation was affecting productivity so gravely.” He was very displeased with the state of affairs. This so-called antidote shortage was the result of his idiot orcs not being able to gather enough of the lichen he needed from the bowels of the mountain. They gave him a million excuses and he was getting sick of them. He was going to start losing slaves if he was unable to make larger doses of antidote, especially considering how much was currently being used up keeping the ranger alive. It was an unforeseen wrinkle in his plans.

He considered Yrinvan carefully. The Wraith was not a respecter of persons, but he was not stupid either. The man was a valuable slave. It had taken years to groom Yrinvan to the point where he
could anticipate the Wraith’s every whim and run the castle as smoothly as if the Nazgûl saw to everything himself. The servants were loyal to him and the orcs obeyed him for the most part, yet he had always proved ultimately faithful to his Master. That was not an easy mix to recreate.

“You had better not be lying to me,” the Wraith threatened.

“No, Master,” Yrinvan reassured. “I was trying only to solve the problem without bothering you. I know the orcs have been remiss in their collection duties. I did not wish to mirror their incompetence to your Lordship. Unfortunately, the orcs disregarded my instruction and took matters into their own hands. If I have erred, forgive me. If I must be punished, then punish me. But please, let Ahnna go. She has done nothing,” he begged earnestly.

Bringing up the orcs’ failures was a wise move. The Nazgûl was very displeased with them right now for their ineptitude. The more the Wraith considered it, the less he wanted to grant them any special entertainment until they had served his purposes better.

“I am going to do this for you this once, Slave. This **ONCE**, do you understand?” The Witch King said after a few, excruciating moments of silence. “But you *will* consult me before any such changes in the future and if your wife is ever caught taking unauthorized actions again, I will personally feed her *and* your two brats to the orcs. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master. Thank you, Master,” Yrin said gratefully, respectfully tapping his head against the floor several times. At the moment he was too relieved to feel anything but joy.

“I am not going to let this go unpunished, Slave,” the Nazgûl warned. “When I deem the time right, you will spend two nights in the ice cell for all this trouble. Do not forget that.” The Wraith postponed punishment for a later date. Right now he wanted Yrin fully alive and functioning to handle the antidote shortage and assist him with his prisoners. When he was done with them, he could afford to spend a little more time ensuring that Yrinvan had not forgotten any of the lessons he had been taught over the years.

“Of course, Master, as you please,” the servant accepted his fate with the unflinching ease that made him so useful.

“Very well then, you are dismissed.” The Wraith dropped a small, iron key on the floor by Yrinvan’s face. “Get out.”
Yrinvan did as he was told. Snatching up the key, he quickly scuttled backward out of the room on his hands and knees, bowing all the way until he was out of sight. Jumping to his feet again he sprinted away as soon as he turned the corner. He reached the lower levels not a moment too soon. Tinald and Rhzaq were standing their ground, but the other orcs were looking extremely restless.

Unlocking Ahnna’s cuffs, he scooped the woman tenderly into his arms.

“The Master changed his mind,” Yrin said sternly, glaring daggers at the orcs. “He suggests you focus your energies on another mission to the lower levels.”

Retzhak snarled darkly, but allowed the small group of slaves to walk away. The dark creatures would not cross the Nazgûl, but silently the orc swore that one of these days, Yrinvan was going to pay.

Yrin carried Ahnna. Tinald and Rhzaq followed him up to the slaves’ levels.

Laying his wife down in their small sleeping quarters, Yrin began tending to her injuries. They were alone. Too young yet to work, Mahdi was away with the other children and Larnis was out about doing his chores. For this, Yrin was grateful. He did not want them to see their mother like this.

Painfully, Yrin washed Ahnna’s cuts and bruises. She smiled at him faintly. Reaching up, she caressed his cheek.

“Yrin...” Worry flickered through her eyes. “You put it on yourself, didn’t you?” She knew him far too well.

Yrin nodded absently, cleaning a deep cut across her collarbone. “Shh, don’t try to speak.”

“What and when?” she whispered sadly.

“The ice cell, but not for a while,” Yrin assured. “The Master needs me too much right now.”

“I’m sorry.” Ahnna closed her eyes against the pain. “I never wanted to get you in trouble...”
Yrin hushed her gently. “Don’t worry about me, Ahnna. Just rest. Everything will be all right.”

Unfortunately, everything was not all right. After an hour, Ahnna was delirious and burning with fever. Yrin bathed her face, struggling to keep her temperature down, but it just kept climbing. She didn’t recognize him anymore and cried out softly in her distress.

The work day was ending. The children would be back soon. Yrin looked up from his heart-breaking struggle.

“Tinald, please... find Larnis and Mahdi. Keep them with you tonight.” Tinald was a close friend and the young ones would not be alarmed. Yrin did not want them here. If Ahnna died, it was better that their last memories of their mother were not of her tossing and turning in this delirious fit. She wouldn’t recognize them, and that would only frighten them.

Everything in Yrin screamed that he could not lose her now, after trying so hard to save her, but he knew the realities of this place. When someone was fading as fast as Ahnna was, it was only a matter of time. All he had bought her was the ability to die in his arms rather than at the hands of the orcs. Even calluses as deep as the ones around his heart could not soften the blow of that knowledge.

“Of course,” Tinald agreed. He laid a gentle hand on his friend’s shoulder. He knew Yrin would need tonight to himself... to say goodbye to his wife. He carried even fewer illusions than Yrinvan. He had seen too many people die this way.

Rhzaq hunkered quietly in the corner. He didn’t want to go back to his own kind. In the state they were in tonight they would probably have *him* for dinner. He preferred to stay close to Yrinvan when the slave permitted him. He scuttled unobtrusively back and forth between this room and the kitchen, keeping the human supplied with cold water.

“Will Green Eyes die?” the orc asked Yrin, cocking his head curiously to the side. He set yet another basin of melted snow beside the headservant and pulled back into a half-sitting crouch that was distinctly orcish. Grief was not really an emotion he understood, but he could tell that Green Eyes was ill.

“Maybe,” Yrin confessed that which he did not want to admit. He could not bring Ahnna’s fever down. He did not understand why. Her wounds were not that serious, but her body burned and weakened with every passing moment. He was the best healer in Angmar, a necessity forced upon
him from tending to so many dying and wounded under him. Yet his knowledge was mainly limited to treating torture victims, antidote withdrawal, frostbite and food deprivation. He had never been able to save anyone this ill. Usually, he simply tried to make them comfortable, knowing it was better that they died.

“Will you end her?” Rhzaq was not trying to be cruel; he simply wanted to know what would happen. Orcs killed and ate their own wounded. He knew the slaves did not follow that practice, but he had seen Yrin ease the more gravely wounded into death before. Ahnna had always been kind to the defective little orc and Rhzaq found that he had a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach at the thought of her going away. He had never experienced that before. It was queer and not very comfortable.

Yrin’s eyes filled with tears. He was not angry, but he wished that the question had not been asked. It was one he did not want to face. He had the ability to end Ahnna’s life painlessly, and he would do it if he could do nothing else for her... but he could not bring himself to that conclusion yet. He felt she could yet be saved if only he knew how!

“She needs a real healer, Rhzaq... not just someone who knows how to make death easier,” Yrin said bitterly around the choking lump in his throat. Suddenly the man’s head came up. A healer...

Yrinvan rose quickly to his feet. “Rhzaq, stay with Ahnna. Keep her head cool, like this.” The human demonstrated what he meant. Taking Rhzaq’s gnarled hand in his, he showed him how to carefully mop the cold rag across Ahnna’s flushed brow, down the sides of her face and across her neck. The orc nodded that he understood, continuing the task on his own with a gentleness that was entirely atypical for his race.

“Where do you go?” Rhzaq asked as Yrin left the room.

The servant paused in the doorway. He took a deep breath. “Probably to dig my own grave,” he muttered cryptically before hurrying away.


Aragorn dozed lightly in Legolas’ loose embrace. When the door to their cell scraped roughly open, he jolted awake. He cringed instinctively.
Yrin was in the doorway. He looked unusually disturbed and haggard. He crossed the room swiftly. Grabbing Aragorn’s arm he tried to pull the human to his feet. “You must come with me.”

Aragorn moaned softly. He felt weary panic clutching at him. He could not go back to that darkness so soon. He could not face it again; he could not. He laid a pleading look upon Legolas as Yrin pulled him to his knees.

Legolas hugged the human fearfully to his chest, pulling him away from the servant. Aragorn was too weak. It was too soon. If they took him again now, he would die.

“No! Yrin, please, he’s too weak!” the elf protested desperately. “You only just barely brought him back. The Nazgûl will kill him!”

A desperation that matched the elf’s swirled in Yrinvan’s eyes as he met and held Legolas’ gaze. It made the elf freeze in surprise.

“He’s not going to the Master, he’s coming with me. If he can help me, he’ll come to no harm. You said he was a healer.” Yrin turned his attention on Aragorn. “Ranger, your friend told me you are a healer, is that true?”

Aragorn nodded. “Yes, it is,” he said quietly. The pain and fear behind Yrinvan’s usually closed and guarded eyes made him consider the servant carefully. He pushed himself upright. “Is someone hurt?”

“My wife,” Yrin answered. “Please come, we must hurry.”

Aragorn struggled to rise. Legolas got to his feet first and then helped the ranger to his.

Yrin checked the elf’s move towards the door with an apologetic plea for forgiveness and understanding.

“Forgive me, Legolas, but you must stay here. I cannot risk removing you both. If... if I lose you two, I and everyone I care about will be killed.” His eyes begged them to help him, to understand his precarious situation.
“Strider...” Legolas asked with concern as Aragorn wavered unsteadily. His hand tightened on the ranger’s shoulder, hesitating to release him. He was not at all sure Aragorn was strong enough to be helping Yrin or Ahnna and he did not like letting him go alone.

Yrin was obviously as tense as a bowstring; he backed warily towards the door when it looked like the prisoners might resist him. He had only to shout and help would come quickly. He did not want to involve the orcs, but he would if it looked like the ranger and elf were going to try to escape. He had had to take such actions in the past and would not hesitate to do so again if needed. It would be easy enough to pretend he had been in the cell on legitimate business. That would however, condemn Ahnna. He knew he had no reason to believe these people would help him after what they had been through, but he had to try.

“We can help you if you can help me. I know you’ve had no antidote for several days. I... I still have my dose, untaken. If you can help Ahnna, you can have it.”

“I’d help you anyway, Yrin,” Aragorn said softly. “Legolas, I’ll be all right.” He laid his hand over Legolas’, bidding his friend to release him to do what he needed to do.

Legolas backed away reluctantly. Yrin had the look of a desperate man. With Aragorn so weak, attempting to fight was not a good idea. The headservant was asking for their help, even though he had the power to simply command it. The elf respected him for that at least.

Yrin left with Aragorn and locked the door behind them. Quickly, he slipped a long grey smock over the ranger’s head, dressing him like one of the slaves. His fingers trembled as he knotted a grey cord around the ranger’s waist, completing the illusion.

It was then that Aragorn realized the risk the slave was apparently taking by removing him from his cell without authorization.

“No one else knows you’re here,” the ranger commented as Yrin hurried him down the hallway. He knew he was right.

Yrin looked at him sharply, his gaze guarded and wary. “Do not give me any trouble. Ranger, you must believe that I have been as good to you and your friend as I am able. Betray me now, and your fates here will only worsen.”
The slave did not know what kind of response he expected, but whatever it was it was not the large, amused grin the ranger bestowed upon him.

“Yrinvan, not everyone in this world will betray you. You do not need to be so suspicious of me. Relax. I will help your wife if I can. Take me to her.”

The headservant was obliged to partially support the ranger as they made their way carefully and quietly to the servants’ living quarters. Aragorn was still very weak from his ordeal earlier in the day.

In the doorway to Yrinvan’s small room, Aragorn pulled up short when he saw an orc crouching over the restless body of a woman.

Yrin prodded him into the room, not understanding the hesitation. The slave crouched down next to Rhzaq, taking the wet cloth away from the orc. He smoothed Ahnna’s dark hair away from her forehead gently. She was still burning to the touch.

Aragorn knelt next to them after a moment, taking his cue from Yrin on whether or not to be disturbed at the orc’s presence. This was probably one of the strangest situations he had ever been in, but the ranger was not easily flustered. He turned his attention to Ahnna.

The Dúnadan’s hands trembled as he checked her vital signs, although he attempted to keep them steady. He laid his palm on her head. “What happened to her?” he asked, looking up and catching Yrin’s gaze. This woman was very ill.

“Orcs,” Yrin spat the word with distaste that was contradictory to his familiarity with the creature by his side. “Her wounds are not very severe... I do not understand what is wrong.”

Aragorn rubbed his head, trying to still his raging headache. “She’s battling infection and orc poison,” he said. He was very familiar with this particular malady and it was relatively easy to treat. For that, Aragorn was grateful. He feared he might not have been up to dealing with anything more complex.

“They cut her with their knives.” The ranger pointed at the red, swollen area growing around several of the nastier cuts. “I think that is the source of the problem. I can help her, but I will need herbs to make a poultice and to bring her fever down. I’m going to need some sallow bark and yellow root to
start; do you have anything like that?” Aragorn hoped they did not expect him to be able to help her without any kind of supplies.

Yrin nodded quickly. “We keep all kinds of supplies stored in the kitchen. Rhzaq, go tell Tinald what the ranger needs, and ask him to send one of the women with it to help us.”

The orc nodded and hurried away. Aragorn watched him go with a bemused look.

“Is something wrong?” Yrin caught his expression, but did not understand its source. He had long ago stopped considering Rhzaq an orc and forgot it was the elf, and not the ranger, to whom he had explained the situation.

Aragorn shook his head as he gently pulled Ahnna’s clothing away from the worst of the inflamed cuts.

“No, but this is certainly the most interesting house call I have ever made.” The ranger laughed softly, but it gave way to coughing and he was obliged to sink sideways, leaning heavily against the floor.

Yrin knelt behind him, holding his shoulders gently as he coughed. The ranger was hot under his hands, nearly as hot as Ahnna. The man’s hand came away from his mouth spotted with his own blood.

When Aragorn was able to straighten up again Yrin pressed one of the familiar glass vials into his hand. “You had better take this now.”

Aragorn considered the dark liquid in the glass. He knew this was what his body needed, what it craved. The dependency was hard to deal with, but it wasn’t something you could question. He looked at Yrin. The servant needed it to survive just as much as he did, even if Yrin’s addiction was more temperate and less desperate than the ranger’s.

“How often are the slaves treated?” he asked.

“Every two weeks,” Yrin answered. He saw the ranger’s horrified look and shook his head quickly. “No, no, that is not unreasonable. Our bodies are conditioned; we do not need it as much as you do anymore. It is violent in the beginning, but it does get better. You *should* be receiving a small
dose at least every other day at your stage. I fear however, that the Master is not interested in conditioning you,” he whispered the truth softly.

Aragorn snorted softly. “He is only interested in breaking me.”

There was semi-uncomfortable silence between them for a few moments before Aragorn uncorked the vial. He drank half and then passed it back to Yrinvan.

“No, I just told you, you need it more than I do,” Yrinvan tried to refuse.

Aragorn would not take the vial back, as much as he wanted to do so. “Two weeks is a long time, Yrin. She’s going to need you to be strong tomorrow, and the days after that. I can save her life, but she will need your continued care for a time.”

The ranger smiled somewhat wryly. “To be honest, Legolas and I would like to keep you around as well.”

Yrin actually smiled at that. It was the first time the ranger could remember seeing the other man smile with real amusement.

Aragorn turned back to Ahnna. “Legolas tells me she speaks Elvish,” he said softly by way of conversation as he gently bathed and inspected the woman’s injuries. Ahnna’s fevered tossing stilled a little under his experienced touch. The effect was not lost on Yrin, who watched everything that happened very closely.

The slave chuckled softly. “So she does, whether accurately or not, I could not say however, knowing nothing of it myself. To be honest, until I met your friend I thought she had invented most of it herself. She was born far from here, in a town on a lake. There were elves in the woods there she said, and they would visit sometimes. When she was a girl she would often sneak away to watch them. Several of them caught her at it, but they were good to her. She was so enamored of them that they let her visit them every time they were in the area and taught her some of their speech.” The man’s voice was distant, as if trying to imagine something so far removed from all his experience.

“She has been obsessed with them ever since. I think... I think it is her way of trying to hold onto some memory of beauty in a place where only death dwells,” he admitted sadly.
Aragorn nodded. He could understand that very well. “How did she come to be here, Yrin? How did any of you get here?”

The slave shrugged, rubbing his wife’s fingers between his own. “Everyone has their own story. I was born a slave and came here as a child. There is not much to tell. Ahnna was part of a caravan taken in a raid. She was the only survivor from her family. I still remember the day she was brought in. I was only in training then, but already in charge of the new slaves. I saw her walking in with the others through the gate. They were all frightened, crying, pleading. She was but 15, yet she was the only one there who did not look completely terrified.” His voice choked. “I remember, she walked right up to me and said ‘well, what am I supposed to do?’ I think I loved her from that moment.”

Aragorn smiled softly. His throat was strangely tight. The love he saw in Yrin’s eyes made him think of Arwen. It was not often he allowed thoughts of her to come to the front of his mind. Sometimes it simply hurt too much. She was never far from his heart however and he could understand exactly what the other man meant. He did not think he would ever see Arwen again, nor Elrond, nor his brothers. The longer they stayed in Angmar, the more certain he became that he would die here. Every hope of escape had been blocked so far and he had to wonder what they were thinking when they came. Surely it would have been better to die in the wilds than suffer like this.

Aragorn pushed those defeating thoughts aside. At least he was not completely alone. He was both glad and sorry that Legolas was here with him. He knew he would not have made it as long as he had without the elf, and yet a small part of him knew that his worst fears were coming true. Like Finrod and Beren, Legolas was giving himself up to keep the human alive.

Rhzaq returned with another slave woman who laid the requested supplies down on the floor next to them. Steadying himself, Aragorn sorted through the herbs, trying his best to keep his mind on the task at hand and banish thoughts of all else.

“Hold on, Ahnna,” he whispered quietly. “Hold on, and believe that someday you will see beauty again.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Strider? Strider, wake,” the soft voice drew Aragorn back to consciousness. He yawned and stretched.
“Legolas?” he asked groggily as he tried to blink the sleep out of his eyes.

“No,” Yrin’s voice was quiet, but held a small smile. It was the second time the human had mistaken him for his elven friend.

“Yrin,” Aragorn yawned again, trying to remember where he was. He realized he was sitting in the corner of Yrinvan’s tiny home, one hand resting gently upon Ahnna’s steadily rising and falling diaphragm. Automatically, he slid his hand up to her neck and checked her pulse. It was steady. “Her fever’s broken. She’s just sleeping now,” he murmured.

Yrin nodded. “I know. Strider... thank you,” the words were hesitant, but heartfelt.

Aragorn nodded, rising to his knees. “I am glad I could help. I did not realize I had fallen asleep. What time is it?”

“Dawn is already upon us,” Yrin said seriously. “Strider, I’m sorry, but I have to take you back to your cell.” He looked extremely uncomfortable. The man had just saved his wife’s life, and he knew he could offer him almost nothing in return. Fortunately for Yrin, Aragorn did not expect much.

The ranger rose slowly to his feet. “It is well. Legolas will be worried.”

“You are very close to him,” Yrin remarked in subdued tones as he led Aragorn cautiously back towards the cells. The working areas were beginning to come alive with slaves going about their morning duties, but few gave Yrin and his companion a second look. If they did, they quickly pretended they had not. No one was about to question the overseer.

Aragorn nodded. “He is a brother to me.”

“I told him once that you were his weakness, and he was yours. I see now that he is also your strength, and you his.”

“That’s the funny thing, Yrin,” Aragorn conceded softly. “When you give your heart to someone, they are both weakness and strength at the same time. Like you and Ahnna.”
Yrin nodded. It was true.

They reached the cell. Yrinvan took the keys from the wall and opened the door, ushering Aragorn inside and quickly re-claiming the robe he had lent the ranger to help him blend with the servants.

Aragorn let Yrin relieve him of the garment, but his heart suddenly started thudding rapidly as he realized that all was not as it should be.

Yrin was slower to notice as he tucked the bundle under his arm, but Aragorn’s worried question quickly called the problem to his attention as well.

Aragorn turned in a small circle, looking around the cell. “Yrin, where’s Legolas?”

The elf was gone and the cell was empty.
Yrin thought he could hear his heart stop beating. Oh stars, the elf was gone and he was dead. What had happened?!

Aragorn was no less alarmed. He turned to Yrin, his face darkened by fear and misgiving. “Yrin, what is going on? What has been done with him?”

“I-I don’t know, I swear!” Yrinvan shook his head. “If he’s escaped...” he could not finish the thought.

Aragorn interrupted Yrin adamantly, “He would not have left without me. Something’s wrong!” He wished he could believe that escape was the reason for Legolas’ disappearance, but he knew otherwise.

Yrin raised his hands, trying to get the ranger to calm down. “Strider, I promise you I do not know what’s going on anymore than you do. But I will find out. Wait here.” The servant let himself out of the cell quickly, locking the door behind him.

Aragorn leaned against the closed door. Twining his hands around the grate near the top, he pressed his forehead against the cool wood. The sudden uncertainty and concern was nauseating. Mixing the unexpected, sickening worry with lack of sleep and poor physical condition, caused the ranger to feel ill. He had to battle to keep his stomach from heaving.

Yrin strode quickly down the hall, looking for someone to question. Almost everything that went on in this place did so under his supervision. To suddenly be in the dark about where one of his prisoners had gone, was enough to make *him* ill. He pulled up short when he was confronted with Retzhrak’s large form, lurking in a doorway. The orc straightened up when he saw the human, greeting him with a feral smile.

A cold, sinking feeling settled in the pit of Yrin’s stomach.

“Retzhrak, the elf is not in his cell, did you remove him?” he demanded. The keys had been in the hall; anyone could have opened that door. Usually, no one would have dared, but someone obviously had this time.
“Master sent for him,” the big orc growled. “Got some big plan for him, he does. You weren’t handy, so Master asked us to fetch him.” Retzhrak gestured behind him with his misshapen head, indicating several of the orcs that stood just behind him in the shadows.

“Funny thing when we went to get him. He was unchained... and alone.” The orc’s yellow eyes held maliciously gleeful condemnation. “Master says they’re never to leave the cell unless he sends for ’em. This morning, all he wanted was the elf. Leave the human he says. But there was no human to leave. Where was he, I wonder? Everyone knows there’s only one person besides Master who has the keys for prisoner chains. Who do you think that would be, Slave-man? I’m thinking that would be you.”

Yrinvan scowled at the orc, refusing to let the creature see the bubbles of fear churning in his stomach. He wasn’t afraid of the orc, but he was very afraid of what the creature would tell the Nazgûl. After last night, Yrin knew he was walking on thin ice. The Wraith would not forgive him another trespass or even the hint of a trespass right now.

“I believe you think too much,” the human said with cold disdain. “You should not attempt tasks that are so ill-suited for you. The Master put these prisoners in my care. If I judge they need to be out of the wall restraints for awhile, then that is my business. The door locks are just as effective. The human is right in the cell where he belongs, and I dare you to prove otherwise.”

“I’m sure he is *now*, wormie,” Retzhrak sneered. “But it’s our word against yours that he weren’t earlier. And there were plenty of us to see that empty cell. I bet some of your precious slave friends would agree, if asked properly. I think this is one you won’t be able to squeal yourself out of so slick. Master will be very interested in our side of the story.”

Yrin’s heart was pumping in his throat as he tried to consider his options. The Nazgûl would take his word over that of an orc’s most of the time, but his against all of them? Especially after last night? His stomach clenched. The other slaves were loyal to him, but if their own lives were on the line he knew they would admit to having seen him and the ranger together. The thin ledge of leeway he had been surviving on thus far had just run out.

Yet he knew, that if Retzhrak were only interested in getting him killed, the Witch King would already have been informed of his disobedience and he would be hanging from a gibbet in one of the Wraith’s torture rooms. The fact that the orc was still threatening him and not yet acting out those threats told him there must be some room for negotiation.

“What do you want, Retzhrak?” Yrinvan asked coldly. He was not an easy man to blackmail, but at the moment it would seem he had no choice.
“I want to put red-hot maggot holes in your belly, slave scum,” the orc replied, viciously candid. “But I can wait for that. Master won’t need you forever and when he’s tired of you, you’re mine. Right now... I want the elf. If you can have your way with the prisoners, so can I. We have business with that one that we never finished.”

Yrin’s fists balled at his sides. “Don’t be ridiculous, Retzhrak! The elf belongs to the Master. He’d have both our heads if I let you play with him.”

“Then talk to the Master,” the orc growled. “Tell him we want our due. That filthy elf killed a lot of my people when it came here. We have our blood rights. He won’t listen to me, but you tell him and he’ll listen.” Retzhrak proved that he was, unfortunately, much smarter than most people expected.

Yrinvan glared at the orc. His heart twisted. After what Strider had just done for him, granting Retzhrak’s cruel request felt like quite a betrayal. Unfortunately he did not see what other options he possessed.

“All right, I will speak with the Master about it when he has time. I’ll relay your request, but that is *all*. I am not about to stick my neck out for you,” the slave said heatedly. He hated having to do this, but at least he would make sure the Nazgûl set limits on whatever the orcs had in mind.

Retzhrak grabbed the front of Yrin’s tunic. He pulled the man close until the slave was almost overpowered by the orc’s foul breath.

“Oh you better do better than just ask, wormie. We get our request, or we go to the Master with our own little story. Then maybe we get your woman back and your brats too. I like the little ones. Tender meat they have and they squeal so well when you pluck out their eyes. Oh, we’d have a lot of fun with them. Keep that in mind!” He released Yrin with a brutal shove.

Yrin could not catch himself and fell hard against the wall, sinking halfway to the floor. He pulled himself up again quickly, his glare tinted with ice, yet realizing that this time his domination would not win. He slowly straightened his tunic.

“Touch me again, Retzhrak. I dare you,” he hissed. “Touch me again and I will tell the Master. Then it will not matter *what* you say. Don’t you ever DARE to threaten my family again! Remember you’re not the only one who has things they could tell the Master,” the headservant threatened darkly.
Turning on his heel he stalked away. He would, unfortunately, have to do as the orcs asked. Despite what he said to Retzhrek, he knew that the orcs’ damaging testimony could get his family into trouble too deep to escape. He cringed inwardly. What was it that Strider had said last night? *Not everyone in this world will betray you?* The slave shook his head sadly. The man did not yet understand the cruel reality of this place.

At least he knew where the elf was now. Although going back to tell Strider that his friend was with the Nazgûl for reasons he did not know, was not going to be the best news he could have delivered.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“What is it? What did you find?” Elladan called as he ran lightly across the snow clad earth towards the forest’s edge. Elrohir was not far behind him. Their breath fogged and hung upon the frozen air.

They had found the area where Beoma described the battle taking place and continued on to the branch in the river where the Beornings had separated from their missing friends. From there, it was difficult to decide where to go next. Time and heavy snows had effectively erased or buried any tracks that might have helped them.

They had been searching for several days now, but were not sure what exactly they hoped to find. It was obvious no one had been here for a long period of time. Whatever tracks there had been, were long ago buried under a blanket of snow.

Shouts from across the river brought Elladan and Elrohir hurrying to rejoin their wood-elf companions. The twins jumped lightly across a broken line of stones that loosely bridged the river. Ice on the stream’s bank crackled underfoot.

Raniean was kneeling by the base of a gigantic, hollow oak tree. The mammoth giant was bedecked with glistening icicles. A strange symbol seemed to have been etched into the rough bark of the tree. The oak’s trunk was frosted along one side with a thin layer of clinging snow. One of the two wood-elves had brushed the snow away from the etching, making it stand out even more.

“What are those marks?” Elrohir asked as he and his brother came to a halt.
Trelan ran his fingers over the chipped bark. “It’s a sign. Our warriors use them to mark paths. This is Legolas’ sign. Due to the way it’s situated, Raniean thinks he left something here.”

“And that would be?” Elladan leaned over Raniean’s shoulder as the wood-elf rose to his feet.

Raniean sighed, his fingers tightly closed around something in his palm.

“You aren’t going to like this,” he warned. Opening his hand he passed Elladan a little leather pouch, such as was often used by the brothers to carry herbs. There was a hard, round object inside the pouch.

Elladan hesitated to open the bag. It was tied off with a semi-distinctive type of slipknot he liked to use. He had been attempting to teach his little brother how to do the knot before Estel left Rivendell. The knot had been loosened enough to let the mouth of the bag gape open. Raniean had already seen whatever was inside the pouch.

Taking a deep breath, the eldest twin emptied the bag into his hand. His heart sank. The ring of Barahir shone dully against his skin. The green stone winked dimly in the fading light.

“Oh no...” Elrohir voiced the emotion for both of them. “Not again. Not Estel.”

It was not the first time finding Barahir had been a harbinger of ill tidings for their little brother. Nor was it the first time in the past year or so that they had had a loved one disappear and been left with only a token that told them that wherever they were going, it was not good.

What would have caused Aragorn to abandon such a historic and personal item? Elrohir closed his eyes tightly and Elladan squeezed his shoulder comfortingly.

Raniean and Trelan exchanged worried looks. Legolas and Aragorn had both been here, but the signs said it was months ago. Where were they now? Where could they even begin to look?
Legolas gave the manacles around his wrists an experimental tug. Unfortunately, they held quite firmly. Resigning himself to the fact that he could not escape, he stared up at the ceiling above him and tried not to think too much. He knew all too well that, in situations like this, your own mind could be your worst enemy. It conjured up horrible possibilities with which to fill the empty minutes. His own long history of such experiences had given his mind plenty of references upon which to draw.

Held flat on his back on the floor, Legolas waited to find out why he had been brought here. He looked from side to side, but all he could see was the wooden frame onto which he was chained. His ankles were fastened directly to the floor, but his arms were locked inside iron cuffs that were connected to the wooden frame on either side of him. The orcs had removed his tunics, chained him in place and left him.

He was neither pleased nor surprised, when the door opened and he felt the dark swirl of the Nazgûl’s presence enter the room. Lifting his head, he watched the Nazgûl place a large metal chest of some kind upon a rough stone ledge built into one of the walls. The elf’s sharp senses picked up the sounds of movement from inside the casket.

“Where is Strider?” the elf demanded coldly.

The Wraith seemed amused at being interrogated by a person who was chained to the floor.

“He is not my interest today. You are. Some of my underlings are concerned about how much his fragile human body can take. I had thought to give him a day to recover, unless you displease me, in which case I shall resume his lessons immediately. Do you want me to do that, Slave?” the Wraith inquired harshly.

“No.” Legolas lay his head back against the floor. He would be the Nazgûl’s amusement for the day if it bought his friend a little much needed time to recuperate.

The Witch King laughed. “Still so willing to sacrifice yourself for others, Slave? Even when you served me, I never understood this about you. You did not make a very good slave then. It will be different this time.” The Wraith slowly worked the latches on the iron chest in the corner of the room.

“I erred last time,” he continued in a toneless voice. “I thought I could subdue the will of an Elda by force. It was successful for a time perhaps, but ultimately futile. I will not make such a mistake
again. When you come to serve me, it will be by your own choice.”

“Then it will never happen,” Legolas said bluntly, still staring up at the ceiling.

“We will see.” The Wraith seemed unconcerned. “Time changes many things, and you and I have that time to spend, do we not? Unlike your mortal friend. I judge you will learn slower than he, but even so, in the meantime, you can still be useful to me, your *highness*.”

Legolas shifted in his bonds. He did not like the way the Nazgûl chose to use his title. “If you think I will betray anything about my people to you, then I severely overestimated your intelligence.” His tone was flat, a compromise between resignation and defiance.

“I didn’t expect that you would. However, I do not need your compliance for you to help me,” the Witch King assured, ignoring the elf’s insult for the moment. The prince would be paying for his misconduct soon enough. “You see, I received something very special from Dol Guldur recently. Something I think you will recognize.”

The Wraith opened a small door in the side of the chest, exposing the dark interior. For a moment nothing happened and the skittering sounds inside halted. Then a few long, thin, dark legs appeared around the edges of the opened hatch, testing the air.

Legolas’ gaze fixed on the opening in a mixture of confusion and apprehension as he realized what was inside the container.

Two black-bodied spiders, a little bigger than a man’s fist, crawled hesitantly out of the chest. Presently they were joined by a few more. Continued sounds of movement inside the trunk suggested that these creatures were merely a few of many.

The Wraith saw the recognition in the elf’s eyes. “You are familiar with our spiders, I think? As you can tell, these are only babies, but we have high hopes for this brood. They are being specially trained. When they grow up, they will not be merely an irritating menace. They will be highly skilled assassins with a taste for elf blood. Correction, your highness, thanks to you, they will have a taste for *royal* elf blood.”

Suddenly, as if with unspoken consent, the spiders surged forward. A dark wave of small, scuttling bodies streamed out of the opened gateway from all angles. They poured out of the hole in their previous prison and down the wall like a liquid wave. The Nazgûl’s will guided their small minds,
Legolas’ body tensed as the spiders swarmed towards him. As soon as they hit the floor he could not see them anymore, but he could hear them: a thousand small, sticky feet pattering around him.

He felt them through his leggings as they crawled up his legs and then they reached his naked arms and chest. The contact made his flesh crawl as their small feet brushed over him, tickling and prickling in a very disturbing manner. The elf tried to repress a shudder of horror as he felt their barbed legs tangle lightly in his hair, moving about there.

He didn’t know when the first one bit him; it seemed as if they all started at once. Small, stinging pricks covered every inch of exposed flesh and nipped him through his leggings. Legolas bucked sharply, twisting in his bonds and trying to throw the small creatures off of him. They swarmed over his face and Legolas’ heart raced in helpless terror. He tossed his head desperately from side to side, but he could not escape them.

The Witch King chuckled darkly. “You see? You shall help me. I shall train them to feed on your blood. Once they have a taste for you, all other food shall seem to them unsatisfactory. They shall crave elf blood, and most of all the blood of your kin.”

Buried under the swarm, Legolas emitted a short gasp as he desperately scrubbed his head back and forth upon the stone floor. The motion got several of the spiders even more tangled in his long blond hair and they bit at him viciously. The elf was hyperventilating. Every inch of his flesh was crawling and he could not suppress his horror.

“Oh yes,” the Wraith purred, reveling in the elf’s distress. “They aren’t lethal yet, not when they’re so small. Once they are grown however... they will be ideal killers. No walls can stop them; no defenses can keep them out. All it takes is one. Tell me, does your father sleep with the windows of his chambers open?”

Legolas’ heart tightened painfully. He happened to know that Thranduil did sleep with his windows open most of the time. Valar, no, don’t let this succeed. Don’t let the Wraiths use him against his father and his people this way!

The Nazgûl did not expect an answer; he was merely taunting the prince. “It matters little. Even if he does not, there are vents, doorways... They *will* find a way.”
Legolas wanted to scream. The pain from the stings had not been particularly bad at first, but as bite layered upon bite and the spider venom flowed into his system, his nerves began to shriek. The spiders were everywhere. He had to close his eyes to keep them out, but he could feel them biting his eyelids.

Their strong legs and stinging fangs probed everywhere. He could feel them in his hair, his ears, prying at his tightly closed lips, crawling over his nose and hindering his breathing. Panic engulfed him fully. He wanted to cry out but he was afraid to open his mouth. His body twisted in its bonds, squirming painfully against the rough stone floor beneath him. The spiders crawled under him and he smashed some of them with his body.

The Nazgûl did not intend to let the elf harm too many of his prodigies. He nodded to several orcs that had entered the room without Legolas’ notice. The orcs moved forward, working a wheel mechanism connected to the frame holding the prince’s arms. The frame creaked upright, dragging the elf into a sitting position. The change in position effectively removed any hindrance to the spiders’ conquest and any way he had to fight back.

The prince tossed his head even more wildly, desperate to shake the arachnids. It did no good. They surged up his back as well as his chest, crawling over and into his clothing and spreading fire throughout his entire body.

Legolas struggled fiercely for several minutes, but the more venom entered his system, the more sluggish his movements became. Creeping numbness spread through his body. It was a sensation he recognized. He had been spider-poisoned before and fear made his throat dry as he realized that he was going to be left paralyzed in the middle of this merciless swarm.

His feelings did not dull. The pain remained white-hot, a searing irritation that made him want to scratch his skin off. Presently however, his muscles stopped responding to his brain and he hung limply from the frame. The spiders continued to feed on him, drinking his blood and injecting their own, irritating poisons as they did. Many of them stung him with their stingers as well as their fangs purely out of spite.

Legolas’ head spun dizzily. He wished he could pass out, but his consciousness lingered painfully. He could not move. All he could do was feel as the spiders crawled over him, biting, probing, drinking his blood and returning only pain and poison. He could have cried at his helpless terror, but even that action was denied him.

The Nazgûl’s chilling laughter filled his ears.
Aragorn rubbed his wrists absently. It was good to be able to move, and the antidote Yrin gave him last night had cleared his head a bit. Tinald brought him his midday meal, but he could barely eat. His stomach was tied in knots. It had been hours and Legolas was still gone.

The pain in his shoulder intensified and Aragorn unconsciously pulled back into the corner of the room. His body knew when the Nazgûl was near.

Keys rattled in the lock.

The door to the cell opened as it had a hundred times before, but for the first time Aragorn was as glad to see it as he was anxious of what lay beyond. He had hoped that Legolas was being returned, but was startled when the prince’s body was flung into the cell.

Legolas hit the ground hard and rolled several times. He came to a stop face down, his golden hair tangled about his head and shoulders. The elf did not move.

Despite the dark waves of fear rolling off the Nazgûl standing over the limp elf, Aragorn crawled quickly forward, towards his friend. The elf’s creamy skin was covered with a swollen, irritated red rash.

Aragorn rolled Legolas onto his back, smoothing the tangled locks away from his face. He started in alarm when he saw that Legolas’ unblinking eyes were partially open. They stared at the ceiling and did not react. The elf’s face was mottled. His eyelids were nearly swollen shut, but remained partly cracked. The blue orbs inside were glassy.

“Legolas...” Aragorn touched his friend’s hot, flushed cheek gently. “What did you do to him?!” the human demanded hoarsely, turning his burning gaze upon the Nazgûl standing over them.

The Nazgûl just gave a low, amused hiss. Turning, he stalked out of the room, closing and locking the door behind him.
“Legolas, Legolas wake...” Aragorn shook his friend gently, trying to get some response from his friend. He had never seen Legolas unconscious with his eyes open before and was alarmed about what was wrong with the elf.

A shiver ran down Aragorn’s spine when Legolas’ blue eyes moved. Slowly, almost painfully they turned to fix on Aragorn’s face. The human’s heart froze as the spark of recognition passed between them. He realized to his horror that Legolas was awake and completely aware. For whatever reason, he was simply unable to move or respond.

“Valar, what has he done to you...?” Aragorn whispered in horror.

Legolas’ hair was still clinging in matted tangles to the prince’s face and Aragorn tried to sweep them away. The golden tresses clung to the ranger’s fingers, sticking to his hands as he tried to pull free. Looking closer he realized that sticky tendrils of webbing coated the elf’s hair and trailed down the sides of his face. In the dim light, he could see more glittering trails covering the Prince’s red-pocked skin.

Understanding came to the ranger slowly. Upon closer inspection, the thousands of swollen blotches that created Legolas’ rash looked suspiciously like bites.

Legolas must have been in this state for quite some time already for him to be regaining any kind of control back.

The elf was a captive in his own body. Legolas could feel Aragorn’s hands upon him, he could see and hear the ranger’s worry, but he could not respond. His eyes moved at his command again now, but anything more than that was beyond his grasp. It was maddening. His body flamed like a searing prison around him. He itched so badly he wanted to cry. Without having any control over the situation, a single tear slid from the corner of his eye.

Aragorn brushed it gently away. He knew that Legolas must be in intense pain. He wanted to help his friend, but he had nothing with which he could treat the elf, nothing that could ease his suffering. The ranger fought to hold back his own tears as he held the elf’s gaze.

Carefully, Aragorn ran his hands across the mottled surface of Legolas’ arms, back and stomach as he held the elf in his arms. He hoped the contact would give a gentle distraction to the irritation and discomfort the multiple bites were no doubt causing his friend.
“Hold on, Legolas...” he murmured into the elf’s sticky hair as he held Legolas upright against him. “We’re going to make it, my friend. Somehow...” his voice wavered. Tears slid down his own cheeks. “Somehow.”
We were meant to live for so much more
Have we lost ourselves?
Somewhere we live inside
Somewhere we live inside...
Dreaming about providence
And whether mice or men have second tries
Maybe we've been living with our eyes half open
Maybe we're bent and broken
   We want more than this world's got to offer
We want more than the wars of our fathers
And everything inside, screams for second life...

-- Switchfoot ~~~~~~~

Legolas recovered slowly. When the paralysis finally released him, he went through an excruciating phase of uncontrollable trembling. Aragorn held him through the shaking fits, smoothing his hair and whispering to him in soothing tones.

By the time Yrin brought them both their supper that evening, Legolas’ trembling had subsided, but the elf was weak, exhausted and in quite a lot of pain.

Yrinvan placed their food on the floor before them, and then glanced quickly at the door before sliding a small jar out of the sleeve of his robe.

“Here,” he whispered, sliding it to Aragorn. “For your friend. It’s a cream that will help with the itching.” He glanced towards Legolas who was leaning against the wall.

The elf was rubbing one of his arms with small, distressed movements. His body was tense. He wanted to claw his skin off, but restrained himself, knowing that scratching the bites would only make them worse.

Aragorn accepted the jar and quickly tucked it away and out of sight behind him in case anyone should disturb them. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Yrin nodded, his eyes lowered. He did not want, nor deserve the ranger’s gratitude.
“The Master is going away for a few days,” Yrin confided in them quietly. “You will not be disturbed while he is gone, but he does not allow me to give you any antidote during this time either.”

Aragorn nodded. He would manage. He had no choice. Sharing Yrin’s dose last night would help him through at least a little.

“Yrin, is he taking the spiders back to Dol Guldur?” Legolas’ quiet voice asked from the corner. The silent agony in his tone made Aragorn give his friend a compassionate look. He knew it was killing Legolas to know that he was being used against his father and his people in any way.

The slave shook his head. “I do not believe so. He... he indicated that he means to give them much more training before he considers them ready.”

Legolas shuddered.

“You mean he intends to let those disgusting creatures feed on Legolas again?” Aragorn hissed harshly.

Yrin nodded slowly. “I fear so.” He wanted to lie to them, to make it easier somehow, but false hope was pointless. “Perhaps... perhaps many times,” he admitted reluctantly.

Legolas dropped his head to his chest, looking away. He tried not to show how much that idea terrified him.

Aragorn was not fooled. “Yrin, I can’t let that happen.”

“You don’t have a choice, Strider.” Yrin shook his head. “The Master is not done with you yet either. I wish...” his voice trailed away. He met Aragorn’s gaze first, and then Legolas’. His eyes were sincere. “I wish I could help you. I truly do. But there is no way I can, and no way that you can help your friend, or yourself. You see? Hope is something we do not have here.”

“Yrin,” Aragorn’s voice was equally quiet and sincere. “There is always hope. What would you do if you were I, and Legolas was Ahnna?”
The slave sighed. He reached into his pocket. He knew what he would do if he and Ahnna were in their situation.

“There... there is one way I can help you.” Yrin held up a corked bottle. It was not antidote, although the vial was similar. “We call this death water,” he said quietly. “This is the only mercy the Master ever lets me dispense. It is quick and painless. You could go together.”

Yrin knew that the Nazgûl would kill him for giving his prisoners a way out before he was done with them, but the Master didn’t have to know it was his fault they died. The Wraith was going to be away... he could shift the blame to the orcs. He would find a way. It was the only kindness he could offer the two friends, but it was offered sincerely.

Aragorn swallowed hard as he realized what Yrin was offering them. He looked to Legolas. The elf gave his head a slight shake, indicating the same thing that Aragorn’s heart was already telling him.

“No, Yrin,” he refused. “We appreciate the offer... but no.”

The headservant looked saddened, but tucked the bottle back into his pocket. “As you wish. I should warn you though, things will only become worse when the Master returns. If you change your mind, let me know.”

Unfortunately, Yrin was right. A few days of reprieve were followed by renewed interest in both prisoners. Sometimes they were together, more often they were apart. It came to a point where neither discussed anymore what happened to them when they were taken out of the cell. The small room had quixotically become their refuge. There they were together. There they drew strength from one another as their world grew progressively darker.

Aragorn was weakening fast. Legolas feared for him more every day. The ranger was constantly ill. He almost did not remember anymore how it felt to be well.
His resistance was crumbling slowly, but it was not fast enough to suit the Witch King. The Wraith pressed him very hard, sensing that the man was nearing the edge of his strength.

The Nazgûl’s patience was wearing thin. Almost without enjoyment, he delivered a few more frustrated lashes from his nightmare rod to his hapless prisoner. The body at his feet jerked and moaned in pain, but was otherwise incapable of responding.

“You are a fool to fight me so long,” the Nazgûl informed him in an impatient voice.

Aragorn, curled on the floor, did not answer. “You are a fool to keep trying,” he thought bitterly. “Just kill me now and get this over with. Isn’t that what you really want?” He was too weak and in too much pain to speak the words aloud.

The Wraith stooped and jerked the human’s head up by the hair. He was breaking the man’s body, but his spirit refused to yield.

Aragorn shuddered as the Nazgûl’s evil cloud intensified around them.

The Witch King looked deep into his prisoner’s heart, carefully weighing the information he had already discovered about this man. Every creature has its weak point. The trick was finding what it was, and when to make use of the flaw. He knew that Legolas’ weaknesses lay in two places: his lack of self-preservation and his devotion to those dear to him. He had learned that about the elf a long time ago, but what about this man? Where were the cracks in his armor? He wagered that they were similar to the elf’s vulnerabilities, yet not quite the same. Everyone was different and had to be handled accordingly. What did the ranger *really* fear?

Aragorn struggled weakly with the painful grip on his hair. He squirmed against the odd sensation of being searched and mentally violated. The Nazgûl wasn’t forcing his way into his head, but he was curling sly around the edges of the man’s consciousness as if reading any thoughts that the Dûnadan was not strong enough to shield.

“You think you are strong enough to resist me? You are not. I see inside you, ranger. You are weak,” the Nazgûl purred softly.

The words hit home more than Aragorn wanted to admit. He was weak, weak and helpless.
“Yes...” the Ringwraith hissed. He knew he was on the right course now. “You are weak. It is in your blood, your soul... I feel it. That hidden corruption you don’t want anyone else to know about. The darkness you think you can hide from those mighty friends of yours... but someday they’ll see through you, Ranger. You can’t hide what you are forever and, because of you, those you care for will suffer.” He echoed Aragorn’s own deepest fears with cruel insight.

Aragorn’s heart raced. What was the Nazgûl saying, what did he mean? It smote him hard that the evil creature could strike so accurately at his most vulnerable fears.

The Nazgûl pulled the ranger to his feet. Holding the human’s back against him, the evil being looked over Aragorn’s shoulder, pressing the side of his hood against the side of the human’s face.

Aragorn tried desperately to pull away from the evil presence, but the Nazgûl held him tightly in a steel grip. He rubbed the side of his cloak-shrouded head against the ranger’s cheek, enjoying the shivers that ran through the body he held against him.

“Yes...” the Witch King hissed the word again. “I feel it in you as I feel it in myself. You see, we are two of a kind, you and I. You fool yourself because you choose the company of the elves, but you can never change what you are: mortal, corruptible.”

In the darkness of the room Aragorn was aware of the eerie flashing of the Nazgûl’s ring. It burned against his flesh where the Witch King’s hands on his chest held him pinned.

“I had a choice to make once, and so will you.” The Wraith continued to purr the dark, evil words in his captive’s ear, filling him with fear and despair. “I know you hate me ranger, but you also know I am powerful beyond the puny limits of our race. I can see your future and I tell you: you will be faced with my choice and you will fall as I have fallen. You will find your true calling at my Master’s bidding, to the ruin and destruction of all you now hold dear. You are simply too weak to overcome your own mortality, your own... weakness.”

Aragorn tried to close his ears against the painful, destructive words, but they cut like daggers of fire. The Wraith was lying to him, he had to be. The evil one couldn’t see his future without knowing his true past... could he? He was lying! Yet lingering doubt gnawed the ranger’s stomach as the evil words pressed deeply into all his most deeply seated insecurities.

“I do not lie,” the Wraith said sharply, one gloved hand tightening on the side of the ranger’s jaw.
Aragorn tensed and started at the way the Witch King had apparently read his thoughts. Valar, was he getting that easy to read? What did that mean for the rest of the Wraith’s words? How deep was he really seeing?

The Wraith turned Aragorn’s head sharply in his hand, forcing the man to stare into the black emptiness of his hood. In the void two gleaming red embers burned faintly, like malevolent eyes.

“It is already happening, do you not see it?” the Nazgûl said, enjoying the tense fear and anguish flowing from his prisoner. “You already serve my Master, whether you acknowledge it or not. An army of orcs could not storm Lasgalen by force, nor could they have obtained for me a gift as costly as the one you delivered. You brought the Prince of Mirkwood right into my hands, and through what I have taken from him his people will fall. He will die here because of you. They all will.”

Aragorn jerked his head violently away from the Wraith, unwilling to let the creature see the absolute horror and devastation that those words wrought inside of him. They were indeed his own worst fears, cruelly shoved in his face and ground in with evil certainty. His heart burned in anguish. He had no strength left to repel the Nazgûl’s lies, especially when they sounded far too much like the horrible truth.

“No,” the ranger breathed the word in pain-filled denial, yet even as he said it, his conviction wavered. Two days ago he had had to watch helplessly as the Wraith let his spiders feed on Legolas yet again. It was a terrifying sight. Worse, it proved that the Nazgûl had already achieved his objective with them. The two friends had been chained side by side, but the spiders completely ignored the human. They had been well taught to desire only the Prince’s blood. Once they were full grown and set free in Mirkwood... the ranger could not finish that thought.

“No.” The word was a painful half-sob now, as the human tried to cling to the hope that had always kept him going. He forced himself to believe that this dark future the Wraith painted for him did not have to be true.

“Yes,” the Nazgûl countered firmly. He shoved Aragorn into the arms of several waiting orcs. “You do not believe me? Then I think the time has come to clarify matters. I have what I need from your friend. *You* are the one I am interested in, Ranger, remember that. Everything and everyone else is expendable to me now.”

The Wraith had his orcs take Aragorn to a room where a deep recess dissected the middle of the floor. The ceiling overhead was not finished and thick beams crisscrossed the rafters. The human was pushed to the back of the room and a heavy iron grate was lowered from between the rafters above, sliding into the grove in the floor and trapping the ranger.
The orcs left, but the Nazgûl, on the opposite side of the grate, remained.

Aragorn waited uneasily in his new cage, not sure what the Wraith intended to do with him this time.

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“Yrinvan?” Legolas was standing at the door of the cell, peering out of the small, barred window. His voice caught the servant as the man walked past.

Yrin stopped. “Legolas, I can’t give you any word. I told you I did not know what the Master was doing with Strider today,” he said wearily. He did not want to talk to the elf right now. This morning he had finally passed on Retzhrak’s request to the Nazgûl, who had, unfortunately, promised to grant it when it served his purposes.


Yrin closed his eyes and turned to face Legolas. “She is well,” he said quietly. There was silence for a moment. Yrin balled his fists.

“Look, I am grateful, what more do you want from me? I offered you the only way out that I know, all right?” his voice was a tense hiss. “I never promised Strider anything I haven’t given him!”

Legolas’ eyes regarded the human calmly. “I never said you did.”

The slave looked away. He was not in a good mood. His conscience was eating at him and he did not like discovering that he still had one to worry about.

“Yrin, the Nazgûl is killing him,” Legolas said quietly. “Soon it will be too late. You have seen that I spoke the truth, he *is* a healer. If you help us, we can help you. I know it is hard, I know it is terrifying. I do not blame you for not wanting to heed what I say. But you have to believe that I
speak the truth when I tell you that your hope is dying before your eyes. If you do not choose to take hold of it soon, you will never have another chance.”

“We never have had a chance,” Yrin hissed somewhat bitterly. He shook his head and stalked away. Part of him wanted to grab onto what Legolas said, but he didn’t see how he could. “I won’t risk my wife and children for a hopeless dream.”

“You do have a chance, and you do have a choice. You were meant for more than this existence you have accepted. It’s in your hands Yrin. Your future, your children’s future,” Legolas called after him. “Do you want this place to swallow their lives too? Do you want to have to look into their eyes some day and tell them it was just too dangerous to give them a dream?”

Yrinvan tensed but did not stop. His steps rang hollowly in the stone hall. Hollow. Like his heart felt. At the end of the passage he heard noises behind him and turned back. There were orcs at the door of the cell. There was a brief scuffle before they dragged Legolas out into the hall with them, his hands bound before him. The elf resisted and they clubbed him between the shoulders, driving the fair being to his knees and kicking him in the stomach before hauling him away.

Yrin let his breath out slowly. He hated this. He hated it with a passion that he found surprising. His heart had been numbed, but Legolas and Strider had been poking it painfully back to life. Life here had always been horrible, but there was comfort to be had in simply accepting that there was no alternative. Now... now he was filled with doubt.

He reached the lower levels almost without realizing he was there. “Papa!” a small ball of curly dark tangles threw itself into his arms.

“Mahdi!” Yrin swung his little daughter up into his arms. “What are you doing here? You should be with the other young ones. Come, I will take you back.”

The child snuggled compliantly in his arms, playing with the neck of his tunic. “I lost a tooth Papa. I will be big soon,” she said wisely, pointing to a little gap in her thin, almost translucent teeth.

Yrin smiled and nodded, but his heart ached. Mahdi was too young to be losing her baby teeth already. Her hair was thinning and her skin was too rough and dry for a child her age.

Her jumper was sliding off one pale little shoulder and Yrin straightened it, his thumb lingering painfully across the dark scar under his hands. The black wound on her shoulder was red around the
edges and irritated. The children of Angmar were introduced to the drug early, almost as soon as they were weaned. Mahdi had received her mark only a few months before the elf and the ranger were brought here. Her body was not handling the treatment well. Her health had been steadily declining. It happened sometimes. Not all the young ones could handle the poison, or the harsh cure. Too many died before they had seen but a handful of seasons.

Yrin held Mahdi closely. Was he taking her future away from her without even a struggle? He didn’t know. He simply didn’t know.

*A~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Aragorn moved forward, gripping the thick, iron lattice tightly when he saw the orcs drag Legolas into the other half of the room where the Witch King waited.

The Nazgûl didn’t say a word, but forced the elf to stand on a chair, his hands bound before him. He had his orcs place a noose around the prince’s neck. The other end of the rope was pulled taught and securely fastened around one of the exposed ceiling beams above them. The elf had to rise up on his toes a little to keep the cord from digging too painfully into his throat.

Legolas stared straight ahead as the orcs yanked the rope around his neck tight. He flinched, but did not move. His gaze darted sideways towards the spot where Aragorn was pressed against the gate that separated them. He did not know what was happening. The orcs had dragged him from their cell without preamble and brought him here. The situation he was finding himself in made him increasingly uneasy.

Aragorn did not understand either, but his heart raced as the orcs put the rope over his friend’s head. There were few non-fatal reasons for such actions. He had to believe the Nazgûl didn’t want to kill Legolas yet, but at the same time horrible uncertainty gripped him. The Wraith had made it very clear that he was willing to count some people as expendable if it suited his goals.

“A long time ago, my Master had several difficult prisoners, not unlike the two of you. One of them was a man.” The Wraith’s low voice was grating. He ran his fingers through Legolas’ hair, the sharp joints on his gloves catching and snagging lightly. “One of them was elven royalty, although he was a King, not just a prince. One by one their companions were killed in front of them.”
Aragorn felt short of breath as he realized the Nazgûl was speaking of Beren and Finrod Felagund.

“Foolishly, they thought they could protect one another,” the Witch King continued. “They thought they were strong. The elf was, but the man was weak. The elf was the one that died.”

Glaring directly at Aragorn, the Wraith deliberately kicked the chair out from under Legolas’ feet.

Legolas’ hands flew to his neck. His wrists were bound but he could still move his fingers and he twisted them desperately into the cord that snapped tight around his throat. Tugging hard at the noose in a desperate attempt to stave off strangling, he choked painfully. The elf was strong and his fierce hold on the rope kept the noose from cutting off all his air as he dangled. He tried to climb up the rope, but the orcs grabbed at his legs and tugged him sharply downward whenever he tried. The pressure this placed upon the cord around his neck was unbearable. He didn’t dare move his fingers out of the noose now and so there was no escape. The elf twisted painfully at the end of the rope, holding himself but a few inches away from death. The orcs reached for his arms to put an end to that, but the Nazgûl stopped them.

“No, let him struggle. He cannot fight it forever. Eventually his struggles will still and the breath will leave his body...” the Wraith wasn’t even looking at the dangling elf. He was watching Aragorn the whole time.

“Save him if you can, Ranger. The gate is not locked. Lift it if you are strong enough and I will let you take him down. Otherwise... you can watch him die.” The Nazgûl taunted the human with his own weakness.

Aragorn was already throwing himself against the heavy grate with everything his injured body possessed. It groaned against its grooves in the stone walls, but he could not make it budge.

The man was shaking, whether from fear or exertion he did not know. He jammed his good shoulder against the unforgiving bars, pushing hard. Nothing. The gate was far too heavy for any human to lift. Yet Aragorn would not give up. He tugged at the rough iron lattice until his hands bled.

Legolas wasn’t moving much anymore, trying to conserve his strength. He found he was unable to grip the rope any higher. He could not leverage himself upward; all he could do was try to keep it from completely choking him. With each passing moment, that was becoming more difficult. He could hold on for a long time, but not forever. He caught Aragorn’s eyes for a moment and shook his head as much as he could. He was trying to tell the ranger that he knew it was hopeless and to conserve his strength. Legolas did not blame his friend for his fate.
“No!” Aragorn nearly screamed. He shook the bars between them desperately, making the iron clink and rattle.

The Prince’s lips were turning blue. Slowly his hands began to go slack against the ropes as his body settled down harder into the noose.
PART SEVENTEEN - Walking the Edge

I walk to the edge again, searching for the truth

Taken by the memories of all that I've been through

If I could hear your voice, I know that I would be okay

I know that I've been wrong but I'm begging you to stay,

Won't you stay...

Will you be here? Or will I be alone.

Will I be scared?

You'll teach me how to be strong

And if I fall down will you help me carry on?

I cannot do this alone.

-- 12 Stones

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After many long minutes of fighting the impossible gate, Aragorn sank to his knees, pressing his head against the bars. His strength was gone, his head spinning. Black and yellow spots danced before his eyes. His body was too weak for him to force it through this much strain, too weak to deal with the heart-stopping horror and heartbreak pounding through him... too weak. Aragorn balled his fists. The Nazgûl was right. He was always too weak and now his greatest fear about this whole situation was coming true.

Tears slid down his face and he sobbed softly in defeat.

The Nazgûl chuckled darkly. There was a soft ‘snick’ sound followed by a loud thump.
Aragorn looked up quickly and found that the Nazgûl had cut Legolas down. The elf lay on his side on the floor, gasping for breath. His numb, fumbling fingers pried the rope away from his neck. He convulsed, his shoulders shaking. For a little while the prince had thought he was actually going to die.

“You are lucky that, for the present, I think he may still be of some use to me alive, human. But remember, it is only my will that keeps him so. Life is a gift I can revoke at any time, for both of you. You would do well to remember that,” the Wraith threatened. “Take them back to their cell. The ranger has much to think about.”

Five orcs slowly raised the heavy iron gate via a pulley. Legolas was not able to stand right away and one of the orcs moved to sling the elf over his shoulder. Aragorn pushed the foul creature roughly out of the way and scooped the elf up in his own arms. In his current state the weight was almost too much, but he would not let these evil beings touch his vulnerable friend.

Legolas insisted on being put down halfway back and Aragorn was not sorry to relinquish the burden. He fingered the ugly rope burn around the prince’s neck gently as the two friends limped back into their cell. The orcs yanked them apart, snapping them back into the chains on the wall.

“Legolas... I’m sorry... I couldn’t... I wasn’t....” Aragorn’s voice was soft and miserable as the orcs forced him back into his restraints.

“No one could have,” the elf’s voice was roughened from near strangulation, but firm. “It was an impossible task, he knew that. He only wanted to break you and steal your hope.” The prince winced as the heavy collar was closed around his aching neck. His windpipe ached fiercely and had swollen as a result of the abuse. The elf had some difficulty breathing.

“He’s succeeding,” the ranger whispered.

The door shut behind the orcs.

“No,” Legolas’ scratchy voice was adamant. “He cannot. You must not allow it, Estel.” The elf sighed, seeing the complete exhaustion written all over his friend’s face. Aragorn was dying from the inside out, a little more every day. He wondered how long it would be until... No! He could not think that way. Yet the relentless, redundant cycle of torment was slowly wearing away at both of them. He wondered for a moment if Yrin was right and there really was no way out of this situation but death.
“Rest, Estel. Get some sleep,” the elf said wearily. He wished he could tell the human he would feel better later.

Elrond looked out over the edge of the library balcony, but did not see the view spread out before him. His mind was literally a thousand miles away.

//"Your heart is troubled,"// Galadriel’s voice spoke in his mind, proving that she still had a knack for stating the obvious, as well as the hidden. //"You have not contacted me thus in a very long time. Yet I am not surprised. I have felt evil stirring for some time now, since before Imladris was attacked, but I did not know what it was I sensed. Something is in motion, I feel it from afar. The shape of the future is changing, and it is not in favor of the foes of shadow. This is about Estel, is it not?"//

Elrond’s hands were tight on the edge of the rail. //"It is. He and Legolas have disappeared. You know I would not ask unless I felt it was of utmost importance, but..."//

//"I have already looked."// Galadriel spared him from asking the question. //"Elrond, he is hidden from me. Great evil masks his presence. I cannot see his present, or his future."//

Elrond closed his eyes. //"Neither can I,"// he admitted sadly before letting the connection between them fall away. His eyes focused slowly back on the present and he saw figures hurrying across the courtyard below. His head snapped up quickly.

Elladan and Elrohir were home. Estel was not with them.

Elrond forced himself to remain on the balcony. The bad news could come to him just as well here. He knew already that whatever tidings his sons brought it would not be good.

The twins’ faces confirmed that knowledge when they approached him. Wordlessly, they held out the ring of Barahir.
Elrond accepted it slowly. “He is gone?” he asked quietly, amazed that his voice could sound so calm.

“We don’t know,” Elladan answered, his own voice low and soft. “We could find no trace of them save the ring.”

Elrond turned back to the balcony rail, Barahir clasped firmly in his palm. It was not the first time he had stood here, holding this ring and wondering about Estel. The last time, the human had left them by choice. This time...

“He’ll be back, Ada, we *will* find him. Won’t we?” Elrohir broke the oppressive silence, but it was more of a question than a statement.

Elrond’s head sank a little farther forward, but he did not reply. He did not know. Valar help him, he simply did not know.

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“Legolas?” Aragorn’s soft voice drifted to the elf through the semi-darkness of their cell. Night had fallen and the small lamp that sat high above shed minimal light in the dreary room.

Looking across to where the ranger sat chained against the opposite wall, Legolas answered quietly.

“Yes, I’m awake.” His voice was no longer hoarse and he seemed to be recovering well.

“Tell me something.”

The elf laughed softly at the odd request. “Tell you what?”

“Tell me what it is like to never get sick.” The request was almost childlike in nature.
Legolas closed his eyes, resting his head against the rock wall behind him. The chains on his manacles rattled quietly as he tried to move into a more comfortable position.

“I fear I’m hardly qualified to speak on that subject anymore, but what would you like to know?” Legolas answered with a question of his own. He tried to keep his tone light and cheerful. He could tell that his friend’s spirits were very low.

“How does it feel?” Aragorn’s soft voice held a hint of sorrow.

Legolas wasn’t sure how to answer that question, for, to him, it was like trying to describe breathing.

“Why?” he asked, hoping to understand what the man was really asking.

“I was remembering how it felt when you shared your life with me,” the ranger explained, a little hesitantly. “It was almost more than I could comprehend. It was like being made of light. It was wonderful. They say sometimes that... that it’s like that when you die. They say you never get sick, or hurt... I thought it sounded a little like being an elf. I just wondered...” The man turned his head away, realizing he sounded incredibly foolish.

“You wondered what it felt like,” Legolas finished his friend’s statement gently. The elf’s heart ached, but when Aragorn hesitantly nodded and raised his gaze, he could see only compassionate understanding in his friend’s blue eyes.

“I’m sorry,” the human whispered quietly.

Legolas shook his head. They had faced many things together. If and when it came, they could face death together with the same strength. It was not a foe to be feared and Legolas did not begrudge the ailing human his question.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I simply wish I could give you a better answer. What is it like to never be sick... It - it’s hard to explain to someone who has never felt it before.” Legolas struggled to find the right words. “You should ask Glorfindel when we return. He would know how best to answer you. He has died, been to Mandos and returned. He would have a good answer.”
Legolas could see the open gaze that the ranger laid on him. His keen sight pierced even the gloom of their cell.

“I may not have that chance.” Aragorn whispered. “Besides, you died and came back. Just tell me the best you can. I just want to know.”

With a small laugh, the elf nodded, conceding the point. “I do not remember anything about it beyond passing out and waking up again! However, you are correct I did. Very well then, I will try my best.”

For several minutes no one spoke as Legolas thought through what he would say and how he could interpret his feelings so the human would understand.

“I cannot say what it is like to die, but I can tell you what it is like to live. I do not need to sleep in the same way that you do, but when I do rest when I get up, I have all the energy and strength I need for the day. Except in extreme situations, I usually do not sleep too much or too little. My strength comes from Arda, from all living things.” Legolas’ voice trailed off as he thought through his next words. “Imagine waking up and never being tired for a whole day. Never aching or getting a headache, like I know you do at times... Strider, I fear I can only tell you what it is not, I can’t tell you what it is. It's hard to explain.”

“You’re doing a good job of it.” The man replied contentedly. Aragorn had closed his eyes and was simply listening to the elf’s voice. A small smile crept up his face. “Go on.”

“Only a few times in my life have I truly been able to sympathize with what you mortals go through when you get sick. Once, on the way here after sharing your illness; once, when I was bitten by a lhyguan in Rohan and once, when I first met Taradin and was poisoned with the dragon water.” Legolas continued talking, encouraged by the ranger’s reply. “And perhaps a few more occasions that I have forgotten or wish to forget. In any case, I believe that even three is far too many times. I remember what it was like. It was awful. I wanted to die and couldn’t. I believe I even threw up once.”

“You did!” Aragorn opened his eyes and gazed at his friend. “Oh, I remember that. That was bad.”

“Well then my friend, you should be glad that I understand your plight a little more than most of my kin. Even if being poisoned is as close as I can ever come to being ‘sick’ in a way you can relate to.” Legolas smiled at the man who was watching him.
“I feel that way now,” Aragorn confessed.

The elf simply nodded. There was nothing more to be said. He had thought that the ranger was looking worse. It was well past the time for Aragorn to be given more antidote.

“He’s wearing me down, Legolas.” Aragorn closed his eyes and leaned his head against his right arm, letting the manacles hold his weight up.

“I don’t know how long I can withstand him. He says things... He twists my thoughts until I don’t know what’s true anymore. He wants to know who I am. I’m not even sure why I’m fighting him anymore. There is a part of me that just wants to give in, even as there is a part of me that fights. It’s so hard to balance them both; they tear me in two. I’m so tired. Do you know how many times I’ve almost told him everything?”

“Listen to me.” Legolas strained against his bonds, leaning forward and speaking very slowly. “Estel, you can’t give in to him. You cannot tell him that which he seeks. I don’t know how it could make things any worse than they are, but somehow I know it would. You must keep the secret close and never let him suspect.”

Slowly opening his eyes, the ranger glanced wearily at the elf. “How do I do that? He’s everywhere now, in my mind, my thoughts... he reads me like an open book.”

Swallowing hard, the elf thought intently, trying to come up with a way to help his friend. An old memory surfaced, crashing immediately to the forefront as those memories were wont to do.

He had had to conceal his identity in Dorolyn and to his credit he had done so very well until the last.

“It’s not always easy.” Legolas answered softly. “But I’ve done it before. I was forced to do so in Dorolyn.”

Aragorn shifted his weight off his arms, straightening slowly up and paying closer attention. It was hard to focus and becoming even harder to maintain his thoughts. Even close as they were, Legolas almost never spoke of that chapter in his life. If the elf was bringing it up, then whatever he had to say was important.
“You simply tell yourself that that information must never come forward. Don’t even allow it in your mind. Banish it from your thoughts and wall it up deep inside your heart where it cannot be reached. As soon as you even start to think about it, immediately force yourself to think of something else. It doesn’t matter what, just pick something. It is a secret kept between you and I, and left here within these four walls when he comes for you. I will guard it for you until you come back. Do you understand?” Legolas tried to explain. Reaching out with his mind as well as his words, he touched his friend gently with his consciousness, trying to show him what he meant.

Nodding slowly, Aragorn repeated the instructions over and over again. His soft words filled the darkness as he took the lesson to heart. “You will guard the secret for me while I’m gone?”

“Yes, mellon-nín, I will,” Legolas confirmed, his eyes locked on the humans. “I always will.”

Footsteps could just be heard outside the door, accompanied by a jangling of keys. At the sounds of approach Aragorn visibly panicked. He tried to control his breathing, but he was too afraid. Fear of who was on the other side of the door and what lay in store for him blocked all else from his mind. He turned a frightened, wide-eyed gaze on the prince.

“Legolas?” Aragorn’s soft plea tore at the elf’s heart. “I believe what you say, but I’m not ready. I-I can’t...” The ranger stopped speaking as the door cracked open. His attempts to squirm out of his bonds ceased and he seemed to simply give up as a dark shape stepped into the room.

Legolas’ fists clenched tightly. He hated how weak Aragorn had become. It pained him to see the almost child-like fear that the ranger had no control over.

“It is well,” a soft voice called to the two occupants, “It is only I, Tinald. I bring you supper and something warm to drink.” The servant glanced at the captives, trying to calm their fears. He could read it in their eyes and feel it in the air when he walked into the room. Fear was what the master thrived on, what he lived for. But Tinald hated it, having seen it too many times etched into the faces of those he loved.

Setting the platter down in the middle of the room, Tinald quickly walked to Aragorn’s position and unlocked the manacles. Gently he eased the ranger’s arms down, rubbing the man’s hands briskly to start the blood flowing back into them.

When he was satisfied the human was fine, he moved to help the elf.
Aragorn was by the prince’s side before Tinald had freed the fair being. He easily took Legolas’ hands in his own and gently worked them over, helping the blood flow to return. His ministrations were somewhat clumsy but the elf welcomed the touch. He wasn’t frightened of Tinald or Yrin, but it was sweet of the ranger to want to keep strange humans away from him.

Stepping back near the food, Tinald picked up the tray and placed it next to the ranger.

“You need to eat. It will help you keep your strength up,” the servant instructed. “Yrin sent the tea especially for you, Strider. It will help you to sleep and slow your metabolism for a few hours. It will be enough to give your body a good rest from the poison.”

“Have you brought any antidote?” Aragorn asked hopefully.

“No. None was given to me,” Tinald answered guiltily. “I am sorry. I am sure the master will give you more tomorrow. He will not want you to die.”

“It’s all right, Tinald,” The ranger assured the small man, “Thank you for the supper.”

With a curt nod, the servant turned and walked out into the hallway. Closing the door softly behind him, Tinald’s voice could barely be heard as he reiterated his apology. “I am sorry, Strider.”

With a small smile the ranger turned his attention to the food before them. They would have an hour, maybe two, before someone came to put them back in their manacles. It was best to make the most of the time they were free.

Taking the flagon of water, Aragorn spared some to gently clean the healing abrasions where the harsh rope had gouged his friend’s throat. Legolas was healing well and seemed to suffer no lasting ill effects from his near hanging earlier. His body was also slowly recovering from the spiders the Nazgûl had inflicted on him. Considering that they had only the meager supplies Yrin and Tinald smuggled them to aid the healing process, Aragorn was pleased with the elf’s progress.

Legolas however, was not as pleased with Aragorn’s. The poisons in the man’s system had lowered his defenses and his many bruises and lacerations were not healing well at all. The cut to his shoulder had never fully healed and looked worse now than it had in days. Dark tendrils reached out angrily underneath his skin and it was feverish to the touch. Legolas realized that when Aragorn had told him he could not hold on much longer, he had indeed been telling the truth. His spirit was willing and able, but his body was failing him. The Nazgûl’s cruel game today had almost been too
“I will not watch him torture you again.” Aragorn spoke softly as Legolas finished cleaning and re-dressing the poisoned cut.

Glancing up sharply, Legolas caught the steely glint in the ranger’s eyes. He may be weakening, but the human had caught his second wind now and his resolve was strengthening.

“There is nothing you can do, my friend.” Legolas knew the assurance had not worked as Aragorn slowly shook his head.

“No, you’re wrong. There is always a way. I simply need to find it, and I will.” Aragorn’s voice was low and determined. He looked back down to the tray of food and began dishing out the meager portion as Legolas argued with him. What the ranger had witnessed earlier in the day had been the last straw for him. Something inside the ranger had snapped when the Nazgûl had played out his deepest fears in such a frightening manner, hanging the elf before his very eyes and taunting him with his own weakness. This ended soon, one way or another.

“Do not do anything rash, Estel,” Legolas whispered harshly. He recognized that look in the ranger’s eyes and feared what trouble his friend might bring down on himself.

“Are you listening to me?” The elf asked when the man simply handed over a platter of food.

“I heard what you said,” Aragorn replied, speaking around a mouthful of bread. He would not meet the elf’s piercing gaze.

“Estel.”

“Eat. Your food is getting cold,” the ranger replied quietly. He knew he was treading on dangerous ground, but at the moment he didn’t care. He felt terrible, both physically and emotionally. Being forced to watch Legolas tormented by the Nazgûl was too much. He had already resolved to never let that happen again.

The tray in the elf’s hands clattered to the stone floor, drawing Aragorn’s gaze quickly up. Legolas sat across from the ranger staring the man down with a hard, piercing look. His face was set in a way that Aragorn had only seen him use on Thranduil when they were arguing.
Taking a deep breath, the ranger calmly set his own platter down and glared back at the prince, matching the sternness with a scowl of his own. Elrond had used the ‘look’ on his sons many times and Aragorn, in turn, had learned to use it as well. He did his father justice with the frown that crossed his face.

The silence between the wills set against one another in the room was palpable. Finally Legolas dropped his gaze with a sigh of defeat.

“I would that you would not,” Legolas spoke quietly.

The elf glanced back when Aragorn picked up the elf’s tray of food and held it back out to the prince as a peace offering.

“I know, but I am sick of this place and sick of the way that I feel. I want to go home and if we don’t find a way soon I fear we never will.” Aragorn smiled gently when Legolas accepted the meager meal. “Don’t worry, you know how my plans always work out,” the ranger laughed softly.

With a snort of derision Legolas shook his head, a small smile tugging at the edges of his lips.

“Your plans, dear friend, usually involve one of us ending up near death’s door,” Legolas chided. He ate the fruits and bread they had been given.

Aragorn’s laughter cheered the elf’s heart as the man nearly choked on the mouthful of food he had just taken.

“My plans are good!” Aragorn protested.

“Your plans are horrible and everyone agrees on that.”

“They always work.”

“They *always* get us into trouble,” Legolas countered lightly, pointing his bread at the human.
“But they always get us *out* again,” the human shot back.

The banter was interrupted by the scraping of the door as it swung inward. Startled by the intrusion, both beings quieted and watched as Yrin walked into the room. Knowing why the servant had come, Legolas placed his plate on the floor and began to move back by the wall. It was no use fighting the man. Behind him in the hallway, the eyes of the orcs who had come to back him up glinted in the dull light.

Aragorn’s hand on Legolas thigh stopped the elf and he glanced at the ranger.

“We are not through eating,” Aragorn quietly informed the servant. He just wanted a few more moments of freedom.

Glancing back into the passage, Yrinvan closed the door so that the orcs could not see inside. Crouching down near the two captives he reached into his inner robe and pulled out a small glass vial, similar to the ones Aragorn was now used to receiving his antidote from. It was only one third full but there was no mistaking the dark colored content inside.

“The Master decided earlier this evening to see how long you would last with no antidote. He knows you are near breaking,” Yrin explained quietly as he held out the vial to the ranger, “At least he thinks you are. This is all I was able to save. I took a partial portion of my own allotment and saved this out for you. It will not harm me too much to go with a little less. Take it. It will carry you through for at least a day.”

Yrin uncorked the small vial and passed it to Aragorn. The ranger quickly drank the foul tasting draught, coughing slightly as it burned roughly down his throat.

When Aragorn passed the empty container back the servant placed the half-empty mug of tea in the ranger’s hand.

“Drink it all. It will slow your metabolism for a few hours and give you a good rest. It helps fight the poison and it will hold the antidote in your system longer.” Yrin glanced nervously at the door. In moments the orcs would become impatient, wanting to know what was taking so long. He was doing his best to make right that which he could never right at all.

Glancing at the elf, Yrin sighed deeply and nodded towards the manacles on the far wall. “I need to
get you back into those before those beasts come in to do it for me.” He hated this part of his job, but he knew the penalty for disobedience.

With a small nod Legolas complied. There was no use fighting, not right now. That time would come.

Yrin carefully fastened the manacles about the fair being’s wrist and moved back towards the ranger. The orcs had pushed the door open and one of them moved forward.

“Hurry up!” The dark creature yelled at Aragorn, kicking the ranger in the ribs as the man drained the last of the tea. The blow sent the man sprawling backwards. His cup flung across the small room, shattering against the stone wall.

Quickly curling inward, Aragorn tightened into a small ball on the floor, trying to ward off any further abuse. But it never came. Yrin’s angry command stopped the orcs in their tracks.

“Get out at once!” The servant shouted angrily, kneeling beside the ranger and gently easing him upright. “The master said they were not to be harmed tonight. Do you dare to defy him?”

“You take too long,” the orc grunted as it shuffled out the door, pushing the others with it. “You think the master would like to know that?”

Straightening up, the head servant pierced the orc with a dangerous look. “Perhaps we should both go and talk to the master when we are done here? Hmm?” His voice held an acidic tone that brokered no good for the orcs.

Realizing they were not in a position to push the human around, the orcs remained just outside the door, muttering amongst themselves. With a sigh Yrin crouched back down near Aragorn. The man was having a hard time keeping his eyes open as the drugs began to work in his system.

“Why are you helping us, Yrin?” The ranger asked, his voice barely above a whisper. The servant had been surprisingly distant with them since Aragorn had healed Ahnna and the ranger had begun to wonder if the man resented him somehow. Tonight was a total change in attitude.

“If I had any conscience at all I would simply poison you both, willing or no, and let you die in peace here in this cell,” Yrin answered softly. He glanced back at Legolas before continuing. “You
can thank your friend. He is very persuasive.”

Aragorn glanced around Yrin and smiled slowly at the elf prince. Legolas had heard the whole conversation and knew what the servant meant. Yrin was thinking about what he had said and that was hopeful. Legolas watched as Aragorn slowly blinked, trying to keep the elf in focus as Yrin stretched his arms back up towards the manacles. The ranger winced painfully at the pull to his wounded shoulder.

“Yrin, please,” Legolas entreated. “Can you not simply let him sleep? With that tea in him, he’ll go nowhere tonight.”

The servant shot a quick glance over his shoulder at the elf. He understood the request but...

When he returned his attention to the ranger, the man had already fallen asleep, leaning against the servant for support. Gently, Yrin lowered Aragorn to the floor of the cell and addressed the orcs.

“Toss me a coil of rope. This one won’t make it in the manacles.”

A small orc was shoved forward. Rhzaq stumbled into the cell, slightly confused. He held a length of rope in his hands.

“Rhzaq help me. We need to tie this one up instead of putting him in the steel rings,” Yrin insisted, encouraging the orc to enter.

Limping slowly into the room, the creature knelt next to man and quickly cut the rope into two pieces. While Yrin bound Aragorn’s hands, the orc carefully tied his booted feet together.

“Like this?” Rhzaq asked.

“Yes, good job,” Yrin replied with a smile. “Now run along I’ll be outside in a moment.

Wading up an extra blanket, the servant placed it under Aragorn’s head before turning back to Legolas.
“The Master will come for you in the morning. I don’t know which one of you he’ll take, but he has plans for you both tomorrow. I – I don’t know what I can do yet, but... I am willing to gamble on a dream if it is better than reality. We will need to act soon. Your friend has a strong will but he won’t last much longer. The Nazgûl is growing bored.” Yrin’s words were barely audible but he knew from past experience that the elf could hear fine. He reached out and touched the Prince’s neck lightly. The rope burn was just visible around the edges of the collar. “I fear that next time, it will not be a ruse.”

Legolas’ slight nod of understanding was enough and the servant rose and left without a word, taking the remnants of their dinner with him. The orcs trailed after their master’s lackey, there was no sense in protecting the two captives. They weren’t going anywhere tonight.

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Aragorn slept deep, but was awakened sharply by the rattle of the door hinges swinging open. The dark chill that flooded the room told him who had entered, even before he got his bleary eyes to focus enough to make out the Nazgûl’s darker black form among the deep shadows swathing the room. His heart gave a small jump and the shot of fear that jittered through his body helped him come to full awareness.

Across the room from him, the ranger could see that Legolas was already awake, watching the Witch King with a cold, silent glare.

The Wraith was pleased to feel the fear level in the room notch up in reaction to his presence.

“Who wants to come with me today?” he invited darkly, his tone hedged with cruel amusement. With his other servants he might expect no answer, but not these two...

The elf and ranger answered to the affirmative at nearly the same time. As afraid as they both were of being chosen, they were more afraid of having to watch the other taken away.

The Nazgûl’s rasping laugh chilled the room a few more degrees. “So eager...” The dark being stalked to Aragorn’s side of the cell. “But I think you and I have more pressing unfinished business, wouldn’t you say?”

He hauled the ranger partially up by his bound hands. Aragorn winced sharply, trying very hard to
keep his heart from pounding out of his chest. He did not feel up to any more lessons but he swore to himself he would survive this somehow.

The Nazgûl’s hiss sounded pleased as he felt the fear surging behind the ranger’s resilient mask.

“Yes, I think you begin to learn well. We must not waste time. Slave!” The barked command brought Tinald scurrying into the room. The orcs in the doorway parted reluctantly for him. “Don’t linger in corners, make yourself useful!” the Wraith castigated, causing Tinald to flinch.

“Yes, Master,” the human apologized quietly, dropping next to Aragorn and bowing his head to the floor as all the slaves had been taught. The human quickly cut the ropes binding Aragorn’s ankles and helped him to his feet.

Aragorn felt a bit better than last night because of the antidote Yrin had shared with him and the tea that had let him sleep. But neither could take away the icy tendrils of fear that rippled through him. He forced it back ruthlessly, allowing Tinald to help him up and keeping a semi-impassive mask between himself and the shrieking panic that was shredding the back of his mind.

Legolas struggled in his bonds as Aragorn was dragged from the room. “Estel…”

Aragorn met his gaze for a moment and the ranger’s raw uncertainty was painfully obvious, despite his calm actions. “I don’t know if I can do this,” the human’s eyes pleaded. “I’m trying to be strong, Legolas. I’m doing what you told me. Hold my secret safe with you here for I don’t know if I can.”

Legolas nodded slightly. He would. He would guard it with his life. He gave his chains another violent shake, hating his own helplessness.

The Wraith turned his dark hood in the elf’s direction. “My business is with your friend, but don’t worry,” he said as he ushered Aragorn and Tinald out of the room. “I haven’t forgotten you. My orcs have gotten the impression you don’t like them very much. They are still upset about how many of them you killed the day you came here. I never have metered out justice for that, so I’ll let them see to it now. I told them about the game we used to play. We will talk again later, Slave.”

Legolas’ jaw clenched. He did not miss the hint of amusement in the evil one’s voice. The Witch King knew very well how much Legolas hated orcs and Legolas knew far too well what old ‘game’ the Nazgûl meant.
The orcs crowded into the cell. One of them wrapped a blindfold tightly around the elf’s eyes, blinding him.

Legolas pressed his eyes shut behind the blindfold, knowing what came next. When the Nazgûl had him in thrall so many years ago, this had been a frequent practice, a way of proving his loyalty. The orcs would brutally blind and beat him, and he was not allowed to move or try to turn away. If he did, greater punishments were handed down. At that time he had endured the ritual unbound. Now, these orcs were lucky he was well restrained or he would have killed them all.

Retzhrak smiled wickedly as he yanked the blindfold painfully tight. “I’ve been waiting for this,” he hissed in the elf’s ear. “Let’s see how well you play.”

The Nazgûl allowed Aragorn to watch his friend being prepared before ushering him out of the room.
The ranger twisted in Tinald’s grip, trying to see back into the cell.

“No! Legolas...” he protested hoarsely. He had promised himself he wouldn’t let his friend be hurt again, but here they were and there was nothing he could do. He turned his burning gaze upon the Witch King. “You said your business is with me, leave him alone!”

The Nazgûl laid his hand upon the human’s shoulder, sending chilling shivers of pain and darkness throbbing through the ranger’s body. “I will do as I please, Slave. Only when you realize this, will your life get easier,” he threatened. “Your lessons begin again. Come.”

Tinald almost had to drag Aragorn down the hallway and the slave did not relish doing it one bit. He didn’t blame the ranger for being angry and afraid. If he were subjected to what these two were going through, he would have taken Yrin’s offer of an easy death a long time ago.

The Witch King led them back to his work room. Aragorn’s eyes searched the chamber as the doors closed behind them. His gaze roved restlessly over the shelves of bottles along one wall and tried not to light upon the various dark and wicked looking instruments that lay upon the tables. He tried to catalogue everything, looking for anything that would help them when the time came to escape. It gave his mind something to focus on besides the way his heart was hammering in his ribcage.

The Nazgûl picked up the pear-shaped gag and walked towards the ranger, his boots clacking menacingly against the stone floor.

Instinctively, Aragorn backed up a pace, his jaw muscles tightening. Unfortunately, backing up ran him right into Tinald. The servant placed his hands on the ranger’s shoulders, as much to steady him as to restrain him.

The Witch King nodded at Tinald. He did not need to voice his command; his slave knew what he wanted.

With a barely audible sigh, Tinald’s kept one arm wrapped around the ranger’s chest while his other slid up to Aragorn’s jaw. The ranger’s stubbly beard scratched Tinald’s fingers as he firmly gripped each side of the man’s jaw, pressuring him to open his mouth. Aragorn started to struggle when Tinald’s grip tightened. The position they were in held his mouth close to the ranger’s ear.
“Please don’t make me force you, Strider,” the slave whispered sadly. “He will only make it worse for you if you do.”

It went against Aragorn’s grain to acquiesce, but he knew what lay ahead and it was better not to make it any worse than it had to be. Closing his eyes, the ranger tried to relax and allowed Tinald to manipulate his jaw open.

Aragorn’s eyes flew open again and he nearly choked when the cruel gag was pushed too roughly into his mouth. His already abused jaw muscles ached fiercely and he had to resist the urge to retch as the thick leather ball pushed too far back against his throat.

The Nazgûl calmly fastened the straps of the device behind the ranger’s head, holding the gag in place. The Wraith leaned close over Aragorn’s shoulder, the edges of his dark hood brushing the ranger’s hair. The sharp ridges of his metal gloves dug into the soft flesh of the ranger’s throat as the Nazgûl cupped the chin of his muzzled captive.

“I grow tired of your pointless resistance. When I give you your tongue back, you had better have something useful to say to me today,” the Dark One hissed in the ranger’s ear.

Aragorn shuddered involuntarily. A moment later the dark hood followed, covering Aragorn’s head and blocking out all light. This time, an additional hood was placed over the normal one and the ranger’s senses suddenly started screaming in panic. The second hood was thick and tightly woven. It was tied off around his neck and the ranger realized he could not breathe through the heavy fabric. He started thrashing wildly, but the Witch King’s hard hand clamped on his shoulder stopped him.

“I wouldn’t waste your breath that way if I were you, Slave. You’ll kill yourself if you keep struggling,” he informed calmly.

Aragorn quieted, knowing it made more sense to conserve air, but still unable to quell the shaking panic burning in his chest as he had to struggle painfully for each breath. The air in the wicked hood had quickly become thick and warm. The ruthless gag in his mouth already made breathing difficult. The added impediment of the second hood made his knees weak and his head swim.

The ranger was dragged across the room. His hands were cut free and his shirt was removed. After that, his hands were pulled before him and bound again. He could not see and only barely heard what was happening. Aragorn was too intent on the struggle for air to notice much at first. When he was nearly yanked off his feet, suspended by his arms stretched painfully above him, he noticed. His shoulders screamed in protest and his injury flamed hotly. The ranger cried out, only to be muffled and choked by his unforgiving gag. The sudden expelling of air from his lungs was too much.
Aragorn couldn’t replace it fast enough and bright yellow lights flashed before his eyes as his chest heaved wildly. He was suffocating.

Tinald knew he could not even flinch unless he wanted to share the prisoner’s punishment. So he only cringed inwardly as the ranger thrashed weakly in the cruel bonds. The harsh, gasping sounds from behind the mask were hard to endure. The ranger was in real trouble and the Nazgûl did not seem to care.

“Master... I think he’s suffocating,” Tinald said quietly. He bowed as he spoke and hoped it sounded like an observation, rather than a fear.

The Wraith murmured his agreement in an unconcerned fashion. When the ranger’s thrashing ceased completely, he tugged the outer hood off the man’s head.

Barely conscious, Aragorn felt the air flowing about his face and into his lungs once more. His chest expanded spasmodically, sucking air greedily into his starved body. He gasped so hard he nearly hyperventilated. His mind cleared momentarily. Then he felt the suffocation hood slide down over his head again and the panic began anew. He moaned a desperate protest as the hood was tied off again, but tried to maintain better self control this time, conserving his oxygen as best he could.

Aragorn felt hot points of agony suddenly springing up across his skin, burning his back, sides and chest as if he were being touched by a million tiny flaming coals. The pain caused his heartbeat to speed up, demanding more oxygen he could not get. Terror and pain made his world spin out of control as the ranger sobbed for air behind his cruel mask.

The Witch King deliberately sprinkled the dark liquid from the vial he held across the ranger’s exposed flesh. It burned like white-hot iron and left small, red marks wherever it touched the human, yet inflicted no serious damage. Pain and terror were the Witch King’s goal, not death... not yet.

Again, the Wraith removed Aragorn’s hood just before the ranger could pass out, allowing him a few moments of air before plunging him back into a dark, airless world once more.

Slowly the evil creature drew lines of exquisite agony across the ranger’s exposed flesh with his painful tonic, eventually making the human scream around his muzzle. Still, the Nazgûl was not satisfied. He pushed Aragorn very hard today, continuing the slow, deliberate torture until the ranger could not cry out anymore.
Then he untied the bottom of the suffocation hood to allow some air inside, but left it on the ranger’s head.

Aragorn’s whole body was trembling. His thoughts were one long, confused blur of pain. His shoulders burned like they were being pulled out of his sockets, and his mouth was so sore from clenching around the gag that it felt raw. He was drained and breathing was still a desperate struggle. He waited in fear of what the Nazgûl would do to him next, but nothing happened.

The uncertainty was almost as unbearable as knowing what was coming. Aragorn’s head rolled back as he struggled to keep breathing and was left to wait, dangling and choked, for the Nazgûl’s next whim. He could hear the sound of movement in the room and knew he was not alone, but no one spoke and no one touched him. As time dragged by, he began to realize that the Wraith simply intended to leave him there for a time, as he had before. The ranger resisted the burning tears behind his eyes. He knew that if he started crying, the congestion would choke him.

Tinald stood uncomfortably on the far side of the room as the Nazgûl busied himself with something on another table, ignoring the ranger still dangling painfully in the corner for the time being. The slave had not been dismissed so he had to remain.

Presently there was a knock at the door. With the Nazgûl’s permission, Tinald admitted the newcomer.

It was Rhzaq. The small orc shifted uncomfortably in the doorway, obviously uneasy around his Lord. “Master, they... they, the others... wanted me to tell you that we can’t reach the lower levels. Everyone who goes down to get the shiny plant doesn’t come back. They say the... the thing is awake.” Fear was palpable in the creature’s voice, although it was hard to tell if it was over his bad tidings, or because he was the one to have to tell the Nazgûl.

Tinald felt a little sorry for Rhzaq. The other orcs always made him be the one to give the Master bad news. The slow-witted orc had received the brunt of the Nazgûl’s displeasure more than once as a result. He had good reason to be afraid.

The Nazgûl’s presence darkened into his version of a scowl. “Fool!” he fumed. “Your filthy friends had no business awakening that which should be slumbering! Too long you have already delayed. You,” he addressed Tinald now. “How fare the other slaves?”

Tinald licked his lips nervously. “Most are well, Master. But some have not had any antidote in quite awhile. They... they need it soon, if it pleases you.”
The Wraith was not satisfied with any of this information. He turned back to Rhzaq. “Tell those slobbering idiots who sent you that they had better get me what I need by tomorrow, or I’ll feed you all to the cave trolls! Do you understand me?”

Rhzaq gave a frightened little squeal and backed further out the door. “Yes, Master!”

“Wait,” the Wraith commanded, halting the orc’s flight. He glanced at the ranger, knowing the human could probably hear them. “How fares the elf?”

Rhzaq studied the ground. He had not taken part in his comrades’ torment of the elf, but he had been present. “He does not scream much, but Retzhrak says his blood tastes sweet.” There was no emotion in the words. Rhzaq’s limited mental capacities did not leave him with the same ravenous appetite for pain as the rest of his species and he didn’t really understand the other orcs’ joy in brutal pastimes.

Aragorn’s ragged breathing hitched visibly at the report and the Nazgûl’s rumbling hiss was pleased.

“Good... now go!” he brusquely dismissed Rhzaq who left without delay. “You too.” The Nazgûl indicated that he meant Tinald. “Find Yrinvan. This shortage has gone on too long. Tell him to prioritize the servants. Cull those with lesser uses; they shall receive no more treatment. If he wishes to ease their passing I will allow him a small amount of death water for them. But only IF he does not take too long with the list.”

“Yes, Master.” Tinald swallowed the bitter lump of horror in his throat and bowed obediently. Only after he had quietly shut the door behind him did Tinald allow his fists to clench and his face to darken. Not another purge... the slaves dreaded times like these. They were rare, but Tinald could still remember the last one. Yrin would be devastated to hear this news. It was the hardest for him because he was the one who had to choose. The one who had to try to figure out what life was expendable in order to meet the Nazgûl’s cruel quotas. It had nearly crushed Yrin last time. Tinald wasn’t sure how his friend would handle having to do it again.

Back in the laboratory, Aragorn was stunned by the callous cruelty of the order. His body trembled in agony and his heart ached for Legolas, and for the slaves. This was a dark, dark world they were in, and he feared he would not survive it much longer. They had to act soon... if only he could figure out how.
It was hours later that the Nazgûl finally cut Aragorn down and removed his hoods. The ranger rolled painfully onto his side, panting as he was finally allowed to breathe unrestricted. With ungentle fingers, the Wraith removed the unbearable gag. Aragorn found he could barely close his mouth now, his jaw muscles had seized.

“Now, think carefully about your answer, mortal,” the Witch King warned. “What are you hiding from me?”

Aragorn’s body was still trembling. He could not take much more of this treatment. The dark force of the Evil One’s strong will wrapped itself around his consciousness, pressing him for an answer. He felt his defenses wavering... but there was nothing there to reveal.

“I-I’m... I’m not...” he rasped with difficulty, his abused mouth giving him trouble speaking. At the moment it was the truth. He had taken Legolas’ advice to heart and his mind was blank. Whatever secrets he had were back in their cell, in the elf’s care. He had nothing to give the Wraith.

The pressure on his reeling mind intensified and Aragorn squirmed on the floor, trying to tuck his head into his chest as if he could protect it from the painful mental assault. The Nazgûl was not content to batter his body, but assaulted the ranger’s mind with equal brutality.

“Then you have not learned your lesson yet,” the Nazgûl said coldly, pulling Aragorn’s head up to re-gag him.

The human struggled weakly against the strong grip on his hair, panic consuming every inch of his awareness. “No!” he protested, no longer above pleading. “No! I-I don’t know what you want! I can’t... there’s nothing to tell... Don’t! Not again, please not again...” he begged, almost sobbing as his body betrayed him.

The Wraith saw his wavering resolve, and for the first time did not entirely doubt the human’s words. Perhaps he had been wrong after all. There may be nothing more to them than he had already discovered, or at least there may be nothing more that he could discover from the human until the ranger had completely given himself over.

“Then will you serve me?” the Nazgûl whispered low, pausing with the gag hovering in front of the ranger’s face. His probing consciousness tugged at Aragorn’s, asking the ranger to bare his mind to
him, to accept him as Lord. To become immersed in his will as surely as Yrinvan, Tinald and his 
other serfs. “Will you end all this pain?”

Aragorn hesitated, frozen between two different choices that both led to terror. But the Wraith saw 
the rejection in Aragorn’s eyes, felt the tenacity with which he was hanging onto his mental borders. He knew what the human was choosing. He was still unwilling.

“Very well then,” the Nazgûl said darkly. Replacing the gag and hoods upon the human who was 
too weak to fight him now, he dragged Aragorn back to his feet. “Then I see you still have much to 
learn.”

Aragorn couldn’t stop the tears behind the mask this time, even as he felt the dangerous congestion 
making breathing even more difficult. He was spent. If the Nazgûl wanted to wear him down and 
break him, it was finally working.

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He didn’t remember when the Wraith had grown bored with him. In fact Aragorn didn’t remember 
much of what had happened when he felt Yrin’s hands lowering him to the ground. The hoods were 
removed and the servant eased the gag out of Aragorn’s mouth. Reflexively the ranger tried to 
breathe in deeply and swallow. His body reacted violently as a coughing fit took hold of the man, 
nearly choking him. His throat was too dry and parched and his mouth was severely bruised from 
the long day of enduring the gag. He nearly retched but there was nothing for his body to expel.

Yrin eased the ranger slowly to his feet. Aragorn was anything but steady.

His knees gave out and the ranger pitched into one of the Nazgul’s tables, dumping the contents onto 
the floor as he tried to maintain his balance.

Yrin grimaced and quickly began picking up the fallen items strewn about the lab, placing them back on the table exactly as he remembered them being.

Aragorn pressed himself up onto his hands and knees. His fingers brushed a long thin metallic tine. Glancing up he noted that the attention of the Wraith and the headservant were not on him at the moment. Quickly he slid the spike into his boot before slowly regaining his feet. He had no idea what uses the Nazgûl had for the tool, but he knew exactly what he was going to do with it if he
were ever given the slightest chance.

Yrin’s hands grabbed him around the waist and pulled him up, helping him to walk back down the hall to the cell. The Nazgul followed closely behind them, gauging the prisoner. It was painfully obvious that the ranger was nearly broken.

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So tell me why you’ve chosen me?
Don’t want you grip, don’t want your greed!

I’ll tear me open, make you gone

No more can you hurt anyone

And the fear still shakes me
So hold me, until it sleeps...

-- Metallica

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Legolas hung forward, suspended by the chains around his wrists. The orcs had finally departed, but they left the blindfold in place and he could see nothing. He had been in worse pain in his life, but he could not deny that the foul creatures had been very thorough. They seemed to have a lot of practice inflicting maximum amounts of non-lethal pain and the elf wondered dully if the Witch King let them practice on disobedient slaves. Judging from things that Yrin had said, he suspected that was indeed the case.

The elf wiped the blood running down the corner of his mouth on his shoulder because it was the only thing he could reach. He hurt, but he was more worried about Aragorn right now. The ranger was the one that the Nazgûl was trying to break, and Legolas knew what that was like. He was afraid for his friend. Very afraid.

The elf lost track of how long he sat in artificial darkness, but it must have been most of the day.
Aragorn was not returned and he received no visit or word from either Yrinvan or Tinald. Legolas’ anxiety mounted.

When the door finally opened, the elf looked up out of habit, even though he could see nothing. He did not need to see to know that the Nazgûl had entered. The dark chill the creature carried with him was one that the elf could never forget or mistake.

The blindfold was pulled from his eyes at last and the elf could see that the Nazgûl was not alone. Aragorn was slumped in the Wraith’s grasp. Yrin stood quietly in the doorway with several orcs just behind him.

Aragorn looked terrible. His bound wrists were bloody. His disheveled tunic hung open. His lips were swollen and his face flushed. Worse than anything else though, was the glazed and semi-vacant look in his eyes.

The ranger’s weary gaze slowly fixed on Legolas. A small flicker of anger and pain flashed through Aragorn’s bloodshot eyes as he saw the new cuts and bruises marring his friend’s body. Yet when Aragorn looked into the elf’s eyes, all he read there was concern for him. It was wrong, so wrong... This was what Aragorn feared most. What he had feared all along. The ranger had accepted he might not survive this situation, but he dreaded taking Legolas down with him.

“The human is almost as stubborn as you, elf,” the Nazgûl said calmly. He knew Aragorn was near breaking, but he wanted to make sure that the elf was there to see it happen. “Almost.” The cruel smile that was not visible became evident in the Wraith’s tone.

Pinning Aragorn roughly up against the wall, the Nazgûl pressed his palm against the ranger’s wound. Rubbing back and forth in small, agonizing movements he increased the flow of sheer evil flooding the ranger’s senses.

Aragorn’s face creased with agony. His mouth opened in a silent scream, but a small whimper was all that escaped his lips.

Legolas surged against his restraints. He yelled for the Nazgûl to stop, even though he knew he wouldn’t. He couldn’t stand seeing Estel hurt this way. His heart thudded with anger and terror. The terror came because he could tell from the distressed waves radiating from Aragorn’s body that the Nazgûl was dangerously close to the truth. Aragorn was breaking.
“Lasto beth nin, mellon-nín! Ú-caro leithiach estel-lín! Listen to me, my friend! Don’t let go of your hope!” Legolas called out to Aragorn. He risked having to endure the bridle again for speaking Elvish in the Nazgûl’s presence, but at the moment he did not care.

Aragorn’s head lolled to the side. It was too hard to fight anymore. The Nazgûl’s abuse and the poison that raged in his system were wreaking havoc with his resolve. He could hear Legolas yelling, calling to him, and fighting against his bonds. He couldn’t stand to see the elf tormented any further, there had to be a way out of this... at least for one of them.

In an instant he knew what that way was and chose his path without giving it a second thought. He had no strength for second-guessing.

The Witch King’s fingers tightened on the ranger’s shoulders as he held the human up before him. The Wraith shook the man hard, watching carefully as the Dûnadan’s defenses literally crumbled before him.

Finally...

“Will you serve me now, or shall we keep going with your ‘lessons’? Or perhaps the elf has more to learn,” The Wraith whispered seductively, turning the human around so that he faced Legolas. One metal gloved hand held Aragorn’s chin, forcing him to look upon the beaten elf. “His tongue is still untamed. I have much more to teach you both.”

“No.” The word barely slipped from Aragorn’s parched lips. “If you want me this much, you can have me.” With that pronouncement the ranger went limp in the Nazgûl’s grip. He stopped fighting and gave in to the toxins in his system. Aragorn’s eyes glazed over. He slid to the floor of the cell when the Wraith released him, slumping against the wall behind him, wrapped in a dark stupor.

The Nazgûl’s dark consciousness rushed to envelop his vulnerable mind. It wrapped around the Dûnadan’s memories, fingering through and discarding them one by one... all but the one that remained safely in Legolas’ keeping.

Aragorn jerked convulsing under the mental ravaging. He curled himself into a tight ball in the back of his mind and hid himself away behind a thinly veiled memory of the time he had found Legolas in the Witch King’s grasp. He knew the Wraith wouldn’t bother sorting through those memories - the Nazgûl had lived them. His conscious thought was shredded and torn under the evil assault. Closing himself off, he waited and concentrated on breathing. Legolas held his most intimate secrets. The rest, the Nazgul could have, save for the ones of his love for his family, the ones that kept him alive. Those he held onto possessively, waiting out the evil tide that tore through his mind.
The Nazgûl hissed slowly. So... this Strider really was just a ranger, the adopted son of Elrond of Imladris. The Wraith still really couldn’t understand why a powerful Lord would take on such a burden, but something from his distant memory told him it had to do with a foolish emotion called love. With malicious satisfaction the Witch King withdrew from his victim’s mind. It may not have been the most satisfactory answer, but still... holding captive the offspring, or at least foster-offspring, of the Lords of two of the most powerful Elven realms was not a small thing either. He would make them both useful to him somehow.

Aragorn slumped to the floor, released from the evil presence that had held his mind captive. His body was unresponsive to him for a few minutes and he simply lay against the cool stone, trying to still his pounding heart.

Legolas stared at his friend silently, in shock. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. The ranger stared straight ahead, barely even blinking, his breathing was shallow and slow. There was no life in the grey eyes that stared out at the elf. The human was hollow... gone. The elf shuddered. Was that what he had looked like when the Wraith had him years ago? It certainly represented what he had felt like.

When the Nazgûl spoke, it startled Legolas. He flinched, trying to pull away from the black apparition that moved to stand between him and his friend.

“You are next, elfling. I know what I am up against in you, but I am patient. The two of us... we’re not like the human. We have all the time in the world. Even if it takes years, I will have you again as I once did. The choice will be yours, whether you will be a formidable warrior against my enemies, or just a broken thrall good for training the orcs. It depends on how far you push me.” The Nazgûl taunted, crouching down in front of the restrained elf. Legolas jerked away from his touch, trying to see around the evil creature and catch Aragorn’s eyes again.

“Don’t worry about your friend, he has found his true calling,” the Nazgûl said with cruel amusement. “Slave!”

Behind the Wraith, Aragorn stirred and came groggily to his knees. It was strange really, how they always knew who he was speaking to, considering the Nazgûl usually called all his thralls by the same title. Yet when he was speaking to someone, there was no doubt in their mind as to whom he was referring.

The Nazgûl’s attention never left Legolas. “He has learned his lessons. You have yet to accept yours. I believe I forbade you to speak that loathsome tongue again... yet you defy me.” The Wraith rose and pulled the wicked bridle off the peg by the door where it hung.
Legolas glared at the evil being with pain-filled defiance. He did not fear what the Wraith could do to him. And he could not believe that Aragorn was truly gone.

The Nazgûl did not bridle the elf himself, but handed the contraption to Aragorn after he cut the binds around the man’s wrists. “I believe you have seen how this goes on. Do it. Give our rebellious friend the tightest setting possible.”

The ranger accepted the harness and knelt in front of the elf. The Nazgûl watched his every move like a hawk.

Legolas’ heart clenched tightly in his chest as he realized that his friend was going to be the one to do this to him. No, he told himself. It wasn’t his friend; this was not Aragorn. No one understood that better than Legolas. Aragorn no longer had a choice. The elf tried to hold onto that knowledge as the ranger slipped the leather straps behind his head.

Legolas searched his friend’s face, his eyes, pleading to find something he recognized there. Aragorn’s empty gaze would not meet his as the ranger slid the front of the bridle down over the prince’s face. He pushed against the elf’s lips to get them to admit the sharp bit. Legolas was in too much shock to resist and allowed the ranger’s thumbs to guide the barbed piece of metal over his teeth and into his mouth. The bit settled much farther forward than it had the last time he had been forced to wear it and it clanked painfully against his teeth. It seemed the ranger was fumbling slightly trying to cope with the abuse he had just endured. Legolas could feel the way Aragorn trembled through the ranger’s fingers that rested on his cheek and jaw. The human’s body was still reeling. Sadly, Legolas had to hope that now that the Wraith had what he wanted, he would at least allow Aragorn to return to health.

Once the bit was in place, the ranger cinched the side straps of the harness. Dutifully obeying the Nazgûl’s orders, he ratcheted the clasps a few notches, increasing the pressure on the bit. Legolas tensed with a small moan of pain as the unforgiving, barbed metal dug into his tender flesh. He tasted blood in his mouth. His eyes filled with tears and he turned his head away to hide them. It was not because of the pain, it was because of who was causing him the pain. He knew it wasn’t Estel’s choice. He knew he had once done much worse by the ranger under similar influence, but it still stung.

The Nazgûl was pleased. The elf’s reaction to these events was better than he hoped. “You serve me well,” he purred in Aragorn’s ear, crouching behind the ranger so he could look over his shoulder at the elf. “I think, elf, I shall let him see to all your instructions from now on. With the proper training he could be a very formidable disciplinarian.” The Witch King noted the pained, horrified expression that darted through the elf’s eyes faster than it could be stopped. The Wraith reveled in the torment.
The Nazgûl too, could tell that Aragorn was still shaking. Pulling a small vial from inside his robes, he administered a partial dose of antidote to slow down the human’s decline.

“Prove to me I can trust you, and you will be given more, until you almost don’t feel the poison anymore, like the others,” the Wraith promised as Aragorn sank shakily back against the wall. His body was still trying to recover from the breaking process.

“Now, stay here, but do not touch the elf. I just want him to see what you have become, so he knows what will happen to him,” the Witch King instructed.

Smiling in satisfaction at the broken ranger, the Nazgûl rose and left the cell, slamming the door shut. Humans were not as resilient as the Eldar. He had known he would be able to break through the Dûnadan’s defenses; it had only been a matter of time and patience and he had plenty of both. Through the ranger he would be able to break the elf as well, given more time. This newest achievement pleased him and he anticipated the prospect of spending more time exploring the ranger’s mind. He would doubtlessly know many very interesting things about the Rivendell elves that could be used against them. Once he had the elf’s submission, the same could be true for Mirkwood, although he would do that only at the last. An elf’s mind was not as easily penetrated as a human’s and it would leave scars that would impair his elven slave’s abilities. That was why he hadn’t done it in the first place when he had him years ago... but he hadn’t known whom he held then either. Perhaps, when the time was right, he would share these two with his own Master, a gift of appeasement until that which he and the other Wraiths searched for, was found.

Stepping out into the hallway, the Nazgûl ignored the servant that stood waiting for him. Yrin could be seen just outside the door, a pained expression on his face before the entrance banged closed.

“Leave them alone until I return. Perhaps now the elf will realize that there is no use fighting me anymore.” The Wraith instructed as he stalked down the hall, leaving his servant and his newly acquired slave behind.

Legolas scooted as far forward as the chains that bound him would allow. The manacles bit deeply into his wrists and the collar threatened to choke him, but he would not relent. The ranger still lay half slumped against the wall, across the small cell from the elf. Legolas wanted so badly to reach his friend, to try and break him out of what was happening. He knew it was possible - it had to be! He had come back once; he had to believe that Aragorn could too.

“Estel?” he fought to speak around the cruel intrusion in his mouth and found that this time he was actually able to. The bit was not far enough back in his mouth to hamper the formation of words. It had not been properly placed. It was painful but not impossible like it had been last time. The spikes
of the bridle cut his tongue as he wrapped it around the cold bar ignoring the blood he tasted when he called to the man. There was no answer, not even a response from the dull-eyed ranger slumped in the corner. “Estel!”

Legolas fought the chains that held him fast, silently cursing his helplessness. It could not be true, the Nazgûl could not have won; Legolas wouldn’t let him.

“Estel, please listen to me. Listen to my voice as you bade me to listen to yours so many years ago.” The prince’s words were hampered and unclear, but he struggled to form them anyway.

“You have to hold on, you have to fight, you cannot give in to him for me, or anyone else. You must fight this! I know what you are enduring mellon-nín... Estel!” The elf’s tongue and the corners of his mouth bled freely from pulling against the barbed restraints, but he did not pay attention to the pain.

Outside the cell, Yrin stood and listened as the elf raged against his bonds, begging his friend to wake up. He knew it was useless, he knew that if the Nazgûl had truly broken the ranger there would be no hope for his recovery. He had seen such things before, too many times to recount. Humans did not live as long once they were broken, so the Nazgûl did not feel it necessary to break all his slaves if they could be bent to his will through fear, coercion or other methods. But those he did break were never the same. They became like the orcs: brutal and uncaring, delighting in whatever pleased their twisted Master. It was considered a fate worse than death.

Yrin could not stand to witness this anymore. He had his own heartbreaking tasks to carry out. Quietly, he walked away, trying to block out Legolas’ painful, tearful pleading.

“Mellon-nín, don’t do this,” Legolas desperately searched Aragorn’s face for some spark of the man he knew, for some sign that his friend was still in there, yet he found nothing but emptiness. The elf choked back a sob. “This is not the way it was supposed to be! You made me promise you that I would never leave without you. You made me swear to never give up my life again for as long as you lived. If you are truly gone and have left me here to the Nazgûl’s desires, I cannot keep that promise anymore. Estel, please…” Legolas’ voice trailed off in a whisper as the tears rolled down his cheeks. He could not speak anymore. His mouth was now too badly torn and it hurt too much to keep fighting the bridle.

The human across from him sat dumbly, unmoved by the words or emotions.

The Prince didn’t know how long they sat there. He didn’t know how long he struggled against his restraints. How long he fought the biting pain in an attempt to speak, to reach his one-time friend.
How long he alternated between begging and demanding that his friend fight what was happening. Time had utterly ceased to have meaning for the elf. All Legolas knew was that he was suddenly very alone. He did not think he could bear it if the Nazgûl followed through on his threats and forced the ranger to torture him. He could endure under any other hand... but not Aragorn’s.

Darkness deepened the shadows of their cell and Legolas shivered uncontrollably as the door to the prison was thrown open and the Nazgûl stepped back inside. The dark being did not speak this time. He simply glanced from the elf to the ranger. Neither had moved and now he was convinced that neither would. This had been a test. If the ranger was able to be swayed by his friend, as the ranger had swayed the elf so many years ago, he intended to catch that now. But it was not so. The human had not moved a muscle nor even recoiled at his approach. With a quiet, cruel laugh he left his prisoners alone for the night and retired to his chambers.

With a defeated sigh, Legolas leaned back against the cool stone wall behind him and closed his eyes, unable to stop the tears that streamed down his cheeks. It was truly over then. They had lost.
Aragorn blinked slowly, never changing the rhythm of his breathing, nor moving his gaze from the point on the wall ahead of him that he had chosen. He thought he was dying inside. This charade was killing him; it was easily the hardest thing he had ever done. He would never, for the rest of his life, be able to forgive himself for putting that vile contraption on his friend’s face. He hadn’t expected that the Nazgûl would make him do that.

Legolas’ tearful pleading had torn his heart out and he desperately wished the elf would stop speaking. He knew the damage the prince was doing to himself by fighting the bridle even though he had not put the vile contraption on Legolas as tightly as he had been instructed to. But the ranger forced himself to wait. Wait until he could hear no one in the hallway, wait until the throbbing in his shoulder died down and the fears that caused his heart to race subsided - all tell-tale signs that his captor was near. He knew the Nazgûl was still monitoring them. He could feel it now when he was close at hand. The dark presence throbbed in his shoulder like a warning signal.

Legolas’ heartbroken sob was too much for the ranger to handle and the emotions he had been fighting spilled silently down his own cheeks. He had been as strong as he was able to be. He had played the charade as best he could around a burning and breaking heart. The only measure of comfort he could take was that, if he had not taken this gamble, the Nazgûl would eventually have broken him for real and he would be forced to do much worse to Legolas, without any choice remaining in the matter.

As it was, he had only allowed the Nazgûl to *think* he had won. His mind still burned and swirled from the dark assault when he lifted his defenses... but the Witch King did not realize that he had been fooled. He had only been allowed in as far as Aragorn chose to let him. He had only seen the things the ranger left for him to find. It had been an extremely risky gamble. If the Wraith had chosen to dig deeper and force the issue more thoroughly, Aragorn might not have been able to pull back and hold onto himself and he could truly have been lost. However, it seemed that, at least for the moment, the Valar were looking kindly upon his desperate gambit.

Aragorn trembled slightly, this time not because of illness or pain. If the Witch King had not been so sure of himself, or had not wanted to torment Legolas with the sight of his broken friend, things could have turned out very badly. But the risk had paid off for now and Aragorn had been left unrestrained in the cell with Legolas. It was more than he had hoped for at the outset. He had a plan fomenting in the back of his mind even now. If Yrin meant what he had told them the other night about being willing to dream, then perhaps they stood a chance. The Nazgûl’s latest orders shifted the level of desperation to their favor. The slaves were not going to be happy about having to cull their own. Perhaps they would be unhappy enough to risk a little more than usual.

Perhaps...
Waiting for a few more minutes before he gave up his feigned stupor, Aragorn swallowed hard and tried to block out the soft sounds of distress coming from the far corner of the cell. When Legolas’ breathing hitched and he gave a soft whimper of pain, Aragorn could stand it no more.

Glancing quickly at the closed door, Aragorn scooted across the floor, keeping well below the barred window. He crouched in front of Legolas and gently took the elf’s face in his hands.

Legolas started and pulled back as much as his position allowed when the human touched him. Stark fear was evident in his eyes as he pressed himself back against the wall.

Aragorn’s heart burned at seeing that abject terror directed at him. Yet he couldn’t blame Legolas for being afraid of him.

Quickly and quietly, the ranger unfastened the hideous bridle and eased it carefully off his friend’s head. Tears burned his eyes as he gently wiped the crimson stains from the elf’s cheeks. The cruel instrument had drawn quite a fair amount of blood, but had thankfully not cut too deep.

“I’m sorry, Legolas, I’m so sorry...” he begged forgiveness he knew he didn’t deserve. “I had hoped it would hurt less that way.”

Legolas shuddered as he was released, his confused gaze searching his friend’s face.

“Estel?” he rasped quietly. He winced, his injured tongue giving him great pain.

“Legolas, shhh... It’s all right; there is nothing wrong with me. I did not give up, mellon-nín.”
Aragorn rested his forehead against the prince’s, speaking soothingly in the grey tongue.

The chains that held the elf clanked loudly as Legolas, surprised by the contact, tried to reach out to his friend.

“Quiet,” Aragorn warned him softly. “They need to think that nothing has changed and we present no danger.” The ranger gently pinned the elf in place with his hands, stilling the chains that held
Legolas’ arms above his head.

“What?…” Legolas stared incredulously at the man crouched in front of him. His wary eyes held Aragorn’s gaze fast, judging for himself whether or not his friend was truly well. To the elf’s immense relief, he saw Aragorn behind his friend’s eyes again, with no shadow of lie or deception between them.

“It was an act.” Aragorn replied distractedly as he worked with the manacles around Legolas’ bruised wrists. “I gave him what he wanted and gambled on his over-confidence…” The ranger braced himself against the wall and shifted his hand to his left boot, extracting a thin, elongated, almost metallic looking tine, the one he had confiscated from the Nazgûl’s workshop earlier. The sharpened tip just slid into the lock and he began to work the mechanism, feeling the way the interlocking pieces lay against one another. In a few moments the manacle sprang open, releasing Legolas’ arm.

The second one was easier and Aragorn caught the offending metal cuff as it swung free from the elf’s wrist. It was best not to let anyone onto the fact that they were free in their cell.

Working the lock on the collar was much more difficult. Aragorn tipped Legolas’ head forward, brushing the long, disheveled strands of hair away from the elf’s shoulder. He crouched near the elf, his head nearly touching the prince’s. This close, he was able to keep up a quiet, steady stream of conversation. The bruises around the elf’s neck were easily visible now and Aragorn winced slightly as Legolas cringed when the pin slipped and the collar jerked tightly against him.

“I’m sorry. Hold on just a minute longer. This lock is…” Aragorn’s voice faltered as he concentrated. “It’s more difficult. I think I have it!” He felt the pin slip into place and move the internal mechanism. Gently he removed the offending restraint and pulled Legolas away from the wall, resting the collar against the stone and keeping it from clanking.

Carefully, he tipped the prince’s chin back and checked the soft skin around the base of the elf’s neck. His fingers were gentle on the inflamed bruises and Legolas closed his eyes until the ranger was done.

Legolas pressed back against the stone wall behind him as Aragorn seated himself in front of the elf. He gingerly rubbed his sore wrists as the circulation was restored to them.

Taking one of the elf’s slender hands in his own, the ranger gently rubbed the prince’s fingers.
“I’m so sorry, mellon-nín,” he repeated. “I had to play along. I had to do what he told me so he would believe... I-I never wanted to hurt you and I didn’t mean to frighten you so. I never imagined he would force me to...to put that *thing* on you. I wanted so badly to give you a sign that I was all right, but I could not risk his returning and finding out the truth. So I obeyed him until I could no longer feel him near.” Aragorn smiled ruefully and gently touched the welted wound to his shoulder. “At least some good has come of this injury – I know when he is near now; he has touched it too many times for it to forget his presence.”

Legolas winced, understanding all too well the pain his friend was going through as memories of his own enslavement resurfaced. Gently he touched the man’s face where the Nazgûl had backhanded the ranger sometime in the recent past. Aragorn’s features were bruised and his lip was split. Welts and bruises decorated his arms and his chest as well where they were exposed. Almost self-consciously, the human pulled his tunic more tightly about him. Legolas’ hands stopped his movements, gently pulling the shirt away from Aragorn’s wounded shoulder. The cut was no better, but the results of the antidote the Nazgûl had administered were evident as it slowed the fevered infection.

“There is nothing to forgive, Estel,” Legolas shook his head. “You did what you had to do. I am just glad that I have not lost you my friend,” the elf admitted, his eyes sparkling with unshed tears in the dim light for a moment, before he regained control of himself. His mouth hurt, but Legolas concentrated on his words and paid it little mind. He knew how to deal with pain without succumbing to helplessness.

Placing his hand carefully over the ranger’s injury, Legolas pressed his palm against the ragged wound, causing Aragorn to draw in a deep breath and hold it against the pain. The elf’s touch was cool to his feverish skin and he felt himself relaxing slightly as Legolas worked, slowly infusing comfort in his touch the way he remembered Elrond doing. The prince’s contact was awkward and his experience with this type of healing nearly non-existent. Yet he closed his eyes, letting the power ebb out from him and into his friend. If he just trusted and let go, it seemed to happen naturally.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Aragorn asked in quiet surprise when Legolas broke the contact and sat back once more.

“Your father.” Legolas smiled at the man.

“When?” Aragorn shook his head, trying to remember when Elrond might have had the opportunity to teach the Silvan elf that level of healing.

“I-I don’t know,” Legolas admitted when the memory did not spring as readily to mind as he had expected. “Probably one of the times we came back in need of his attention after some adventure or another.”
Aragorn smiled at the fond memories. He wanted nothing more than to be back home with his father right now, instead of being trapped as they were. The mountain winds whistled fiercely against the walls of the prison, causing the small oil lamp to flicker.

“What now?” Legolas asked softly. Aragorn refocused his attention on the elf and smiled slowly.

“Now, we find a way out of here.” The ranger stood to his feet slowly, his body beginning to feel the ache of the beating he had endured. “I’ve been analyzing the antidote as much as I am able from taste and effect. I think I can make some guesses about how to recreate it. I was in the Nazgûl’s lab again today and he had a table set aside with large quantities of certain herbs and powders. I recognized most of them. It’s a fair guess that he is waiting to make another batch of the antidote as soon as the orcs get him the last ingredient.” He reached down and helped Legolas to his feet, careful of the elf’s bruised wrists.

“While I was in there, the dim-witted orc, Rhzaq, came in and reported that the orcs could not reach the lower levels and harvest the plant for the antidote. Apparently the Nazgûl is running low on supplies and needs some soon for the household servants,” Aragorn explained quietly as he crept to the door and glanced out into the darkened hallway.

No one was up this late at night and the door to their cell was not locked. There was no reason for it to be fastened. The elf had been chained to the wall and left with a ranger who was no longer capable of functioning, or so the Nazgûl had thought. Locked doors weren’t necessary in a dwelling where fear stalked the halls and the threat of death hung over the heads of the inhabitants. Running away was sure death; disobedience simply brought it on faster and more painfully. The orcs monitored the halls at night and so the humans remained on their on floor to avoid contact with the evil creatures.

In Angmar, things ran smoothly or not at all, and so it was that very few of the doors were fitted with locks. A practice that lent an advantage to the two friends who stole silently down the long hallway heading for the stairs that led to the lower levels.

“So we should try to accomplish what the orcs have failed,” Legolas whispered quietly, his tone a little ironic. “Lovely.”

“We need that plant,” Aragorn whispered back. “If I can get Yrinvan or someone who knows about these things to help us once we have the ingredients, we might have a chance.”
Legolas noticed that his friend used the word ‘might’. It was still a long shot that they would actually be able to reproduce the antidote, but right now their only option was to try.

They had nearly reached the stairwell when Legolas grabbed Aragorn and pulled him back into a recessed doorway, pressing the human as far into the corner as he could.

The ranger didn’t resist when the elf shoved him out of the hallway and shielded them both, dimming his light. Legolas laid his chin on the ranger’s shoulder and pressed his lips to the man’s ear, speaking in a barely audible voice.

“Orcs approach.” The elf whispered, his breath stirring the ranger’s unkempt locks. Legolas’ grip on his friend’s shoulders tightened as the sound of the small company quickly approached. He hoped the darkened recess would be enough to hide them, for he was sure they would not be able to resist recapture.

“Retzhrak, the master is looking for you.” A human’s voice stopped the company from advancing further. “His mount is hungry and the coffers are running low. He has requested that you feed the creature and see to the traps.”

A low grumbling set up within the ranks of the orcs and they glared at the human.

Yrinvan stared the dark beings down. “It is the master’s request. I only bring it on his behalf. If you wish to discuss it with him further I can inform him of your desire.” The human crossed his arms, pushing his hands up underneath the overlarge tunic sleeves.

“No.” the orc he had addressed answered him harshly, “We’ll go. You may tell him we have obeyed.” With a rough command Retzhrak led his contingent back to the stairwell and headed up to the level that housed the Nazgûl’s mount, barking orders at his men as they walked.

Yrin sighed, shaking his head and moving forward. He wanted to make sure the elf and the ranger were settled for the night. It was the least he could do. He tired of being the Nazgûl’s lackey, but once again it seemed he had no choice. With the ranger gone, their hope of making any successful attempt to break free had dwindled back to a foolish dream. He was sure that someday the Witch King or one of his orcs would become equally tired of the slave that carried out the orders and kill him. There were nights when he looked forward to that day and this was one of them. The Master expected him to decide who lived and who died tonight... How was he supposed to do that? He had done it once and it still haunted him, all those lives on his hands. His heart couldn’t take it anymore.
Letting up his grip on Aragorn, Legolas allowed the man to move from the shadows and slide closer to the hallway, knowing instinctively what the human had in mind. They had both heard what had transpired and the ranger was paying close attention to the approaching footsteps.

As Yrinvan passed them by, Aragorn stepped out behind him and grabbed the man, pulling him back into the recess with them. One hand covered Yrin’s mouth and the other pinned the servant’s arms to his side.

The slave stiffened under Aragorn’s touch, shock and fear paralyzing him enough so that he did not fight as the ranger pushed him into the corner, turning him so Yrin could see his abductors and Aragorn could motion the man to silence.

Yrin’s eyes grew wide when he saw the elf and the ranger but he remained silent as ordered.

Glancing quickly at Legolas, the ranger motioned to the edge of the alcove and the elf stepped into the doorway, looking up and down the hallway.

With a simple nod the elf informed the Dûnadan that they were alone.

“If you’re going to kill me, please do it quickly,” Yrin said quietly. If the Nazgûl had found out all that Yrinvan had been doing behind his back through his new control over the ranger, then it was far better for it to end like this. He wasn’t afraid. At the moment it sounded as if he was almost asking them to kill him.

The ranger shook his head. “We aren’t going to hurt you. We need to know where to find the plant the Witch King uses to make the antidote and what it looks like.” Aragorn whispered.

“How is that you are well? How did you escape?” Yrin glanced from the elf to the ranger. The signs of their abuse colored the skin that he could see but the Dûnadan’s eyes were cleared from the dead, glazed look he had in his cell. “I saw you! You were overcome.”

“No.” Aragorn shook his head, glancing at Legolas again for reassurance that they were still safe. Time was running out; he could feel it. The night had precious few hours left in it and they would need them all. “I was pretending so the Nazgûl would leave us alone. I freed Legolas with this.” He pulled the tine from his pocket and showed it to the slave.
With a gasp the servant grabbed the long spine and shoved the elf out of his way as he stepped near a torch set high in the wall. Carefully he inspected the long tine looking for telltale traces. It was clean.

“Do you know what this is?” He asked fearfully. When they indicated they did not, he continued. “This is a spine from that terrible beast the Nazgûl rides. It’s from his back. They grow and shed them with the seasons. Usually they are longer and thicker. This one appears to be newer growth. But they are also filled with the blood of the creature and it is a toxin to humans. This one is not poisoned; you were lucky.” He handed the tine back to Aragorn who held it more gingerly, its iridescent coloring sparkling under the dull lights.

“Estel, the antidote. We are running out of time and so are you.” Legolas warned quietly.

Urgently, Yrin grabbed the ranger’s arm, garnering his attention. “The plant is found in the lower levels, but you cannot go there. It is not possible. Cave trolls live down there... and worse things as well, if the orcs are to be believed.” The slave was insistent.

“Yrin, listen to me.” Legolas stepped back near the two men. “This... this plant is the main ingredient in the antidote, is it not? If so, then we must try. If we can recreate enough of the antidote, you and your people have a chance to be free and Strider has a chance to live. Otherwise none of us have any hope. It all hinges on this.”

The servant was shaking his head adamantly. “You will not make it out. And even if you did, what do you expect us to do? Borrow the Master’s lab to make the antidote? That is the only place it can be done. Simply walk out under his nose? People don’t leave this place alive against his will!”

“Trust us Yrin.” Aragorn touched the man’s shoulder redirecting his attention. “If we stay here the Nazgûl will kill us. If we die trying, at least we will have tried. We can’t just wait for that Wraith to have his way with us. He won’t stop, like he has with you and your people. He will never be content with us merely for our service. He intends to destroy us completely and through us, all the elves of Mirkwood and Rivendell. We can’t let that happen.”

Yrin nodded slowly, but the fear was evident in his nervous gaze. If the ranger and the elf failed, it would very likely be his end as well. The Nazgûl didn’t even have to know he had been involved, the fact that he was in charge of the prisoners would likely be enough. Yet hadn’t he just gotten through thinking that he almost wished the end would come, rather than keep living this way? Yrin swallowed hard, remembering what it was he was supposed to be doing tonight. Would he risk anything rather than have to be involved in another mass murder? Yes, he would.
“All right, I’ll help you,” he agreed quietly.

Aragorn swayed slightly as nodded his agreement. He reached out to catch the wall and steady himself as the world tilted sideways. He felt sick and weak. The adrenaline rush of being out of their cell and finally taking action had carried him this far, but it would not support his failing body for much longer. His mind still ached from the Nazgûl’s intrusion and the small amount of antidote he had been given wasn’t nearly enough for his depleted physical state.

“Strider?” Legolas caught Aragorn’s outstretched arm and eased the man down into a sitting position in the small alcove. “Can you help him?” he asked the servant as Yrin crouched next to them. Their plan was not going to work very well if Aragorn could barely walk.

The slave checked the ranger’s pulse and pressed his head back, gazing into the other man’s eyes before answering. “I have no antidote. He is suffering as much from the Nazgûl’s attempts to break him, as he is from the poison. He needs rest.”

“There is no time,” Aragorn whispered, trying to push back up to a standing position. He was impeded by two sets of hands that held him firmly down.

“I don’t have anything to counteract the poison, but I do have some chrysein seeds,” Yrin offered quickly, remembering the tiny dried seeds in his pocket. He had been handing out a lot of them lately, as more and more of his fellow servants became in need of a supplement to keep them going through the inevitable withdrawal that the antidote shortage created.

“Chrysein?” Aragorn had never heard of it before until now.

“We found them one spring. They come from plants that grow in the woods at the edge of the granite steppe. They don’t stop the poisons and they can’t counter their affects but they do give a boost of temporary energy. They’ll help you get down into the caverns and back out if you’re quick,” Yrin explained. He reached into his tunic and produced a small velvet wrapped pouch. Pouring out a handful of the tiny, black, elongated seeds, he dumped them into the palm of Strider’s hand. “Eat.”

The seeds had a slightly acidic bite to them as though seasoned with spices that the ranger could not quite identify. He sat quietly for a few minutes while Yrin explained the way down into the caverns below. Slowly, the nausea faded and his thoughts cleared. The headache that had been wrapping itself like a vise around his temples slipped away and he felt the tremors leaving his body. He felt better, but he also felt unnatural. A strange, slightly detached sense of euphoria replaced his former weariness.
Yrin noticed the difference before Legolas.

“Feeling better?” He asked as he turned towards the ranger.

“Much better,” Aragorn answered as the servant and the elf helped him to his feet. “That stuff works amazingly well.”

“Perhaps,” Yrin replied guardedly. “But it is wise to use it seldom. It’s not really giving you any strength; it’s just clouding your ability to feel pain or weariness. It will wear off and when it does... when it does it will leave you worse than you were before. You’ll have a few good hours though, so I suggest you make the most of them.”

“Thank you, we’ll keep that in mind.” Aragorn nodded in understanding. He glanced at Legolas, knowing he would need the elf’s help when that time came.

Legolas returned his gaze with a quiet promise of support. He was a little bit anxious about this situation. He did not like entrusting his friend’s wellbeing to the hands of this obviously powerful narcotic, but it seemed their only option at the moment. He hoped his friend would not pay too dearly for it later.

Peering around the corner into the hallway, the elf moved down the passage towards the back door to the caverns below. “The way is clear. We must hurry, Strider.”

“Wait just a moment more,” Yrin bid them pause. “There are a few more things you need to know.”

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The pathway cut into the heart of the mountain was steep and winding. The walls of the descending passageway that led into the bowels of Angmar were no more than three feet wide at most. They were barely wide enough for the orcs that sometimes used this stairwell. The stone was slippery with mosses that had collected on them, feasting upon the condensation.

Legolas led Aragorn down into the darkness as swiftly as possible; using the little-used side-passage that Yrinvan had shown them. He carried a torch stolen from one of the wall sconces. Holding it high above his head, the elf lit their way down into the depths of the earth. He tried to not to think about where they were going or what waited for them as they raced down the stairwell.
“Down the winding stairway, through the portal and into the left hand tunnel, past the waterfall and into the basin...”

Those were the instructions Yrin had given them. The plant that they sought was really a phosphorescent mold. It grew near the edges of a large, subterranean lake. It was harvested by the orcs who simply scraped the glowing plant life off the rocks.

Yrin had never actually been down here himself, which was not a comfort since they were relying on his directions. However, he had gotten all his information on the topic from Rhzaq who had been sent there frequently by the other orcs. The little orc had told Yrin all about the lower levels one night when the servant had found him cowering in a corner, mumbling about things in the dark that tried to catch him. Yrin had deduced that Rhzaq had encountered cave trolls from the descriptions the orc had given him. He also cautioned the two friends of something that apparently lived in the underground lake near the water’s head. He was never able to get a straight answer out of the smaller orc, except that Rhzaq was terrified of the water.

Time lost all meaning as they wound their way down the nearly vertical stairwell. The pace was tiring for Aragorn, but he did the best he could to stay within the sphere of light that Legolas cast around them. The rocks were slippery in places and the mosses grew thicker the farther down they went, turning from bright greens and deeper reds to even darker shades. As they neared the bottom, the lichens and molds that ran in rivulets down the rock face had begun to pick up traces of phosphorescent colors, lighting the passages duly with streaks of greens and blues. They would have found it pretty had their situation not been so dire.

Aragorn’s foot slipped on a wet patch of moss and he stumbled forward into Legolas, throwing the elf off balance. Legolas, although fairing much better than his friend, was still trying to deal with the effects of the rough games the orcs had played with him earlier in the day. Unfortunately, it was affecting his reflexes and balance. Unable to catch himself, the prince threw the torch down the stairwell ahead of him as they tumbled down the steps. It wasn’t far to fall as they had nearly reached the ground level. The torch rolled into the open cavern a few feet ahead of Legolas.

Aragorn lay sprawled on top of the elf, unmoving. Legolas slowly sat up, gently easing the ranger off of him.

“Estel?” The elf shook the man carefully, quickly checking him over for broken bones or gashes. Amazingly their short fall had resulted in no serious damage beyond a few additional scrapes and bruises.

Aragorn moaned as consciousness broke afresh through his mind. His head hurt and he was dizzy,
but with help from Legolas he sat up and stared around them.

“Legolas, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stumble, are you all right?” He apologized, but the elf was not listening.

Following the prince’s gaze, Aragorn could see that they were in a vast, domed cavern. The top of the cave stretched far above them, beyond the sphere of light their torch cast. Legolas picked up the still burning flame and held it as high as he could. Behind them was the staircase they had just descended, and next to that, a yawning opening that was well over nine feet tall and just as wide. Dark stairs led up from the cave floor, disappearing into the tunnel. This was the main passage down; the one Yrinvan had cautioned them to avoid since it was more frequently used. On the opposite side of the room were three passageways leading out in different directions.

The wind whistled through the caves high above, creating an eerie melancholy music that sent shivers up the ranger’s spine. Bracing himself against Legolas, he stood shakily to his feet and helped the elf stand.

The air wasn’t as dank as they had expected, but it still held an unmistakable oldness to its scent. Mingled with the smell of moss and musty stone were the traces of animal droppings: bats, rodents... trolls. Legolas took a deep breath as he walked in a small circle, taking in their surroundings.

“We dare not linger,” the elf whispered. His voice echoed loudly despite the softness of his words. “Yrin was correct, these caverns are inhabited.”

With a curt nod, Aragorn followed the prince, heading towards the left-most passage. As they walked through the cavern, Legolas lit the sconces mounted on the wall nearest to them, shedding a small amount of light into the huge room.

The tunnel was more than tall enough for them to stand upright, and wide enough for them to walk beside one another. Legolas wondered absently if the dwarves had at one time occupied Angmar, before the Witch King established it as his home, or if slaves had done all this work. After a sharp switchback in the passage, the tunnel opened up into a second room that was nearly taken up by a massive, underground lake. The thermal flows that ran under and through the mountain, kept water here from freezing, even in the bitter dead of winter. A small waterfall fell from several feet above their heads just to the left of the tunnel’s opening. Its soft, misty spray covered everything near it in a fine sheen of water.

Aragorn stepped farther around the lake to the right, avoiding the misting shower. He had no desire to add cold and wet to his already mounting list of discomforts. A large metal sconce, set five feet
off the ground in the rocky wall, easily accepted the torch as Legolas slipped the handle into the ring, shedding light around the edges of the pool nearest them. The lake stretched back into the cavern, seemingly with no end. Around both sides of it for as far as the pair could see a narrow shelf of rock edged the perimeter. Jutting out here and there into the water in odd patterns, the ledge created islands and jetties upon which the moving water broke in quiet waves.

The water was an inky black color where the light did not touch it. It barely rippled on the edges when Aragorn knelt. The stone shelf the ranger balanced on had been smoothed over time and now formed a barrier between the lake and the rocky ledge around its circumference.

When Legolas knelt next to the man, he could see what had so fascinated the human. Inches below the water line, brightly glowing ribbons and rivulets of lichen coated the rocks, reaching up the stone face just below where Aragorn’s fingers gripped the lip of the shelf.

“This must be it.” The ranger spoke quietly. His voice was swallowed up in the immensity of the large room and drowned out by the sounds of the waterfall behind them. “Look, here, this patch has been all scraped away, not more than a month ago.”

Leaning in closely, Legolas could easily see where the rock had been scratched and gouged. White indentations marked the ledge below where they knelt. He pulled the small velvet bag that Yrinvan had given to him before their descent and held it out as Aragorn dug into the soft plant life. The ranger loosened it with his fingers, attempting to pry it free. The going was slow and the lichen stubbornly refused to release. Searching urgently around them for anything that might help, Legolas returned with a small, flat rock and offered it to the ranger.

Within minutes the sack was bulging, filling up quickly with the glowing lichen. Aragorn kept up a steady pace. He was unsure of how much they would need for everyone and wasn’t taking any chances. He packed the bag as full as it could get. The rock clanked dully against the granite shelf as the ranger scraped one more section of lichen into his hand.

The small sounds they made as they collected the plants reverberated under the water loudly, ringing through the depths and disturbing the inky black peace.


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They were back.
They never should have come back...

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Small dark eyes opened and blinked, looking up through the water and finding the small pinpoint of light that the torch shed on its underwater haven. It liked it dark in the cave. It hated the light. It hated the beings that came and woke it so often, taking the glowing plants from the edge of its home.

This was *its* home and it was not happy. How many of those creatures must it kill before they would stop coming back? What would it take to convince them? Moving slowly, the creature worked its way upward, its massive body swirling the waters as it stirred once more to life.

Legolas touched Aragorn’s arm, stopping the human. Something was wrong. The lake, which had moments ago been smooth as glass near the back of the cavern, was now rippling. Small wakes disrupted the ever expanding ripples created by the waterfall behind them. The water was moving, shifting as though something below were surfacing.

“We must go. Quickly!” Legolas jumped back from the ledge and stood to his feet, trying to pull the man up with him.

“One more handful. We have to get enough! If we make mistakes as we try to recreate the antidote, we’ll need plenty to cover them.” Aragorn argued.

Bubbles rose to the top of the lake, churning the surface into a black cauldron. Glancing up, the ranger’s eyes went wide as a long, thick tentacle uncurled from the water and snaked toward the edge of the pond.

Legolas’ arm around the ranger’s waist tightened and the elf jerked the human backwards, out of harms way, pressing them both against the cavern wall. A high pitched, shrieking roar filled the cave and set the hair on the back of Aragorn’s neck on end. They had awoken something, and it was not pleased. More tentacles joined the first and swept the walkway along the side of the cave where the torch was hung. Groping in the murky twilight, it searched for the beings that it knew had invaded its home.

Legolas leapt out of the way as a dark limb swept past him, trying to trip him up. It barely grazed his heel, just missing bringing the elf down. Aragorn ducked as a wildly flailing tentacle swept past overhead. It crashed down on his right, making the cavern shake.
Darting after the elf, Aragorn shoved the bag of lichens into an inner pocket of his tunic and headed for the passageway. Legolas grabbed the torch as he passed by it, garnering the water creature’s attention.

The light was moving. It was so much easier to catch the ones that carried the lights.

Surging forward, the creature propelled itself up, rising out of the water. Legolas only had seconds to correct his course as the massive beast flung the upper half of its body onto the walkway, cutting off their escape.

The elf skidded to a stop, slipping on the water that sloshed over the edge of the lake. Turning as quickly as possible, he pelted back towards Aragorn. For all his speed and agility, it wasn’t enough.

The world shifted around Legolas as the monster behind him latched onto the elf’s ankle, pulling his feet out from underneath him. With a sharp crack, the prince’s chin impacted the stone floor, shooting pain through his consciousness and causing bright points of light to dance across his vision. The torch flew out of his hand and hit the wall.

Before the elf could gather his wits, the creature pulled Legolas back along the slippery floor towards the center of its mass, exposing a gaping maw filled with sharp teeth. Legolas scrabbled at the wet stones under him but could get no purchase. The creature was sheer muscle and he could not get his leg free. If he had his weapons this would have been a vastly different story, but with only his bare hands he could not make the creature let go of him. The beast roared in triumph, grasping one of Legolas’ wrists and pinning the helpless elf in its grip.

Legolas gasped in pain when his already sore arm was twisted and ground against the harsh stones under him. The creature dragged him back steadily. The tentacle around the elf’s leg snaked up over his knee and around his hips, gripping the prince more firmly.
“Legolas!” Aragorn sprinted towards the downed prince. He had no weapons, nothing even vaguely resembling one, but he could not abandon his friend.

The torch Legolas had been carrying lay against the wall, sputtering and choking from the water that washed up onto the walkway. Snatching the dying flame, Aragorn raced forward and buried the burning end in the soft flesh of the monster’s tentacle that held Legolas’ arm pinned. Moving quickly, the ranger did the same to other the tentacle coiling around the elf’s leg and up his body. He stabbed at the creature with the smoldering wood, causing the wet black flesh to sizzle and steam. A very nasty smell filled the air.

The creature screamed in pain. Rearing up into the air and dropping the elf, it recoiled momentarily in surprise. Its monstrous bulk sank back into the lake as it tried to judge whether a further attack was eminent. Its enraged roars reverberated off the rock walls.

Aragorn helped Legolas up from where the beast had dropped him. The prince’s chin had a deep gash on it where he had fallen and it was bleeding freely. There was no time to worry about the elf’s condition however, as the water creature regrouped and lunged at the two smaller beings. Its tentacles grasped the doorframe, the rock shelf, any outcropping where it could find purchase as it attempted to recapture the elf and the ranger.

Aragorn skidded into the hallway underneath one of the grasping appendages, narrowly missing being caught by the limb.

Throwing himself to the ground, Legolas rolled on to his left shoulder avoiding the flailing tentacles as he leapt to his feet and raced down the passage after the ranger. The sounds of the water creature could be heard ringing through the tunnel as it threw its bulk against the doorway repeatedly. It was too big to fit through the entry and too far away from the water to muster enough force to bring the sturdy stonework down. The beast’s eerie, rock-grating cries followed the two friends down the tunnel as they ran.

“What *was* that thing?” Aragorn asked when Legolas finally caught up with him. The ranger had stopped just after the switchback and was leaning against the tunnel wall, trying to catch his breath. His head swam nauseatingly, reminding him why he needed the antidote for which they had just risked their lives.

“I don’t know. Are you sure there was only one?” Legolas stared hard around the corner. The monster’s raging had ceased and only the sounds of their own breathing echoed in the passageway.
In the dark, caught in its clutches, it had been hard to tell if it was just one beast or a host of snakes.

Aragorn simply shook his head. He had no idea what that thing was, but he was certain he knew now why Rhzaq was deathly afraid of coming down here. He’d take any odds that this was the creature that was killing the orcs.

“Let us go. Yrin says we need to use the Nazgûl’s lab. If we are to do that, we need to try before he realizes we are missing.” Legolas whispered, hooking his fingers in the ranger’s tunic and pulling him along. They were both soaking wet now and the lower reaches still held a chill despite the thermal flows.

Legolas led them into the main cavern, and froze mid-step.

Just inside the grotto stood two large cave trolls, talking amongst themselves in quiet grunts and whuffles. They had been drawn into the cavern by the sounds of the water beast. Their curiosity had brought them in to investigate. Often, when the water watcher was disturbed, it meant there were little tasty tidbits running about ripe for the catching. The troll nearest to Legolas stopped speaking and turned towards the intruders.

Small, semi-intelligent eyes focused on the elf and the ranger. The trolls stood perfectly still, wondering if they had been seen. Their arms, nearly as long as their bodies, hung at their sides. One held a large crudely made hammer. The other slowly hefted a twelve-foot spear, the tip of which was crafted from a torn piece of metal that resembled the remnants of a door.

“Trolls,” Legolas murmured almost inaudibly. “It had to be trolls...” his arm curled reflexively around his stomach, remembering the last near-fatal encounter he had had with members of that huge and brutal race.

Aragorn shifted closer to Legolas, looking up at the tall, green-scaled bodies that stood between them and their way out.

“What now?” He whispered quietly.

Barely shaking his head, Legolas didn’t move. His eyes darted to the smaller opening across the way. The trolls’ gaze followed his, glancing at the narrow, winding stairwell.
One of the hulking beasts moved closer, scenting the air above the intruders, trying to decide if there was a threat. These creatures were not nearly as smart as their cousins that lived further south, but they were just as dangerous. The large flat feet of the trolls shuffled closer, making Aragorn nervous. A rasping bark from the one that lagged behind seemed to make up their minds.

For all their bulk, the two creatures moved incredibly fast.

Sensing the shift in the beasts’ temperament, Legolas darted to the right, heading for the small opening nearest them. If they could get inside the narrow passage they would be safe. Aragorn followed suit, dodging behind the elf and sidestepping the troll as it tried to tread on the two fleeing beings.

A blow from the monster’s hammer cut off their attempt at escape as the cave trolls reacted to the quick moving elf. The mallet slammed into the stone wall above the doorway, caving the stairwell’s frame in and reducing the passageway to rumble at the opening. Large, broken pieces of granite fell from above, threatening to crush the elf and the ranger as the two skidded to a stop, backpedaling away from the destroyed tunnel.

“This way!” yelled Aragorn. He grabbed the collar of Legolas’ tunic and pulled the elf out of the way as a stone shard taller than prince drove tip first into the ground in front of them, blocking their path once more.

Legolas raced after the ranger, dodging between the trolls’ awkward attempts to stop them. The large stone hammer fell between them, causing the cave floor to shake. Aragorn was thrown forward as the blow barely grazed his boot, nearly catching him. Legolas leapt backwards, only just keeping his balance as he whirled tightly to the right and ran for the wide, dark opening of the main stairwell.

Dazed and off balanced, Aragorn rolled onto his shoulder, letting it take the brunt of his fall. He stopped in a crouched position as he realized that the second cave troll had stepped from behind him, blocking his escape to the main tunnel.

Legolas had already made the stairs, but looked over his shoulder on the first step and noted Aragorn’s position. Both trolls stood still, breathing heavily as they watched the small human, waiting for him to move. They knew just as well as the ranger did that he was trapped.

The troll behind Aragorn muttered in a deep, growling voice. What exactly they were saying, the ranger did not know and had no desire to discover. Dodging forward, the ranger feinted left before turning sharply right. The troll was too slow to catch onto the misdirection and lunged at the darting
human. Aragorn threw himself to the left, narrowly avoiding a swipe by the huge spear that the troll jabbed at him. The large beast shifted its weight, throwing itself back into the human’s path. Before he had time to think it through, Aragorn dropped to the ground and rolled underneath the troll. He tumbled between its massive feet as it tried to step back into his path.

Legolas roughly grabbed the ranger’s tunic and hauled the man to his feet, shoving Aragorn into the darkened pathway. Stumbling up the steps Aragorn realized he could not see in the pitch black tunnel.

“Legolas!”

A dimly glowing light darted past him, lighting the steps just beneath his feet as they nimbly raced upward. Behind them the outraged howls of the cave trolls could be heard.

“Estel, quickly! They are following us!” Legolas cried out. He increased his speed as much as he was able to, taking into account the ranger’s natural impediments.

Indeed, it was as the elf had said. The two trolls, enraged and unwilling to give up, were chasing their quarry up the ancient stone stairs. The cavern reverberated with their heavy steps and their guttural roars. The sound of pursuit alone was enough to spike adrenaline through Aragorn’s veins, giving him the extra boost he needed to mount the stairs.

They burst into the upper chambers, flinging wide the large double wooden doors that protected the portal. Yrinvan had heard the clamor. Thinking one step ahead of the escaped prisoners, he raced towards the tunnels and unbared the huge doors. Tinald came running from the opposite direction, disturbed from his nightly rounds by the racket echoing up the steps.

“Yrin, what in the name of the moon is going on?” he demanded, but he never got an answer.

Grabbing the smaller servant, Yrin pulled Tinald out of the way just as the doors swung open, slamming into the rock walls behind them with a metallic clang.

Legolas leapt into the hall and quickly headed to the left, towards the laboratory. Aragorn was right on his tail. The ranger slid to a stop against the far wall of the hallway, halting only long enough to yell a caution to the servants.
“Yrin! Tinald! Get out of here! The trolls are on their way up! GO!” With that simple warning he pushed off the wall and raced after Legolas. Their chance for secrecy was gone. Now all of them would simply have to try to survive.

Tinald was stunned. “What? How did—”

The clumsy, thundering steps of the cave trolls could now be felt as small tremors through the stone castle floor, their roars and bellows waking the entire household as they gained access to the main landing.

The doors had partway closed, moving on their own slowly as the force with which they had been thrown open dissipated. Yrin and Tinald quickly muscled them shut, dropping the huge bar back into place in an effort to keep the creatures contained. The trolls had never come up to these levels before. The slaves weren’t sure what to do.

No sooner was this done when a large stone hammer slammed through the top of the portal, smashing the wooden doors to splinters. Tinald was frozen in fear as the huge beasts crashed through the gates and lunged into the hallway. Quickly, Yrin pressed the other servant to the floor, crouching over them both and covering them with his cloak. It was grey and drab, melting in perfectly with the walls and the floor in the Witch King’s castle. He knew that the trolls had poor eyesight and would only follow movement. If they could keep from getting stepped on, the creatures wouldn’t even know they existed. The one and only thing they had on their side, was that cave trolls were incredibly dumb.

Down the hallway, the ranger’s boots rang on the stone passageway, attracting the monstrous beasts’ attention as the two escapees fled through the castle. With a sharp bellow, the cave trolls continued their pursuit. Careening down the hallway they punched holes in the walls, caving in small alcoves and doorways as they vented their frustration on anything that impeded them.

The hallway filled with dust and bits of rock from the melee, choking the two servants as Yrin slowly stood up and surveyed the damage.

“The master will be angry... Oh stars, Yrin, he’s going to kill us,” Tinald whispered shakily. He dusted his clothes off and shifted a large splinter from the broken door. His mind reeled in shock. They were all going to be very, very dead.

“The master will not have time to be angry with us.” Yrinvan answered darkly. The tone in his voice caught the others attention and grounded him back to the moment. Tinald glanced up at his friend.
“Do you remember when we were younger, before Givon died? Do you remember the plan? When we had promised to escape or die trying?” Yrinvan’s face was set. His mind had been made up from the moment he let the prisoners go free. He had known then that there was no turning back. This merely added a new twist to the situation.

Tinald’s eyes grew round and his mouth opened slowly. Of course he remembered. Givon and Yrin had been best friends. Even though he was almost a child, Tinald had gone everywhere with them. He remembered the plans they had discussed and the contingencies they plotted... But he also remembered that all those plans had died with his big brother when the Nazgûl became suspicious and sentenced Givon to death in the ice cell.

Yrin took his friend’s orphaned brother into his own family, and Tinald had never heard the older man speak of escape again. Tinald had spent plenty of time thinking about it himself, but it had never gone beyond thoughts and hopes. He had never expected to get close enough to actually try, and certainly not tonight. Plans were easy to make, but much harder and more frightening to attempt.

“Well, it’s time.” Yrin turned the smaller man around and pushed him down the hallway.

“Yrin... even if the trick with the vents works... the antidote... we’ll all die,” Tinald said quietly.

“Maybe. But it’s too late to worry about that now. I’ve taken the last of the antidote from the master’s lab. He didn’t have much left in reserve unfortunately. We’ll need it later if we are to try replicating it. Go quickly! Wake up Ahnna, if she is not already awake. Tell her to get the others out and down to the plateau. You should run into minimal resistance at this time of night. The trick will be getting them all to comply. Tell them these are the Master’s orders if nothing else, no one will question that. Move swiftly and use the back stairwells, no one will be there. If you can find Rhzaq, take him with you. If I find him on the way to the vent room I will send him to join you. He doesn’t deserve to die in this hole. The other orcs can stay. You know what to do.”

Untying a wrapped, oddly shaped bundle from his back he handed the pack off to the smaller servant.

“These are the weapons that belong to the healer and the elf. I found them in the lab in one of the cabinets when I was searching for the antidote,” Yrin explained softly. “Take them with you and keep them safe. Right now they are the only ones we have. If we all make it out of here alive I should think they will need them back.”
The sureness in Yrin’s voice and the steeled look he laid on his friend calmed the smaller man. He would follow Yrin to the underworld and back... and tonight, that may be exactly what he was doing.

“What about you? You will join us, will you not?” Tinald asked softly. He knew what his friend was headed out to do and he feared for him. Silently he fastened the bulky pack of weapon to his back, slinging it over his shoulder.

“I hope so. If this works right... maybe. If not I’m trusting in you to take care of Ahnna and the children,” Yrin charged the younger man.

“Of course. Don’t get caught, my friend.” The younger slave hesitated, the desire to be free warring with the fear of failure in his eyes. “Yrin, what if it doesn’t work? What if we were wrong about the magma? And the strangers, what if their promises are false Yrin? We’ll all die.”

“Then we’ll all die free. But *this* ends tonight.” Yrin grasped Tinald’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. One thing he had learned from the two new slaves was that it was all right to hope, and tonight he had the feeling hope was on their side. This was that moment to act. Most of them would die either way now. They had little or nothing left to lose. Strangely, Yrin found the desperation of the situation freeing. No more trying to appease the Master and his conscience at the same time. No more treacherous balancing game. Right now, everything felt like a free-fall plunge, but it was better than standing forever on the knife edge.

“I’ll meet you on the plateau. Make sure you get far enough away that no one gets burned,” Yrin said.

With a simple nod, Tinald ran down the hallway and turned a corner, out of sight.

Sighing deeply, Yrin hurried to a small cove and raced up the vertical stairs set deep into the passage. They didn’t have much time. The ruckus of the trolls was certain to rouse the orcs and the Nazgûl any minute. Inwardly, Yrin was afraid that if the Witch King were to appear and command him to stop, he would obey and betray everyone who was trusting in him. He was afraid of how much hold he knew the Dark One had over him. That fear propelled his feet ever faster. He could not fail. He could not get caught! He would rather die first.

A straight tunnel ran down from the top floor to the storage rooms, an upright passageway spanning the length of the castle. It was the only way to reach the room that contained the controls for the massive heating system that had long ago been built into the core of the mountain.
Managing the vents was a tricky job. They had to be opened at certain times and only to certain angles, allowing small amounts of lava to flow through the tunnels that ran throughout the castle. Every so often, a team was sent into the chambers to clean out the residue lava, but that only happened in the summer months when the heat wasn’t needed. For the most part, the superheated magma moved easily through the bored tunnels and emptied into a large cavern deep in the heart of the mountain, back into a pool of liquefied rock, to be used again later.

Yrin had often theorized that, if he timed it right, he could overload the system. If he opened the vents fully one at a time, the magma would swiftly gain enough speed to trigger the tunnels to overflow. He could flood the living quarters and the Nazgûl’s personal chambers, not to mention the wing mount’s cavern that was heated constantly by natural thermal flows. In the beginning, when they were still new to this place and its horrors, he, Givon and Tinald had spent many sleepless nights discussing that very thing. But after his friend’s death, days had faded to months and months to years without an opportunity to attempt their daring plan. The darkness had slowly sapped their hopes and dreams until it was simply safer to try to continue surviving, than to upset the delicate balance between the meager existence they called life, and the horribleness of torment and death that would result from defying their Dark Master.

Yrin’s feet pounded softly up the long stair, his heart matching the uneven rhythm. Tinald was right, the plan worked in theory only. He did not know if he really had a chance of success, but it was now or never. The time for caution had passed.

It was a precarious place that the Witch King had chosen to construct his castle, almost directly atop a dormant volcano. Yrin had always believed that somehow the evil one had worked his powers on the mountain itself and tamed it to his will, as he tamed everything he made his own. That was one of the biggest unknowns about their plan. Was it even possible to wrench that control away from the Wraith? Even if faced with a complete mechanical breakdown, would the mountain still remain in the control of the Witch King? Yrin didn’t know, but he was ready to discover the answer.

Sliding the portal aside, Yrin pulled himself into the vent station, a room barely large enough for a single occupant. After flooding the vents, he would have only minutes to evacuate the vertical shaft or be caught in the overflow.

The controls were ancient, simple slide bars connected to thick metal doors set in the shafts somewhere below. He had no idea who had constructed them; probably some poor soul now long gone from this world and this evil place... he almost envied them as his hands slid over the ancient equipment.

The danger zones were marked with heavy, uneven scratches carved into the rock face of the panel he worked at. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Yrin began to open one vent and then
another in a pattern he had learned eons ago when he used to work the vents. Only this time, instead of stopping at the carefully indicated notches, he pushed the handles all the way up, past the point of no return.

For half a heartbeat he did not know if anything had happened. Then, the levers on the wall next to him began to tremble and jerk upward with popping, groaning sounds as the vents they controlled were forcibly impacted by the sudden onslaught of molten rock.

In seconds the magma had picked up speed and he was no longer in control as the vents were forced off their hinges and broken down in a systematic domino effect. Once the main catches were released, the secondary vents were swiftly compromised. Melting underneath the overloading system, they were forced aside as magma spilled through the vent ways, finding every opening on every floor in the castle. Already the fiery rock was oozing out of the holes around the levers on the wall behind the slave.

Yrin tried to control a stab of fear. This was happening a great deal faster than he had anticipated. He might not have time to get out of here after all.

Crouching down, the slave hurriedly eased back into the vertical passage and swung out onto the stairwell. He closed and sealed the hatch leading to the vent room behind him. A bright flaming spec of debris fell past him, landing with a splat on the stone floor far below. Glancing up, the servant noted the bright orange-yellow spot above his head. The magma was already seeping through and eating away at the closed hatch above him.

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The part of the castle they were running through was foreign to Aragorn. He had never been this way. He knew how to get to the laboratory from their cell, but the hallways the elf was leading him through now he did not recognize.

“Legolas, where are we going?” Aragorn asked as they slowed down a bit. He hazarded a glance behind them.

“Are they still coming?” The elf stepped back past the ranger and glanced around the corner looking for the trolls.
“We might have lost them.” Aragorn leaned against the prince, glancing over the elf’s shoulder. He was breathing heavily and could feel weariness beginning to leach back into his body. Wincing slightly he rubbed his sore shoulder.

“I don’t want to lose them. I *want* them to follow us.” The elf whispered.

A soft, snuffling noise could barely be heard in the hallway. Legolas froze in place. The trolls were trying to pick up the scents of their prey. They had suddenly realized that they had no recollection of where they were. The smells and sounds were foreign to them and in their small minds fear began to rise.

“We’re losing them.” Legolas crept back down the hallway.

“I thought that was the point. Legolas!” Aragorn whispered fiercely, hesitantly following the elf towards the sounds of the cave trolls.

Leaping around the corner, Legolas shouted at the two creatures in elvish, startling the large beasts. Responding to their fear the only way they knew how, the trolls lunged forward, bellowing and roaring in anger as they took up the chase anew.

“Smart!” Aragorn shouted at the fleeing elf, racing to keep up with him.

“Trust me.” Legolas called back, skidding to a stop before a large, dark, ornate, wooden doorway. The elf pounded on the portal before tearing down the hallway, yelling for the ranger to hurry. Aragorn stumbled as a wave of pain and black fear swept over him – the Wraith was near.

The wooden doors parted and blackness leaked out into the already dark hallway. The cave trolls’ fear and anger-dulled senses, noticed the evil ahead of them too late to change their course as they lumbered down the passage. They would have run from it given the chance, but finding themselves suddenly upon it, they lashed out in terror and anger. Their fear and malice blended together into an unstoppable rampage.

Enraged and terrified by the dark fear behind the door, the cave troll nearest the doorway rushed forward, raising his hammer and bringing it down hard against the stone archway above the portals.

The impact cracked the stone support and the doors shrieked in protest as they were torn from their
hinges, crushed under an avalanche of stone and wood. When the air cleared, the doorway was a jumble of boulders and splinters. This was one door that would never open again. An angry, piercing shriek echoed through the castle, sending black ripples of terror through the stone fortress. High above in its cavern, the Wraith’s winged mount lurched to its feet and answered its’ master with its’ own ringing cry. Magma was seeping its' lair and rapidly covering the floor in a liquid carpet of glowing lava.

Realizing exactly what Legolas had been up to, Aragorn skidded to a stop and turned back, watching as the cave trolls made short work of the door to the Nazgûl’s chambers. The creatures had wreaked a trail of destruction down most of the passageway, but stopped their rampage just up the hall from the broken door. They were now slowly turning back the way they had come, carefully watching the floor and talking to one another. Something had happened to check their all-out frenzy. The beast with the spear gave his companion a small shove and motioned down the hallway.

“Legolas...” Aragorn called to the prince as he took a step towards the monsters. “Something’s wrong.”

“Very.” Legolas answered from his right. The elf pulled the ranger back with him, jumping out of the way as a rivulet of lava traced across the floor, scorching the stone with a hissing sigh. “It’s coming from everywhere.”

What the elf said was true. Tiny streams of molten stone were oozing from the heating vents situated in the walls just above the floor. The superheated liquid poured out from under the doorways of several rooms, spilling across the hall and instantly raising the temperature in the passageway. Heat rose in shimmering waves from the floor and walls. The two friends began to feel the warmth radiating through the thick leather soles of their boots.

The thundering pound of the cave trolls’ footsteps shook the corridor as the creatures headed back for the lower levels, jumping across the widening rivers of molten rock.

“Did we trigger this?” Aragorn questioned in alarm as he stepped closer to Legolas, avoiding the steaming fingers of lava that reached out for his boot. The mountain trembled beneath them, throwing them off balance. The increasing heat and gasses made the ranger nauseous.

Legolas caught Aragorn to keep him from falling down upon the glowing floor. They had to get out of here.

“I do not believe this was the work of the trolls,” Legolas said quickly as he urged his friend quickly up the hall. He understood very well how a thermal heating system worked... and what would
happen if one was sabotaged. His home in Mirkwood employed very similar devices. “And no, we
did not do this either. I believe the servants must have, if it was indeed intentional and not an
accident. Someone who knows how to work the vent system could have caused this,” Legolas
explained as he backed up a pace, pulling Aragorn with him.

“Perhaps our friends amongst the slaves have spent more time thinking on escape then we gave them
credit for now that we have given them hope.” He patted the bulging sachet of herbs tucked inside
the ranger’s shirt. “I believe they have found their courage.”

Another rumbling shake from deep in the core of the mountain shook the passageway, breaking open
new new paths for the lava to traverse.

“Wonderful, if it doesn’t roast us alive first,” Aragorn murmured, blinking to clear the sweat from his
eyes and holding his head. His vision did not clear. He could not tell whether that was because of
the gasses being released or because of his illness.

“We cannot go back.” Legolas watched, as the doorway across from the Wraith’s chambers broke
apart, spilling liquefied rock into the corridor and splattering it against the far wall.

“Quickly, this way. There is a stairwell that I believe leads to an exterior passageway, hurry!”

Knowing the ranger would follow unquestioningly, the elf raced up the corridor, nimbly avoiding the
rivers of lava that were widening and deepening through the passages as the venting system
overloaded.

~*~

He had been concentrating so deeply that all awareness of the physical world around him had fallen
away. The Witch King kept running through the information he had acquired from the human’s
mind. There was something that was bothering him. It all seemed correct but...

He could not rid himself of the feeling that he was missing something. It was like a precognitive
premonition, an awareness that barely brushed the back of his warped memories and it ate at him.
Even now that he had ravaged the human’s memories and taken control of his mind, the Wraith
found he was still bothered. Was it possible there was something the ranger was hiding even now?
Was there some corner of his mind left unsearched? The Wraith felt hesitant to entirely trust the new
situation and he did not like the feeling that he may have missed something. He hadn’t wanted to
destroy the man completely but if that was what it took to uncover the reason for this nagging
doubt... then so be it.

The inhuman howling of the cave trolls outside his door suddenly interrupted his meditations and
then someone pounded on the entry, completely breaking his train of thought. No one *ever*
deigned it necessary to disturb the dark lord without his leave.

Outraged, the Wraith stalked to the doorway, intending to discover whom it was that his wrath was
about to visit. What he hadn’t counted on were the enraged trolls that lumbered down his hall,
equally irritated at being disturbed. The hammer of the troll nearest his door smashed into the
archway destroying the portal and the Wraith was thrown backwards into the interior of his chamber.

The entry was completely destroyed. Debris and rubble filled the doorway, blocking any entry or
exit. Before he could decide what to do next, the Wraith’s swelling anger was checked as he sniffed
the air about him. His sense of smell and hearing far exceeded that of any normal human.
Something in the mountain had changed, something had happened. The fumes of molten lava
reached his senses and he halted, staring at the collapsed passageway. Moments later, traces of tiny
yellow-orange fingers spread from underneath the debris, fanning slowly across the ornate carpet.
They cooled and darkened to a semi-obsidian color on prolonged contact with the outside air, but
more continued to seep through, layering magma atop magma. The carpet could not take the heat
and burst into bright tongues of super-heated flames.

The lava flues had been flooded. The mountain was burning.

Fire! The Wraith’s senses shouted as he recoiled from the blazing rug and the magma creeping in
under the destroyed doorway. FIRE!

Above all, the Ringwraiths hated water and fire. They were the only things of which they, the
shadow creatures, were truly afraid. With a piercing scream, the Wraith vented his anger and terror.

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Aragorn staggered, sagging against the wall nearest to him as the Witch King’s rage washed over the
castle and the remnants of beings still inside. His shriek shook the stone and nearly deafened anyone
within earshot.
Legolas leapt across a stream of moving lava, grasping the rungs of a vertical ladder shaft that ran up from the passage floor into an access hatch, high above. Balancing on the bottom rung, he turned back to the ranger. The ladder-well was set in a crawl space in an alcove at the end of the hallway. The floor at the far end of the passage behind them was now a glowing sea of lava and they had reached a dead end. There was nowhere else to go but up the shaft.

“Strider!” The elf cried out in distress as he watched the river of lava at his feet widen, washing up on the wall and lapping at the base of the ladder. “Estel, quickly! Jump!”

Scurrying further up the ladder, the elf held his hand out towards his friend who was just recovering from the blow of terror that had left him immobile.

Aragorn’s eyes widened as he watched part of the wall break away, increasing the flow of molten rock through the hallway. He was standing on a small, dwindling island of stone floor, caught between two lava floes. His gaze latched onto Legolas who was straining out over the molten rock that now separated them, reaching for the man.

“Estel...”

Taking a deep breath the ranger ran back down the hallway a few paces, putting a fair distance between himself and the end of the passage. With a shout he raced towards the ever-expanding river of molten rock and jumped at the last moment. The tip of his boot barely grazed the heated rock, searing the leather.

He slammed against the rungs of the ladder, slipping down towards the floor of the hallway, which was now covered in a yellow, undulating sea of lava. A strong hand wrapped around his forearm and pulled him back up. Legolas hugged the human to his side until Aragorn was able to get his balance.

The lava licked the bottom rungs, filling the alcove with heated air. The iron bars beneath their hands almost began to burn them as the metal conducted up the heat from below. Quickly glancing upward, Legolas hurriedly began the long climb into the enclosed shaft above them. The tremors in the mountain around him were warning the elf that, as the Nazgûl lost control of his home, the volcano no longer slept and they would soon be out of time.

Behind him, Aragorn climbed at a slower pace. His injuries and the poison in his system were beginning to renew their toll on him. The effect of the chrysien seeds was fading and his illness was
taking over once more. The collapse Yrin had warned him of was imminent. It was long past time for him to have more of the antidote and his body was remembering that as it slowly came out from under the effect of the narcotics he had taken.

The full extent of his injuries seemed to be crashing down upon him once more. He stopped and leaned against the rungs, breathing hard. With a soft sigh the ranger rested his head against his forearm, waiting for the pain to ease. The vise-like pressure around his temples increased, pounding in his ears.

It startled the ranger when Legolas edged around him, holding onto the side of the railing and stepping down on the rung upon which the human was balanced.

“There is an access hatch only a bit further ahead. You cannot rest just yet, my friend.” Legolas whispered as he moved around to stand behind the ranger, bracing his back against the stone wall behind them. “Come on, I will help you.”

Wrapping one arm around Aragorn’s waist, Legolas pulled the human up with him, moving them slowly up the rungs. Below them, the tunnel was completely blocked by the rising lava. That exit had been sealed off, replaced by a deceptively thin top layer that had barely cooled.

Legolas desperately wanted to be moving faster. He was well aware of how quickly the lava was catching up with them, but it was difficult maneuvering Aragorn’s only partially responsive body up the vertical ladder.

“It’s the poison isn’t it?” Legolas asked softly as he eased them both up one more rung. He had come to recognize the pattern in his friend; the sudden bursts of energy that gave way to almost complete collapse as the toxin alternately goaded and drained the human. Unfortunately this crash was coming on even worse. The elf feared that his friend was paying the price for his temporary, artificially induced reprieve.

The only answer he received was a small nod as Aragorn focused on simply climbing up the ladder.

At the top of the shaft, the access hatch was covered with a metal grate. Pressing Aragorn firmly against the rails so he could not fall, Legolas braced himself on the sides of the tunnel and shoved the access portal hard. The catch on the other side buckled and released under the elf’s strength. The hatch popped open, clanging loudly against the floor in the tiny room above them. Scrambling past the ranger, Legolas climbed into the crawl space and reached back down, pulling Aragorn up after him.
The level of the lava below them was rising and the repercussions of distant explosions rocked the mountainside, shaking Aragorn’s grip loose. He slipped from the rungs just as Legolas’ hand wrapped firmly around his wrist, pulling him back to safety.

Drawing the man close to him, the elf kicked the hatch closed and eased his friend down onto the blessedly cool floor. Snow lightly drifted in the corners of the room, but it was already beginning to melt as heat rose slowly from beneath them.

A good eight feet above their heads, the shaft was sealed off with another hatch similar to the one that had let them into the tiny, circular room. Legolas could see from his vantage point that the grate above them was locked firmly shut.

The room, if room this could be called, that they found themselves in now was small. Barely seven feet wide in each direction, the chamber was taller than it was wide.

Legolas tried in vain to open the sealed hatch above them. He could jump up and touch the grate, but he could not muster near enough force to break the sturdy lock, he had no leverage. It was maddening. He could see the fading night sky through the grate overhead, he could smell the scent of free air... but he could not reach it.

The elf’s eyes darted around the room, seeking another exit. There were none. The small chamber had only two access points. One was closed off by lava; the other was firmly locked against them.

They were trapped.
Aragorn shuddered involuntarily, resting his head against the elf’s chest. His breathing was labored and fast. The world spun around him anytime he opened his eyes now. Legolas’ hand on his forehead calmed him a little and he concentrated on listening to the prince’s voice as the elf spoke quietly.

“Aragorn, there is no way out of here. The grate above is locked from the outside.” Legolas leaned over the hatch in the floor and gazed down at the still rising lava, flinching slightly as the mountain shook from yet another blast.

“At least we won’t freeze,” the elf continued, chuckling softly to himself at the irony. “The lava will keep us warm.” He scooted them both back as far away from the grate as he could, pressing back against the opposite wall. The smell bothered him. The scent of burning earth was distressing. The voice of the mountain was warning him to get as far away as possible, but he was unable to comply.

Aragorn stilled in his friend’s arms and relaxed. The day had been far too much for his body to handle.

“You’ll see to it that they are freed, won’t you?” the human asked quietly.

“What?” Legolas glanced down at the man huddled against him.

“The antidote,” Aragorn explained simply. “Make it for them, Legolas. Promise me you will. If I can’t...”

“You will.” The firmness in the elf’s reply quickly cut off any argument to the contrary. They hadn’t come this far to die in a wretched access hold, eight despicable feet from freedom. “I cannot do it without you, mellon-nín. You are the healer, not I. Besides, once it’s made, there has to be someone I can test it on.”

The jibe brought a small laugh from the ranger, who settled more fully against his friend.

“Fine, I’ll be your test subject then.” Closing his eyes Aragorn gave into his weariness and rested, knowing he was safe in his friend’s arms.
Glancing back at the circle above their heads, Legolas could tell that morning was just dawning. The shades of night were fleeing, replaced by the soft blue hues of a new day. A shadow darted overhead, blocking the sky momentarily. A clear piercing cry followed seconds later and the elf's heart leapt with joy as he realized that it was not the call of a fell beast. The great eagles were circling Angmar; it could be the call of no other creature. He had no idea what brought them thither; perhaps they had been drawn by the strange disturbance and fissures of steam rising from the long dormant mountain. Whatever the cause, the elf did not care. The important thing was that maybe, just maybe, there was still hope.

Another blast shook the mountaintop and Legolas curled protectively around Aragorn as the stone walls about them trembled one more time before stilling into an unnatural calm.

His attention was drawn to the grate in the floor as the top of the lava brushed the bottom of the mesh hatch and settled. Glancing skyward once more, Legolas wondered how soon anyone would come looking for them... or if they would think to look at all.

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The Witch King realized that he had lost control over the volcano as the mountain shook, trembling beneath his feet. Gas from the cooling lava in the lower vents was building and the pressure was increasing as more magma flowed into the core of the volcano, creating bubbles in the superheated rock. It wouldn't be long before the volcano would find an outlet and the Wraith knew exactly where the weak spot in the mountain's wall was located. It was time to leave Angmar and he was positive that this time he would be unable to return.

Rushing to the picture window in his study, the Ringwraith picked up the chair in front of the desk and threw it through the glass pane. The winter-cold winds of morning whistled through the broken portal, tearing at his clothes and bringing the scent of burning rock closer. His dark heart seized. True, nothing on this earth could kill him, but there were still things that even he feared.

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High above the Wraith's chambers, his winged mount was fighting its own battles. The iridescent, scaled monster leapt to the front of the cavern just as the build-up within the mountain peaked. A rumbling, shuddering explosion at the back of the grotto gave the creature only seconds to escape as the volcano found a weak spot in its walls.
Molten rock and ash blew out of the cave entrance as the beast leapt from the lip of the grotto and rushed skyward. Pyroclastic debris shot into the air, trailing in its wake and showering the plateau with heated rocks. The great winged beast screamed in rage and frustration, wheeling in a tight circle and gliding back past the face of the mountain. Its heated chambers were a pool of molten lava. Streams of the thick rock poured out the opening.

Below in the outer courts, the slaves were running from the castle entrance, heading for the safety of the woods. A lone orc limped hurriedly along with them. Of the other orcs there was no trace. Doubtless, their dark living quarters near the base of the thermal system had been one of the first areas flooded and apparently something had prevented them from escaping.

In its primitive brain, the Wraith’s dragon rationalized that the humans had some responsibility in the mountain’s destruction and dove for the fleeing servants, intending to visit its wrath on the people.

So bent on revenge was the monstrous flying mount that it had blocked all else from its periphery senses. A black dart fell from above it, crying a warning as a second swift shadow chased across the sky on an intercept course with the foul beast.

Sharp talons snagged the beast’s long neck, diverting its attention. With a pained cry, the mount twisted mid-flight, snapping at the diving eagle and altering its course. It beat the air with huge, leathery wings trying to gain altitude and follow its attacker. From below, the second eagle inverted its flight and raked the creature’s exposed belly, jerking the large reptile down with it a few feet before releasing the snarling, hissing mount.

Slower than its enemies, the Wraith’s mount snapped and lunged at the eagles that flew in circles around it, snagging its wings, its tail or any unexposed part of the creature’s body that they could. Their attack was incessant and intense as they kept the beast distracted.

The humans had reached the safety of the woods that bracketed the front steppes of the castle and were fleeing into the protective cover, out of the monster’s range.

Gwaihir, king of the eagles, did not stop to consider that this was not their fight. The eagles hated the fell beasts of Mordor, considering them an aberration to the sky. He and his companion had literally just happened to be in the area when they saw the smoke in the sky. Had it not been for the presence of the fell beast about to attack the people below, they probably would have continued on their way after sating their curiosity.
Gwaihir dropped down on top of the Wraith’s steed, slamming the creature’s snakelike head with his body. The impact drove the beast downward, spiraling out of control. It twisted its neck with lightening speed, snapping at the eagle that dipped just out of reach. Its ire was peaked and the creature loosed an ear-splitting shriek as it caught the upward rise of wind that traveled up the mountain’s expanse. Regaining its momentum, the dark beast increased its speed chasing the eagles higher and swiftly gaining on its enemies. In moments it would overtake the great eagles and deal with them blow for blow. It had had enough.

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Far below in Angmar, the Witch King balanced on the ledge of the window he had just shattered. Behind him, lava oozed slowly into the study, crawling up the legs of his desk and covering his work with its liquid rock, destroying everything that he had spent so many years recording.

The chest that held the spiders from Dol Guldur was buried beneath the brightly glowing liquid rock as the lava fanned out into the room. The Wraith howled in frustration. That batch had nearly been ready for release. All his work had been for nothing and his anger mounted. He knew this had something to do with that blasted elf and ranger. His one satisfaction was that at least no one else would escape this destruction either. Even if the prisoners and slaves escaped the destruction of the mountain, they would simply die in the wilds from his poison.

Anything that could burn was now on fire, the flames adding to the heat and glow of the lava. The molten rock touched the edges of the wall below where he stood, splashing lazily up towards the broken sill. In moments it would overspill the confines of his study and he would need to be far away.

Glancing upward, the Wraith caught sight of his winged mount battling the great eagles near the lowest pinnacle. The beast nearly had those meddling birds in his grasp. Their kind had been a thorn of contention in his master’s plans before. For a moment he considered allowing his beast to have its way with them, but he was out of time.

Lava licked the edges of the shelf just behind where he was precariously balanced and the mountain had begun to shudder once more. It was building up for one final eruption...

One he didn’t plan on watching.

Calling the black creature to him, the Wraith leapt from the sill, plummeting towards the ground.
Breaking off his attack, the winged creature twisted around. It stopped its forward motion, alerted by the Wraith’s piercing call. He saw the black, tattered form of his master dive from the window sill as lava spilled over the edge, following the Nazgûl towards the base of the mountain.

Folding its huge wings against its back, the monstrous beast dove straight towards the falling black shape. Passing the Wraith up by meters, the mount unfolded its wings, bringing its descent to a sharp halt. The Nazgûl landed squarely between its shoulders, barely causing the creature to dip as it skimmed the valley floor before angling vertically over the tree line and disappearing with a heart-stopping scream. Fear that dragged in the wake of the Nazgûl spread across the woods and edged everything in an unnatural darkness as the Wraith fled south towards Dol Guldur.

The fell beast was happy about one thing. With their home here destroyed, it would mean heading south again.

Tinald crouched down with the rest of the slaves, covering his ears as the Witch King’s angry cry shuddered through his heart, freezing him in place. Behind them, the mountain convulsed, sending a black plume of dust and ashes into the air. The side of the mountain where the library window had been blew outward, providing another vent for the volcano as the eruption found another weak point. Lava poured from the newly formed opening in undulating orange waves that quickly cooled to black at the edges, only to be covered over again with more glowing orange.

The thick molten rock covered the steppes and layered over the lower entrances to the castle itself. The slow moving tide eased to a stop some distance from the edges of the forest, hissing and venting steam in the cool winter air. It was a miracle that the woods had not caught fire from the falling cinders and heated rock. The refugees counted themselves lucky, at least for the time being. Within moments, the upper layers of lava had cooled, deceptively daring the humans to walk across the newly laid valley floor.

Edging farther away, Tinald began seeking Yrin. He was worried that his friend hadn’t made it out and he had yet to find him in the mass of people that milled uncertainly beneath the ruined mountain. Their summer homes were not but an hour north of this position. In the growing seasons the Wraith permitted part of the populace to move into the tiny vacant town to till the ground for winter stock. They could easily reach those dwellings before the day was through, but there was much that still needed accomplishing. Everyone was in chaos, families had to find one another, explanations had to be made... and none of them dared go anywhere without the antidote.

The former slaves stared at the ruined mountain in disbelieving shock. Their whole way of life had just gone up in flames and smoke. Everything they had known was buried under molten rock...
A loud cheer burst spontaneously from the stunned humans after that realization fully penetrated their minds. Whatever happened now, they would never have to see the inside of those hated halls again.

Pressing his way through a knot of slaves, Tinald found Yrin quietly consoling some of the less jubilant amongst the newly freed people. Approaching quickly, Tinald waited until the former headslave was done and then stepped closer.

Looking over the ragtag collection of humans moving about the meadow, Yrin glanced down at his friend, questioning him wordlessly.

“Everyone made it out. We lost no one, except that I can’t find the elf or the ranger. I locked the orcs on the fifth level; they could not escape.” Tinald watched Yrin, carefully gauging his response. He hated the orcs - it was no secret. But intentionally sealing them in to their death had been harder than he had thought. Only moments ago they had been alive and now because of his actions they were not. The young man tried hard not to think about how their end had come but focused rather on the freedom the slaves would now have to roam the woods of Angmar freely, without fear and retribution. Without the shadow of the Witch King and his servants dogging their every move.

Tinald rubbed his shoulder. They weren’t entirely free. Perhaps they were all walking dead men right now, but it was better than living and dying under the shadow.

“You did well Tinald. We knew it had to be done. We wouldn’t have been able to escape if they were left free,” Yrin consoled the smaller man. He glanced quickly at Rhzaq. The orc was nervous, shifting quickly from one foot to the other and constantly looking over his shoulder towards the destroyed mountain.

“Where are they?” The dark creature asked hoarsely. He had not heard the previous conversation. “Where are the others?”

“They didn’t make it out, Rhzaq.” Yrin turned the orc around and pointed to a group of men who were attempting to construct a fire ring. The younger boys had been sent into the immediate forests for wood and kindling.

“Can you help the others get fires going so we don’t freeze out here?” he asked kindly as he gave the orc a push towards the far side of the group.

With an enthusiastic nod, Rhzaq shuffled off, his temporary worries forgotten in the need of the
moment. It wouldn’t be long before the crippled orc would not even remember that his kinsmen were gone. They had never been true kin to him anyway. They had always treated the smaller creature as a freak, a mistake. In a strange twist of fate, the humans had accepted the slow-witted orc when his own kind rejected him. The humans saw in him simply another slave, twisted and wounded by the master’s cruel hand. He would be safe in their company for the remainder of his years, and they knew that they were safe in his.

When Yrin focused his attention back on Tinald, he noticed the man had stepped back out onto the plateau and was glancing upward, one hand shading his eyes from the bright morning sun.

“Yrin...” Tinald didn’t turn to see if his friend had heard him. “Yrin? You don’t think... you don’t think he’ll be back, do you?” Tinald tried to keep the apprehension in his voice in check. But they had all lived too long under the dark shadow of their cruel master to not know what his retribution was like.

Yrin glanced skyward, his eyes squinting against the rising sun. There was no lingering shadow of fear and the wound to his shoulder no longer throbbed as it did in the presence of the evil one. The Wraith was gone for now. Would he return? Yrin didn’t know. He hoped not. After all, there was nothing for the Nazgûl to return to now. The fortress was destroyed and the slaves...

Yrinvan looked around at the refugees moving aimlessly around him. Some were squinting and looking around in awe as if they had never seen the sun before. Maybe they hadn’t. Grim reality niggled at the back of Yrin’s mind, tainting the elation of freedom. The slaves were all as good as dead without their former Master’s potion.

No, the Nazgûl would not be back because his last, cruelest stroke would be to simply let his former thralls die the slow and agonizing death he had intended for them from the beginning. Yrin was sure this is what the Witch King would be thinking. He knew the dark one’s ways too well.

Shaking off his thoughts and looking back at his friend, Yrin shook his head. “No, Tinald, I don’t think he’ll be back.”

Tinald could read the conflicting emotions that those words summoned behind his friend’s eyes and nodded slowly, not sure what to say. He looked away, towards the sky again. It was beautiful to see the whole sky like this, and not just the portions one could view out a barred window or through the top of a tunnel shaft.

Tinald frowned and squinted as something atop the mountain caught his gaze. He ventured a little further forward, shading his eyes with his hand for a better look.
“Yrin, do you see that?”

The head servant walked up behind his friend and matched the smaller man’s gaze. High above, near the base of the lower peaks of Angmar, the great eagles were circling and diving. One of the largest birds he had ever seen appeared to light upon the mountain momentarily. It seemed they were trying to pick up, or move, something. A few minutes later a high keening cry was taken up by the eagles as they tried to get the attention of the humans on the valley floor.

“I think they have something up there.” Tinald continued quietly. “You don’t imagine...”

“I think we should get up there and find out what those eagles are circling before it’s too late.” Yrin raced across the plateau, trailing Tinald in his wake. The smaller servant called back quick instructions to the men now assembling camp, letting them know where they were headed. They circumvented the cooling lava as much as possible, not yet trusting its deceptively solid appearance. The gasses being released into the air made their eyes sting and their throats constrict.

Yrin took a moment to pull his shirt up over his nose and mouth, and Tinald followed suit. If the lava had completely encircled the mountain, they would have been out of luck. As it was however, the lava had only broken through in some areas, and the winding staircase up to the heights that the two servants sought, was still mostly intact.

The back stairs up Angmar’s heights were tedious and slippery this time of year and the damage done to them by the upset within the mountain was not helping matters. The higher up they climbed, the more slick the carved steps became. The freezing night temperatures iced the stairs solid, but when the sun rose, they became a rivulet of snow water cascading down the side of the mountain and collecting in pools at the base of the cliff. In the summer, the steps were completely concealed by a waterfall for the better part of the spring months, providing the population of Angmar with clean fresh water for the warmer seasons ahead.

There were few entrances or exits into the mountain. The access path they were on now was used infrequently and only in dire emergencies. The stairs had been crafted eons ago by the first men who had been conscripted to build the mountain castle. A means of accessing the natural caverns and grottos that had been converted by the earliest inhabitants, the stairs led to two small shafts, one that emptied out into the mountain near the Witch King’s study and the other which dropped into the ventilation shafts above the laboratory.

The vertical passages into the mountains had been sealed shut with a series of grates to which Yrin still held the keys. As the head servant in his master’s house he knew of all the back routes and hidden passageways that had been dug through the mountain, and he knew their purposes. The
intention for some he hoped to one day forget altogether.

However, if anyone had survived and found their way into the access hatches, they would need to find them and soon.

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“Tulu mín!” Legolas’ voice felt small and ineffective in his own ears as he tried to catch the attention of anyone outside. He could not see the eagles’ battle with the mount from where they were trapped. All he could see was that the great birds had disappeared from his line of vision.

“Tulu mín! Ammen mellyn!” He hoped that if the eagles were still within earshot, that calling to them in Elvish would garner him more attention. The plan seemed to work, because a few moments later a shadow passed over the two friends as one of the great eagles soared by overhead.

“Who calls out to Gwaihir, Lord of the Eagles? Speak! Make yourself known!”

Legolas felt relieved. “Gwaihir, glad am I to see you! I am Legolas, son of King Thranduil of the woodland realm. We met in Imladris some years ago, and again after that, when you were with Gandalf the Grey. I am with Estel Elrondion, we need your help!”

“I remember you Thranduilion, hold fast. We shall get you out,” Gwaihir assured.

Aragorn flinched slightly as the eagles repeatedly attempted to break the grate, diving and scratching at it with their powerful talons and beaks. Snow fell into the shaft, dusting him and Legolas with a fine, white powder. The elf held the human close, leaning over his friend and shielding Aragorn’s head against his chest as he tried to protect them both from the falling debris and the cold winds stirred up by the powerful wings of the birds above them.

The top layer of lava had cooled, pooling out around the edges of the grate and melting the snow at the bottom of the tiny grotto. It had slowed for the moment, but not given up, threatening a cataclysmic battle between fire and ice that would take no notice of the two hapless beings trapped in its path.
Despite the lava attempting to eat its way up from below, the air here atop the mountain was biting cold. The wind drove painful needles into Aragorn’s skin wherever it could reach him around Legolas’ protective hold.

The floor below them was warm now as the stone began to conduct the magma’s heat. Legolas pressed the human close to the warm rock floor, trying to preserve his friend’s body-heat. However, it was more than the chill about them that was causing Aragorn’s uncontrollable shivering.

Darkness swirled in uneven patches before the ranger’s eyes. A warm chill lay like a blanket across his body, a foggy disassociation from reality that let him see the end was nigh without inspiring much alarm.

“It’s been too long.” He whispered softly against Legolas’ tunic.

Choosing to ignore the quiet statement, the prince held more tightly to Aragorn and called up to the eagles circling above them.

“Gwaihir!” His voice caught on the winds and drifted up to the great bird. One wheeled away from the pack and dove for the mountain alighting easily on the craggy ledge.

Leaning down, the eagle pierced through the gloom of the passage and fixed his gaze on the two beings huddled at the bottom.

“Great one, we need help and swiftly.” The prince called up.

“We cannot break the lock, Thranduilion.” Gwaihir answered solemnly.

“I know.” Legolas cupped Aragorn’s head against him, trying not to feel ill at the dark nausea he felt every time he touched Estel. “Elrond’s son fares poorly and will not survive without aid. Tell me, what can you see? Have any of the others escaped the mountain?”

“I see many people moving in the mountain meadows not far from here,” Gwaihir reported after a moment.
Legolas was relieved to hear that the slaves seemed to have survived. “Gwaihir, please find the one they call Yrinvan and bring him here to us.” He hoped against hope that the servant would have found some antidote in the Wraith’s lab as he had said he was going to attempt to do before they left him for the lower levels. At the very least Yrin should be able to get them out of here.

With a sharp cry, the eagle vaulted skyward and swept down the face of the mountain, calling out to his kinsmen. The great birds broke off their circling flight and followed their leader towards the staircase and the two humans who were stumbling up the slippery causeway.

Yrin ducked, barely avoiding being knocked back as Gwaihir dove down over his position, calling out to the human.

Tinald grabbed his friend, righting them and fighting to keep his precarious balance on the stairway.

“Yrin, I think that bird just spoke to you!” Tinald pressed close to the taller servant and glanced upwards as the eagles turned for another pass.

“What?” Tinald’s observations made no sense to Yrin. But the smaller man was unable to respond as Gwaihir swooped low, grasping the head servant by his shoulders and hefting him aloft.

Yrinvan’s heart dropped into his stomach. The only experience he had had with winged creatures this large was with the Nazgul’s Mount, and that was not a pleasant association. The human fully considered himself a dead man now.

“Yrin!” Tinald screamed after his friend in horror.

Gwaihir’s sharp ears did not miss the call. He had merely wanted to talk to the human about where he could find the person he sought, but perhaps his quest had been easier than he thought.

“Are you Yrinvan?” The eagle questioned his quarry as he flew higher up the mountain. He was forced to tighten his hold as the frightened human fought him. “Stop moving so I do not hurt you or drop you.” The bird commanded, “I take you to the Prince of Mirkwood. He has need of your help.”

The words stunned the human and he relaxed, holding onto the large talons that encircled his shoulders. A small cry from behind him caused Yrin to turn slightly in Gwaihir’s grip. He could
barely see a second eagle following them with Tinald held tightly in his grasp.

In moments, Gwaihir dropped back down toward the mountain. Yrin cringed and closed his eyes as the ground rushed up at him. Seconds later the great bird released his hold and the servant fell free, touching down onto the uppermost ledge near the staircase.

Stumbling forward, Yrin fell onto his knees against the grate fixed above the access hatch. He finally understood what the eagles had been trying to tell them. Pressing his face closer to the opening he glanced down at the blue eyes that watched him carefully.

“Yrin?” Legolas called up to the human.

“You are alive!” Yrin pushed back in surprise, fumbling with the overlarge pockets of his outer coat as he searched for the keys.

Tinald dropped down next to him, flattening himself against the cliff face as the eagles swept upwards once more.

“What?...” The smaller servant quieted as he watched Yrin working over the lock on the hatch. “Are they there?” Tinald questioned, overcoming his initial fears as he helped the other pull the heavy grate back and rest it on the ground.

He was answered as Yrin leaned into the hole and extended his hand down. “Can you reach my hand? We’ll get you out.”

Legolas hesitated as he shifted Aragorn into a standing position. The jostling woke the ranger and he glanced dully about them.

“Legolas?” He questioned softly, holding tightly to his friend to keep the nausea at bay.

“Yrin, did you find any antidote?” The elf glanced back up at the human hopefully.

“What is it?” Tinald questioned from above, trying to see in around his friend. “Yrin?”
“Tinald, be quiet for a moment. Let me speak.” Yrin glanced back at the smaller servant, shushing him with a slight motion before refocusing on the elf and ranger.

“I did.” He answered hesitantly, his fingers finding the small vial in the pocket of his vest. “But there was only one dose. It is all we have left. I do not know if any more has survived. The castle is destroyed.”

“I know.” Legolas spoke evenly and softly, hoping the man would be able to follow his logic. “Strider has not had enough antidote for far too long. He will not survive much longer and we need him to recreate enough of the medicine for everyone else. I won’t use it all. We’ll need some of it as a sample...” His voice trailed off as he saw the worry lining the servant’s face. “When was the last time you were given any antidote Yrin?”

The truth was Yrin had been sharing his antidote with Aragorn too often. He knew that and could feel the effects, although he hid them well. Sitting up, Yrinvan pushed back from the grate and glanced at Tinald. The servant had knelt next to him and overheard the entire conversation. Yrin’s eyes questioned his friend wordlessly.

“We knew it would come to this,” Tinald spoke softly thinking only Yrin could hear him. “You trusted them enough to risk all our lives and you were right. If we die, then we all die free and that will be enough.”

The two servants sat quietly for a few moments as unspoken words drifted between them. Tinald arched an eyebrow and shrugged glancing back at the shaft. “Give him the vial, Yrin.”

Nodding once, Yrinvan leaned back to the edge of the passage and handed the small glass bottle down to the elf.

Legolas’ heart had tightened when Yrin’s head disappeared from the narrow square of daylight above them. He knew he was asking a lot of the humans, facing the fate that they were. Several anxious moments dragged by before Yrin’s head appeared above them once more. With a grateful sigh, Legolas accepted the antidote and quickly popped the tiny cork. Tipping Aragorn’s head back he poured part of the contents into the ranger’s mouth.

“Not all of it, Strider. We’ll need some if we are to recreate it successfully. I just need you more coherent my friend.” He smiled slightly as he braced the man against the wall, hoping the medicine would take effect soon. Stopping the vial once more, he slid it into an interior pocket of his tunic and
focused his attention on the ranger.

“Will he make it?” Yrin called down. He was slowly lowering a looped off length of rope that the eagles had deposited for him on the ledge. The great birds circled high overhead, watching what happened on the peak. From time to time, one would drop down to the plateau to assist the humans there as the servants began to set up camp and take stock of what and who had survived.

Legolas crouched down slightly in front of the ranger, trying to see into the human’s eyes. Aragorn stepped back a pace and took in a deep breath. His head pounded and he still felt ill but the thrumming waves of pain had ceased and his heartbeat had slowed back to its normal pace, giving him a bit of respite. Weary, red-rimmed grey eyes opened and locked onto the elf’s curious gaze.

“Do you feel any better?” Legolas asked softly.

With a small nod, Aragorn glanced up towards the top of the shaft. “It won’t last long though. We need to find out if we can get into the lab still. We need to make more soon, Legolas.”

Overhearing the slightly slurred words, Yrin leaned farther in and spoke to the two as he eased the rope down into the elf’s hands. “I’ve sent Tinald on ahead to check the vent shaft for the laboratory and see if we can access the room. It is high enough up, so perhaps the lava has not reached it.” He smiled and nodded in affirmation as Legolas tightened the loop of rope around Aragorn’s chest and boosted the man partway up the passage.

In seconds, Yrin had hoisted the ranger out of the duct and tossed the rope back down to Legolas.

It was easier to pull the elf out of the vertical bore, as the prince helped by climbing most of the way out himself. He gripped the edge of the hatch and eased out onto the snow covered ground as the servant kicked the grating back over the hole.

Aragorn was seated on the rocky outcropping, resting against a large boulder that decorated the ledge. He smiled weakly at the elf before glancing into the meadow far below. The eagles, seeing that no more help was needed on the heights, had joined the humans on the plateau, scavenging all that could be rescued or reused.

The shout of a distant voice could just be heard, drawing Yrin’s attention. It was Tinald. He rounded a corner just beyond the edge of the outcropping upon which they were standing. The pathway seemed to drop off into thin air, but in actuality it wrapped around the mountain out of sight,
following a second set of stairs up to the vent shaft opening above the laboratory.

Tinald’s investigation of the Nazgûl’s lab had revealed that the room was indeed still intact.

“The far wall is nearly collapsed from the press of lava but it seems to have stopped and is stable for now. Many things lie broken, but it appears usable.” Tinald finished his assessment as he led the trio higher up the mountain to another hatch. From this one, small wisps of warm air drifted out. The lava may have cooled but the warmth generated by it was still dissipating.

Aragorn was doing a bit better by the time they reached the second hatch but Legolas would not allow him to spend any extra strength and insisted on helping him up the stairs. Worry had set in the prince’s heart now that they were so close to creating more of the antidote. Would Aragorn be well enough to figure out how it was made? The wood-elf feared he would be of no help, as his knowledge of the healing arts had ever been rudimentary at best. If they couldn’t do it... if all these people were doomed to die... if Estel died...

Legolas shook his head, denying those thoughts and clearing his mind. There was no time for that type of thinking. They had come this far; there had to be a way to make it all end up right.

“Legolas, are you all right?” Aragorn gently placed his hand on the elf’s chest.

Tinald scurried down the shaft, calling up for Yrin and leaving the two friends to converse quietly for a moment.

“It will work out, Estel.” Legolas tried to reassure the ranger. “We need to get you inside quickly and see what damage the lab has taken. The faster we begin, the sooner you will be well.”

The slight worry that hedged the elf’s eyes was not lost on his companion. With a small smile, Aragorn conceded and eased stiffly down into the shaft, crawling through the confined vents towards the sound of the servants’ voices inside the lab. Behind him, he could hear Legolas as the elf followed. When he slowed imperceptibly, the prince’s hand gently grasped his boot, encouraging him to continue.

The air in the lab was heavy and broken glass crunched underfoot. Shelves of vials had been thrown down and smashed, their contents staining the rubble-strewn floor like orc blood. The lava that had crushed in one wall had stopped short of breaking through the stones and now lay hardened on the other side. The noxious gasses released from the eruption, combined with the acidic smell of
whatever had been in the broken vials, were enough to make anyone feel choked. Tiny rivulets of the molten rock had seeped through the cracks and pooled on the ground, looking as though they were simply part of the wall itself. They shimmered slightly with the heat they gave off.

Aragorn had to lean against the wall to support himself as he fought to breathe in the foul air. It was going to be hard to work in here, but they had no choice.

Legolas supported his friend, his own eyes watering slightly. “Is there any way to get more air in here?”

Yrinvan, breathing through his shirt sleeve, shook his head. “I’m afraid not. Here,” he retrieved an empty sack from the corner of the room. “Put this over your nose and mouth.”

Legolas easily tore the sack in two along its seams. He tied the make-shift mask around the lower portion of Aragorn’s face first, and then secured his own. It was a flimsy barrier at best, but at least it was better than nothing.

Aragorn stiffened when the cloth went over his face and for a brief moment a small flare of panic hedged his eyes. Legolas saw this and stopped moving immediately.

“Estel?” he questioned quietly, his voice slightly muffled behind his own mask.

Aragorn shook his head and attempted a weak smile behind his protective covering. It was going to be a while before he could have anything put over his face and not remember what had been done to him here. “It’s nothing, don’t worry,” the ranger assured.

Tinald and Yrinvan had already secured their own masks and were now busy at one end of the room, clearing a table and searching out what undamaged supplies remained to be found.

Aragorn closed his eyes a moment. He had to push aside the dark memories of how often he had been tortured in this room. The feeling of evil was strong in here, as strong as, or stronger than, the noxious air. It made his knees feel weak, as if the very strength were being slowly sapped out of him.

He hated being in this place again. It held too many dark memories. Glancing slowly around, he stopped moving as his gaze landed on a table a few feet away from him. Legolas bumped into the
ranger when Aragorn jolted quickly to a stop. He gently grabbed the man’s shoulders and tried to look around the human to see what had captured his friend’s attention. Just to their right, shoved up against the broken wall, was the table that held that Nazgûl’s torture devices. The gag that Aragorn had been forced to endure, lay in a jumbled pile of leather along with several other devices of a similar nature and a spare bridle.

Legolas unconsciously licked his bruised lips when he caught sight of the offensive contraptions. Gently pushing the man aside, the elf strode over and swiped the pile of torture devices off the tabletop, sending them flying into the wall. The gag bounced off the hard stone and fell against a broken edge, sinking quickly into the still cooling lava. Bright flares of orange molten rock swallowed the gag, covering it immediately with a deceptively cool dark exterior. The prince watched as the metal on the bridle melted into the lava, disappearing from sight. The elf’s anger cooled with the magma that hissed on the ground, barely touching the tip of his boot. A small thrill of satisfaction coursed through him as he realized the offensive contraptions would ever again harm any living being.

Aragorn’s shaky hand on his arm brought the elf back to the present. He was watching the lava that now covered the torture devices. Legolas gently turned the man back and led them both away, joining the servants in the far corner of the room. Yrin was watching them carefully. He hadn’t given much thought to the room or its contents. He had been here so many times he was used to seeing the Nazgûl’s collection. The reaction from the two former captives caught at his heart, reminding him that the old way was over and there was no more torment to fear.

“Yrin, can we take all this outside, do it there?” Aragorn asked. His voice muffled by the cloth over his mouth. He still did not like this room.

Yrinvan set a large iron caldron back on its thick-pronged feet over an un-kindled fire-ring. “Perhaps,” he nodded slowly, also wishing to be out of this foul place. “But... I don’t know if we’d be able to control the environment enough.”

“What?” Aragorn did not understand.

Yrinvan wished he could explain more clearly. “I assisted the Mast-” he caught himself. That evil being was his master no longer. “I assisted the Wraith in the preparation of the antidote on several occasions. I wasn’t there the whole time; he never allowed anyone in the whole time, lest they know how it was done. But in the final stages, he needed someone to keep the fire at exactly the right temperature while he added the last ingredient. He was very particular about the temperature of the room and the fire itself. We lost more than one slave because they let a draft in or did not tend the fire exactly as he wished.”

Aragorn nodded slowly. So, it was temperature sensitive when it was being made. That was not a
good sign. This was going to be a very complicated potion to recreate. “When you were here, Yrin, what did you see? What did he do?”

Yrinvan was thoughtful for a moment, trying to recall everything exactly. “I remember that the room was very warm and I had to be careful to allow no air in the door with me that would disturb the temperature. He had some kind of red-brown tincture that he must have mixed up beforehand sitting on the table. He would put it into the cauldron with whatever else was already in there, while I kept the fire evenly stoked. Then he would soak a piece of cloth in whatever is in that canister,” Yrin indicated the one he meant, which was thankfully not broken. “And dip it into the potion. If the cloth turned brown, then he removed the potion from the fire and let it cool. All was well. If it turned black... then he had to start over again and I was subjected to the mercies of the orcs for my failure.” Yrin’s gaze did not waver. “I was lucky. The master did not think he could replace me as easily as some of the others.”

Aragorn’s eyes flashed with silent compassion and understanding. He could not imagine having lived under the Nazgûl for as many years as Yrin had suffered. “Do you think you could bring the fire to the correct temperature again when it is needed?” he asked quietly.

Yrin nodded with a mirthless smile. “I am certain I can. There is a small spoke built into the fire pit that glows dully when the temperature is right. I learned very quickly how to take my bearing off of that.”

“Good,” Aragorn smiled weakly behind his protective mask. He knew they were all looking to him to create the antidote. Any possible help was appreciated. “You give me hope that we may accomplish this yet.”

“Can we not take this outside then?” Legolas inquired with concern as he walked beside his friend to the table. Aragorn held the elf’s arm for support and orientation. His own illness combined with the fumes made the human incredibly dizzy.

“No,” Aragorn shook his head. “Not if temperature is a concern. We could never control it right out there in the cold wind. There are too many variables and this is going to be hard enough as it is. We will simply have to work fast.”

Legolas understood. “Very well, tell me what to do mellon-nín, and I will help you any way I can.”

“All right,” Aragorn assessed the situation, forcing his mind to work through the haze crowding his mental functions. “We have the lichen from the caves, and I think I know how that should go into the base. Legolas, I’ll need what’s left of the antidote to examine, some clean, empty vials and a
mortar and pestle. Yrin, Tinald, look around through what is left undamaged. I’m going to need some charcoal powder, flaxseed and white oak bark if there is any.”

Estel prayed to the Valar that he could do this and do it right. Their time was growing painfully short.
Two hours later, Aragorn’s hands were trembling so badly he could no longer hold the vials steady as he worked with them. He nearly sloshed the precious liquid he was working with all over the table top, and would have, if a set of strong elven hands had not clamped over his own, holding them steady.

Gently, Legolas relieved Aragorn of the small glass cup in his hands. “Let me do that, mellon-nín,” he offered quietly.

Aragorn nodded, closing his eyes against the blurry nausea that consumed his being. It was getting so dark; it was hard to see what he was doing. When he opened his eyes again they might as well have remained shut. He could see nothing. A small thrill of weary panic shot through his being. No! Not now!

The ranger remained very still, afraid to move lest he knock something off the table that had taken him hours to create. He wavered a little on his feet.

“Legolas,” he said quietly, but the tone in his voice caused his friend to look up in alarm. “Please
take my arm.” The ranger’s request was calm, but somewhat plaintive.

Legolas hurriedly complied; setting the mixture they were working on aside on the table and taking his friend’s arm reassuringly in his own. He recognized the staring, blank look on Aragorn’s face with a sick, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“You can’t see again,” the elf said sadly. It was not a question.

Aragorn inclined his head slightly; moving it too much felt like it would tip him off balance or make him throw up. “Yes,” he conceded. With Legolas as an anchor, he felt steady enough to reach out and find the edge of the table with his groping fingers. Holding on to it tightly, he let go of the elf’s arm.

“Legolas, I will tell you what to do. I just need you to be my eyes and my hands for me. Can you do that mellon-nín?” Heavy perspiration stood out upon the ranger’s brow and stained the cloth tied over the lower part of his face. He was not doing well. The fumes and darkness of their surroundings was hastening his fall back into the clutches of the poison that was killing him.

“Of course, Estel. But let us go topside first, for you must have some fresh air,” Legolas tried to convince his friend.

Yrin and Tinald were already taking a breather up in the fresh air, but Aragorn had refused to go and Legolas remained with him. The elf squeezed Aragorn’s right hand.

“Let me share your trial with you my friend, get you some of your strength back...”

The ranger shook his head with a sad smile. “Legolas, even if I would allow you to do that again, we don’t have any Togiuith.”

Unfortunately, Legolas knew he was right, but he wasn’t ready to give up yet. “Then at least get some fresh air, out of this foul reek. Come, Estel, please...”

“Legolas!” Aragorn’s voice was strained and hinted with anguish. “I don’t have time,” he whispered hoarsely. “This has to be done before...” he stopped. “This has to be done. Please, just help me my friend.”
When Legolas looked into his friend’s sightless eyes, a flicker of panic leapt inside him like a tiny flame. Aragorn had the look of a man who knew his moments were numbered, and was trying to make as much of them as he could. The elf was glad his friend could not see the tears that sprang into his pale blue eyes.

“All right, Estel. Just tell me what to do,” the prince said quietly.

Aragorn directed the elf slowly through the final stages required to purify the mixture he had created. The human’s breathing was ragged now, his speech so slurred Legolas could barely understand him.

“That’s... that’s the base,” Aragorn murmured. “At least... Valar, I hope it is. This will have to be heated and then...” A long silence followed as Legolas waited for his friend to continue. Aragorn did not.

“And then, Estel?” Legolas prodded quietly.

Aragorn started slightly and blinked. His mind was drifting in and out on him. He was fading; he couldn’t be sure he was doing anything right anymore, and now his mind was getting so cloudy he couldn’t even find strength or reason enough to be alarmed. “Then... finished and... add the other... other thing... like Yrin said.”

“Finished how Estel? And what is the other mixture? Is it the same as this?” Legolas pressed. He was worried that he was losing Aragorn’s concentration.

Aragorn didn’t answer.

“Estel!”

“I-I don’t know...” Aragorn shook his head helplessly. “Legolas, I’m sorry... tell them... tell them I’m sorry...” he murmured, his voice a mere sorrowful rasp.

Legolas caught Aragorn as the human’s knees buckled. Swinging the ranger quickly up into his arms, Legolas hurriedly carried him up through the shaft and out of the claustrophobic laboratory.
The sun was almost blindingly bright and the elf had to blink several times to adjust. He drew in deep breaths of clean air as he ripped the mask off Aragorn’s face, tilting his friend’s head back so the ranger could breathe easier.

Yrinvan and Tinald rushed over, seeing the elf exit with the limp ranger in his arms.

Legolas laid Aragorn gently on the rocky ground, pulling his own mask down to hang around his neck as he gazed worriedly into the ranger’s damp, flushed face.

“Estel? Speak to me! Wake, Estel, please, I need you, mellon-nín! I cannot do this alone, come back,” Legolas pleaded earnestly, massaging his friend’s swollen hands and arms, trying to ease the ranger back to consciousness.

Yrinvan and Tinald knelt beside them, but after a few minutes Yrin straightened up and laid his hand on Legolas’ arm, halting the elf who was still trying to wake his friend.

“Legolas,” the former slave said quietly. “You cannot wake him now. He... he’s too far gone.”

“No!” Legolas ripped his arm away from Yrin, refusing to believe the human’s words. Maybe it was true for others, but they didn’t know Aragorn. He was stronger - he was!

“Yrin’s right,” Tinald put in sadly. “It’s already beyond miraculous that he’s made it this long. We’ve seen it many, many times Legolas. Look at the way he’s sweating and shaking, even though unconscious. It’s claiming him. Only the antidote can save him now, if it’s not already too late.” They weren’t trying to be cruel. This kind of death was a reality they had all had to come to accept.

Legolas stumbled back a step, feeling a little dizzy and nauseous himself. “But there isn’t an antidote yet. Estel used up what was left in testing. We have a base... but I don’t even know if *that’s* right or not.”

“Then we are all dead,” Tinald said quietly, with the finality of one who had half-expected such an outcome.

“No, no...” Legolas could only shake his head for a moment. He could not accept this conclusion. “Tinald, stay with Estel, please, try to keep him comfortable. Yrin, if I attempt to finish the antidote, will you help me?”
Yrinvan nodded without hesitation. “Just lead the way.”

Legolas scrambled back down the hatchway into the lab. Returning to the foul air after the fresh was like slamming into a brick wall and he gagged, quickly pulling his mask back on. After he and Yrinvan had finally gotten their eyes to stop watering, Legolas stood for a few moments, looking at the table and the jumble of items strew across the top. Valar, he had no clue what he was doing.

“All right, this is our base,” he gestured to the mixture Aragorn had created. “We need to finish it, and create the second element that is added after heating.”

Yrin nodded slowly. “Good. You know how to do this?”

Legolas tried not to wince behind his mask.

“No,” he admitted. “But maybe together we can figure it out. Please, Yrin, tell me anything at all you can remember from when you assisted in making the antidote. The smallest thing might help.”

“I told you almost all I know...” Yrinvan admitted. “But I did come in once when the Wraith was still finishing the second element. It was a very light red until he added a white powder, and then it turned dark.”

Legolas nodded slowly. That actually did tell him something. There were only certain plant families that could have created a red formula, and only one of them was present in this lab. Legolas could not have told you why he knew this, but he did.

The prince had a limited knowledge of healing practices and applied every ounce of commonsense he could muster to aid him. Slowly, painstakingly, he experimented with some different compounds until the mixture was an appropriate shade.

“Hand me some of... that,” Legolas couldn’t remember the substance’s name and did not particularly care at the moment. Yrin saw what he was waving at and brought it over. Legolas measured some out into the bowl of his palm and added it to the light red-ocher potion he was working over. Instantly, the liquid clouded to a dark brown. “Like that?” the elf inquired of the human.
Yrinvan nodded, smiling for the first time. “Yes, at least that is what it looked like to me.”

“Good,” Legolas was relieved. Then he chewed his lip, his thoughts flying swiftly, automatically. “But there’s nothing for it to react to in the base. None of these elements react against one another. We need to add some velendrum or hallyhem...”

Yrin raised his eyebrow as Legolas sought out the herbs he desired. “And you said you don’t know what you’re doing,” he said with a small smile.

Legolas blinked several times. He didn’t know what he was doing... did he? A moment ago it had certainly felt like he did. The answer had come to him automatically in his mind, as if it were knowledge he already possessed, but he was certain there was nothing in his experience that should have taught him these things.

It was a mystery the elf did not have time to entertain. Too many lives hung in the balance for him to make a mistake now. Hoping he did right, he added a few measures of hallyhem to the base mixture and put it in the caldron along with several cups of water to dilute the concentrated mixture.

Yrin quickly went about his job of building and maintaining the fire.

The moment of truth came quicker than Legolas felt ready for it and he dumped the second mixture into the pot. Holding his breath, the elf tore a bit of clean cloth off one end of his mask and dipped it into the pale yellow liquid in the jar that Yrin had indicated earlier. Dipping an edge of the cloth into the bubbling potion, the elf bit his lip, hoping...

The cloth flushed a deep purple-blue and Legolas swore, yanking it out of the pot in frustration. It wasn’t even black, so something in the mixture was decidedly wrong.

Yrin let the fire die down to embers again since they did not need any extra heat or smoke in the room and rose to his feet.

Legolas dumped the ruined concoction and started all over again at the beginning, recreating the base from step one, as he had watched Estel do, and considering every measurement he added.

“What do you think went wrong?” Yrin asked quietly.
“It could have been anything,” Legolas admitted, his frustration riding just beneath the surface. “The wrong ingredients, the wrong measurements... we must keep on trying.”

Try they did. For three long hours Legolas and Yrin toiled over one mixture after another until both of them felt ready to gag from the strain of their surroundings or scream from frustration.

When one of the vials the elf was using cracked from being left too close to the fire and ruined another batch before they even got to test it, it was almost too much. Legolas pounded his fists on the table and slammed his forehead down upon them. He was failing them. He was failing everyone, especially Aragorn who had placed far too much misguided trust in him.

“I can’t do this...” he choked out softly, not meaning to have spoken at all.

“You’re doing your best, Legolas,” Yrin tried to reassure him. “We’re trying everything we can.”

“Well that’s not good enough!” Legolas straightened and whirled around angrily, flinging the cracked vial in his hands forcefully against the far wall where it shattered and exploded into a million pieces. Yrin pulled back, but it was quickly evident that Legolas’ anger was not directed at the human.

Legolas buried his face in his hands. “What am I missing? I feel like it’s right there, right on the edge of my consciousness and I can’t find it!”

Yrin coughed into his hand, wheezing around the bad air. “Come, let us go up and clear our heads. We’ll come back down and try again.”

“No,” Legolas started to refuse, shaking his head. “We have to...”

“Legolas,” Yrin’s gaze stopped the elf’s protest. “Just for a few minutes. I... I need the air, but I won’t go up if you don’t. I think you need it too.”

Legolas noted the way Yrin’s eyes had swollen partially shut. He heard the nasty cough the human was developing for some time now. Yrin did need to go up, and maybe he did too. Perhaps it would help him think.
“All right,” the elf conceded. “I want to check on Estel anyway.”

The outside air was a welcome relief and Yrin leaned heavily on a rock, his lungs heaving. Tinald hurried quickly to his friend’s side, leaving Legolas to check on Aragorn.

The ranger’s condition was steadily declining. His pulse was fading and his skin was growing dangerously cold, despite the pile of coverings Tinald had wrapped around him.

Legolas squeezed his unresponsive friend’s hand. The sad truth was that if they did not find an antidote soon, Estel was not going to make it much longer.

After waiting a few more minutes for Yrinvan’s sake, determined steps took the elf back down into the dark, polluted chamber once more and Yrin followed stoically.

Legolas laid a gentle hand on the human’s shoulder before they re-entered the shaft. “Yrin, you don’t have to come with me, I can make do on my own for a while. I’ll call you when I’m ready for the fire.”

Yrin shook his head. “I can help you. I’m going back in,” he rasped with determination. His eyes reminded Legolas that it was the life of his family and all of his friends on the line too. The elf understood that and allowed Yrin to follow him back down into the pit.

Legolas coughed as they descended once more. He was more resilient than Yrin, but the foul atmosphere and lingering oppressive evil was wearing him down as well.

The elf picked up the pestle he had been using and rested it on the edge of the mortar dish. He had to try again, but what was he supposed to do? What was he missing? Why didn’t the formula work? All the elements seemed right, but the test cloth was still turning a resolute purple.

What? What was he doing wrong??

The prince ran through every action and reaction that occurred in the compound, sorting them in his tired mind. There weren’t that many really. It was trying to balance them. That was the issue. He felt he had achieved that balance, but something was still amiss...
“The hallyhem,” the thought darted through his mind. “It’s reacting too violently to the charcoal. A catalyst is needed.”

Legolas’ head jerked up. It made perfect sense; they needed a catalyst to stabilize the highly volatile hallyhem. Undoubtedly, this instability was what caused the undesired reaction in the compound. An instant later Legolas knew there was no way he could have known that information. It had not come from his mind, although it was clearly echoed in his thoughts. And *what* was the catalyst? He had felt like he had grasped the concept only a moment ago, but now his mind drew a disturbing blank.

The prince gripped his head tightly. This was a bad time to start going crazy.

The elf fought to hold onto the thought, to trace back the random flickers of knowledge that seemed just behind. He had been feeling it for a while now; the odd touches of thoughts, knowledge or information that should not have been contained in his mind, and yet they came to him as his own. He knew he should not have been able to come as far with this antidote as he had, but here he was. And now he was positive that he could remember something about a catalyst for hallyhem, if only he tried hard enough.

“Legolas, are you all right?” Yrin asked quietly, and Legolas realized he had frozen, his hands on his temples, a look of intense concentration on his face.

“Shh...” the elf bid his companion distractedly. He had to concentrate. Like one trying to recall a barely remembered dream, Legolas sifted through his consciousness, attempting to pinpoint the memory he sought. It came to him in bits and snatches at first, but slowly became clearer and clearer under his continued scrutiny.

*Two identical little elflings with dark hair were staring up at him with questioning eyes. In their hands they each held a small mortar dish with liquid inside. One was bubbling - the other was not.*

*The child holding the still cup looked either peeved or disappointed. “Ada, why does El’s work and mine doesn’t?”*

*Because you forgot the wildeen, my son,” a patient, loving voice replied. In Legolas’ head, it seemed the voice was his, yet in reality he knew that could not be true.*
“Wildeen seems an insignificant little plant,” the voice that was not Legolas’ continued. “Because it has no special properties of its own, but it is a catalyst that will keep the hallyhem from reacting too quickly and going flat. Always remember to pay attention to even the seemingly unimportant things, Elrohir, for they will serve you well. Come, I’ll help you make it again, all right?”

Legolas stood stock still for a few moments as the memory faded. Memory? How could this possibly be his memory? He had just seen Elladan and Elrohir as very young children, long before he had come to know them, and he would not have been calling them his sons. Obviously, inexplicably, it was *Elrond’s* memory that he was recalling, and not his own at all.

Other memories were now surfacing, recollections that felt as if they had been locked away in his mind, hidden until he turned his attention intently enough upon them to bring them forward into the light of day. The momentary rush on his senses was almost staggering.

*He was holding a baby in his arms, a little girl. She was so perfect, so beautiful. “Arwen,” he whispered. “Her name is Arwen. A Noble Lady...” he glanced up to catch the lovely, curling smile on his wife’s lips. “Like her mother.”*

“But she has her father’s features,” replied a beautiful elf woman that Legolas knew immediately was Lady Celebrían.

*Celebrían reached out and ran her fingers through her husband’s dark hair. “I hope she has your hair, like our sons.”*

*He leaned over, kissing her gently, cradling their daughter between them. “Well I hope everything else about her is like you,” he whispered.*

Legolas pulled back from the memory abruptly, feeling like an intruder in someone else’s life. He flushed hotly. It was impossible, but the memories really were there. Dimly he recalled the only other time he had felt this way... that day on the mountain when he lay dying... nay, when he did die. Elrond brought him back, pushing so much of himself into the wounded elf’s body that their minds had literally joined for a few heartbeats of time. He remembered his initial confusion when he couldn’t remember who he was due to the warring sets of memories he contained. Legolas had almost forgotten all about it. He had told Estel the truth when he said what had happened on the mountain that day had been lost to him, but now he was beginning to remember.

With a jolt, Legolas realized he still had those memories, though he thought initially they had seemed to fade away almost immediately after that encounter. Rather, he realized now, they had simply been buried, slowly leaching out in little ways such as his increased familiarity with medicines.
The elf pulled in a shuddering breath, only to gag on the thick air. That quickly brought him back to present. The wonder over what had happened was going to have to wait; he did not have time to deal with any of this confusing information now. He did however see one immediate advantage. If he had some of Elrond’s memories, then he also retained some of the Elf Lord’s knowledge. He needed that knowledge now; needed it badly.

Yrin thought it was almost a different elf that came back to work with him. Legolas had suddenly become more assured, calmer, and he simply... felt different. He also suddenly seemed to know what he was doing.

It was difficult for Legolas at first to access the knowledge he needed, but slowly, he brought to light the memories and wisdom he sought, as if remembering things from a dream. He tried very hard to keep any non-medicinal memories out of his mind and focus only on the essentials. He already felt dangerously as if he was trespassing deep into someone else’s privacy, but he had no choice. He had to believe that Elrond would forgive him if it meant saving Estel’s life.

The wildeen was quickly measured out, along with a few other essential herbs and minerals that Legolas’ new knowledge now told him was vital. After the hours of frustration and stabbing in the dark, it felt frighteningly easy. Legolas was more than a little afraid of the results when he hesitantly dipped the test cloth once more. His mask had become very short from having bits ripped off of it; dare he hope that this would be the last time?

Legolas resisted the urge to give an audible whoop when the cloth turned a very satisfactory shade of brown. He carefully lifted the concoction off the fire and set it on the table.

Yrin stood to his feet, rubbing his aching back. His huge grin was hidden under his mask, but it shone in his eyes.

“We did it, Legolas.”

The elf nodded as he carefully poured the liquid into a large flagon. This potion was actually much stronger than the watered down version the Nazgûl had employed. Only a little bit would be required for each person to completely counteract the poison. They may have enough right here to give everyone their first dose. Still, it was not going to be a one-time cure. The slaves’ dependency was deeply rooted, but with regular treatment, they could eventually neutralize all the poison in their bodies and finally become free. Legolas or Yrin could easily make more for them now. They wouldn’t even have to use this lab again, now that Legolas knew *what* temperature control was needed and how to achieve the correct balance of elements.
“Yes, we did,” the elf sighed with relief. He showed Yrinvan exactly how much to give each person as the servant was only used to dispensing the meager amounts the Wraith had allotted them.

“Yrin! Legolas!” Tinald’s worried voice echoed down the shaft, bringing a chill of alarm back to the exhausted human and elf. “Come quickly! It’s Estel, he’s... please hurry!”
Legolas surfaced so quickly that Tinald had to jump back from the entrance to avoid colliding with him.

“He stopped breathing,” Tinald explained quietly as Legolas quickly dropped to his knees beside the ranger.

Aragorn’s face was deathly pale and his skin was so cold it burned Legolas’ hands after having been so long in the hot laboratory. Compressing Aragorn’s chest with swift, rapid moves, Legolas willed his friend’s heart to keep beating, his lungs to keep breathing.

“Come on Estel, breathe!” Legolas commanded as he pumped the ranger’s chest as if he could force the man’s heart to keep beating and his lungs to keep working. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes. He couldn’t have succeeded only to have it come to late for Aragorn, it could not be!

“Breathe!” the shout had almost become angry, but quavered just on the brink of anguish. “I did not come this far to lose you now, human! Now fight it!”

Slowly, Aragorn’s body responded, a soft, stuttering breath inflating his lungs once more. But it was feeble at best and it would not be long before resuscitation had ceased to be possible.

“Yrin, please get me some of those white crystals from the lab,” Legolas requested as he gently scooped Aragorn’s shoulders into his arms and sat the human partway upright. “I need him aware enough to take the antidote.”

Aragorn had to be able to swallow; Legolas couldn’t risk accidentally choking him.

Yrin hurried back with the crystals and Legolas crushed them in his palm, holding them under Aragorn’s nose.

After a few moments the ranger stirred slightly. He wasn’t lucid, but his body was aware enough that when Legolas tipped the flask with the antidote in it to his lips, Aragorn swallowed reflexively.
Legolas gave the ranger more than his mind told him he needed just to be safe. Then he closed the flask and passed it to Yrin. He pulled Aragorn more firmly into his arms, letting the ranger’s back rest against his chest, the human’s head on his shoulder.

“Yrin, Tinald, take the rest of the antidote to your people. Make sure they know that, if you run out, we will make more. Everyone will have all they need. No one needs to perish from this abominable poison anymore. I will stay here with Estel until the antidote takes effect,” Legolas said. He had to believe it would work. He could not entertain the nagging doubts that worried that the cure had been given too late, or that Legolas had still managed to make a mistake in its preparation.

The two humans nodded. “Are you sure you will be all right alone with him here?” Yrinvan asked as he piled the blankets over Aragorn. The servant draped one around the elf’s shoulders as well, tucking in the edges.

Legolas nodded. “I will be fine, thank you.”

Yrin and Tinald began making their way down the mountain and Legolas watched them go until they turned a corner and disappeared among the rocks.

He had been concerned that they all might still be in danger from the mountain itself, but the earth beneath him was calming. It seemed that the magma had simply flooded back to fill its normal channels, as it had always been before the Witch King harnessed the mountain to his will. Now that it had evened out, there was no immanent danger of an eruption. The mountain was content to slumber once more and the song the earth sang was once again falling into balance.

Legolas felt like he wanted to sing himself, but his throat was a little too raw after hours in the fumes under the mountain, so he contented himself to humming as he rocked his friend’s still body back and forth gently, waiting for Aragorn to begin taking a turn for the better. The elf was struck by a gentle memory of holding Estel when he was a tiny child and the prince smiled, too weary at the moment to sort out that that was, of course, not *his* memory.

Legolas was beyond exhaustion as the day’s events had drained him. While he held his friend, his mind slowly began wandering and his head slipped down to rest against Aragorn’s back.

It was in this position, cocooned in Legolas’ arms that Aragorn awoke many hours later. The sun had gone down and the stars twinkled high overhead, seeming nearer somehow from their mountainside vantage point.
The ranger was incredibly weak, but he felt better than he had in months. He turned his head to the side to see Legolas’ faintly glowing face resting on his shoulder. The elf’s eyes were open, but he was obviously asleep. Aragorn smiled. He didn’t realize he had stirred, but he must have because a few moments later Legolas’ blank eyes focused and blinked.

“You’re awake,” Aragorn said with a smile. His voice was hoarse, but there was real color in his face again for the first time in ages.

Legolas straightened up. “That’s my line, and I wasn’t asleep.”

Aragorn’s smile remained in place, perhaps widening ever so slightly. “Of course not. I’d say you were resting your eyes, except that you don’t *need* to rest your eyes...”

Legolas shook his head with a disgusted sound. “Remind me *why* I keep dragging you back from the brink of death when *this* is the kind of gratitude I receive?”

“Because you’re a glutton for punishment?” Aragorn suggested. He tried to laugh, but it caught and choked in his throat so he had to stop. “Do we have any water?”

Legolas could have slapped himself for not thinking of that earlier, although he didn’t know where he would have gotten any from since all the water in the lab was used up making the antidote. “No, I’m afraid not. I have nothing here. I didn’t want to move you until I knew you were better and I... I did fall asleep Estel, I’m sorry. Come, mellon-nín, I will help you down the mountain. I’m certain that Yrinvan and his people will have water for us.”

Aragorn nodded; although he was unsure if he could stand right now, much less walk. Legolas brushed the coverings off of them and helped him to his feet, but it became obvious the ranger could not stay upright. He was still far too weak.

Legolas picked the man up once more, settling him on his back. He was worried. Was this normal? Aragorn usually came back to strength faster after having been given the antidote. Was it just because he had been pushed almost to the brink of death before he received it this time, or had Legolas made an error in the potion? Unfortunately his borrowed knowledge was no help to him in this case. He didn’t really know *everything* Elrond knew; he was simply able to access pieces of it, sometimes in odd or disjoined ways. This left him a little uneasy about his own accuracy. Because at the moment, all his foggy ‘memory’ supplied him with was the understanding that a positive result on the color test could have been achieved, even if the mixture had not been done properly. As long as the heat was right and the wildeen and hallyhem proportions had been correct, it should work. That was not comforting knowledge right now.
“Hey, put me down, I can walk,” Aragorn murmured in protest.

Legolas smiled, relieved beyond words that even if Aragorn couldn’t walk, he was at least strong enough to argue about it once more.

“Of course you can. You’re just going to rest your legs, that’s all,” the prince turned the ranger’s own joke back on him, lightening the sting of the human’s helplessness.

“Legolas...” Aragorn murmured as they started down the mountain. “I would never have made it through this alone. You were right.”

“Aren’t I always?” the elf teased lightly.

Aragorn rolled his eyes. “I’m trying to say thank you, my dear conceited elf, so give me a chance.” His voice mellowed back to seriousness once more. “Truly, thank you for saving my sorry life *again*. And for standing by me, for not letting me go through this by myself.”

Legolas gave his friend a squeeze. “Just returning the favor.”

“No, I’m being serious, Legolas,” Aragorn’s voice rasped slightly against the elf’s ear in his effort to make his friend understand.

Legolas did understand. His voice gentled. “I know. So was I.”

Several dots of light appeared on the path ahead and presently Yrin, Tinald, Ahnna and several of the other former slaves came into view. They were carrying lanterns, supplies and a makeshift stretcher.

“We were worried about you two,” Tinald explained as they helped ease Aragorn off of Legolas’ back and onto the stretcher. “The mountain is still giving off heat, but the temperatures will begin to drop soon. You should not be out alone. Come, we have a camp set up in the meadow. We’ve been able to salvage many supplies from parts of the castle that weren’t completely destroyed. The eagles have gone, but said to tell you they will return soon as they wish to hear more of what has gone on here. We have a comfortable place for you to sleep tonight.”
“Thank you,” Aragorn whispered. He was losing his voice.

“Could I have some of that water, please? Thank you,” Legolas asked for and received the water skin that Ahnna was carrying. He placed it gently against Aragorn’s parched lips. “There you are, my friend, drink.”

Aragorn did, and the cool water helped clear his head and soothe his sore voice and throat.

Together the small party made its way down the mountain. Legolas walked beside Aragorn’s stretcher, stealing frequent glances down at his friend. The human had fallen asleep again, lulled by the rocking motion of the stretcher. Starlight framed his weary and bedraggled, yet ultimately peaceful face.

“Soon we will go home, Estel,” he promised. “And I will have your father check you out to be sure you are really all right. But for tonight my friend, just rest, and regain your strength.”

“It’s a beautiful night, is it not?” Legolas heard Tinald ask quietly.

“Every moment has become beautiful,” Yrin agreed with solemn joy.

Legolas knew what he meant. Yrin knew his people had hard times ahead. They had never had to fend for themselves before, but they would learn. They might have hardships, but they would face them together and conquer them. They were free.

Legolas smiled.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Peace lay like a blanket over the darkened earth. Legolas had chosen a spot far away from the former slaves’ summer dwellings and sat perched on the edge of a tall rock outcropping, overlooking a deep ravine that wound away into the distance like a black scar in the moonlight. In the near distance, the elf could see the black mountain bathed in moonlight. It may never be completely free
of the evil that had once haunted it, but already the shadow it cast was far less imposing than it once had been.

It had been a little over a fortnight now since the downfall of Angmar. Everything was going well. When put to a vote, the former slaves had decided to relocate to and build upon their summer houses here amid the valley gorges. This was their home and with the threat of the Nazgul gone, they were loathe to leave. The underground pool beneath the black mountain had been spared during the eruption and another way in had been discovered, granting the people access to fresh water in all seasons. The creature in the lake never surfaced again and when they sent divers into the deep pool they found no trace of its presence. No one knew how or where it had gone, but they did not choose to question their good fortune. Of the cave trolls there was no sign. Legolas supposed that they had left the mountain’s vicinity for somewhere safer and less populated. In the span of a year he was sure the slaves would turn the small meadow into a thriving village for themselves. It would be hard but they were used to hard labor and this would be different. It would be theirs.

Aragorn continued to undergo regular treatments of the antidote, the same as the slaves. He was recovering steadily, although he was still far weaker than Legolas would have liked.

Yrin and Tinald had pulled the people together and the slaves were finding new purpose and new courage to face life together, as their own masters.

The eagles had listened to the tale that Aragorn and Legolas had to tell very solemnly and then gone out as scouts to be sure the area was secure and that no retribution from Dol Guldur or anywhere else was imminent. Gwaihir had promised that, when they were done, they would return and bear the two friends back to Rivendell. It was a concession for the mighty eagle, who liked to point out that they were not beasts of burden, but Legolas had prevailed upon him most earnestly. The elf greatly feared that Estel was not up to the trip, and yet they had to get him home as soon as possible. He desperately wanted Elrond to be able to check the work he had done on the ranger. Since the two younger beings were friends of Gandalf and dear to Elrond, Gwaihir had semi-reluctantly consented to help them, with the understanding that this was not going to become a regular habit.

Everything was well... so why was Legolas troubled? The archer twisted several long blades of dry grass in his lap. Looking down into the ravine he fancied he could see a river down there, with a ship bobbing at anchor. Yet he knew it wasn’t real, just like all the other disturbing specters his mind was conjuring up lately.

"I hate to see you go brother, but you know I wish you well..."/

The words drifted across Legolas’ mind like a memory, and in his mind’s eye he was looking into eyes that were strange to him, and yet felt incredibly dear. They reminded him of Aragorn, but it was not Aragorn.
"I know, muindor-nín," the other person replied. *He wasn’t an elf, was he? No, he was human.*

They embraced. *Legolas could feel the cloth of the other man’s tunic under his hands, could feel himself gripping tightly as if he never wanted to let go.*

Legolas took a deep breath and blinked his stinging eyes rapidly until the images faded and the illusionary specters were gone from his mind. The ravine was dark and empty again and the night was still. The lingering ache and love in his heart was staggering. He felt like he had lost someone... or remembered losing someone. Yet he knew he had never seen that person before in his life, had he? He must have, for it was there, his mind told him he had... but he knew it was not so. Legolas gripped his head tightly for a moment, stilling his confused, circular thoughts.

The prince rubbed his aching chest as if he could physically make the feelings go away. He knew it was just the phantoms. They weren’t him and they weren’t real... but Valar, they were wreaking havoc on his mind and heart. He didn’t know what was wrong with him these past few weeks, why his dreams had suddenly become so disturbed and reality had become so strangely twisted. It was as if he was discovering some part of his past he had somehow forgotten, or revisiting a previous life he had lived. Legolas knew the source of his trouble, but that was almost as disturbing as not knowing.

“Hey, you all right?” Aragorn’s soft voice broke through Legolas’ troubled thoughts.

Legolas started slightly and looked up. Aragorn leaned over him, silhouetted against the starry sky. Even in the starlight Legolas could see the deep, dark circles under the ranger’s eyes and the unnatural pallor of his friend’s skin. The human had a blanket pulled tightly around his shoulders, over his clothes. Spring was starting to visit the valley, but Aragorn was still almost always cold. It seemed next to impossible for him to get fully warm. He was healing, but very slowly.

The elf prince quickly returned a weak smile. “Yes, of course. I’m not the one who has been knocking on death’s door for the past few weeks. I thought you were sleeping,” the last statement sounded suspiciously like an accusation.

Aragorn gave his friend a warning smile. “*You* are changing the subject. I’ll go to sleep when I’m ready to go to sleep.” The ranger sat down beside his friend, dangling his legs over the edge of the rocky outcropping and shifting the blanket around him to cover his lap as well. “Now, what’s wrong? You’re troubled and I can tell. Is it me? The others...” he swept one arm in the direction of the slumbering camp in the distance. “I told you before not to worry so much. If anyone was going to die from your antidote, they would have already...” the jest received only a token laugh and Aragorn’s eyes narrowed. “All right, it’s not that then. So? What?”
Legolas drew in a deep breath and pulled his knees up to his chest, gazing up at the stars. “I miss my brother,” he said softly, glancing sideways to see what kind of reaction that admission would garner.

Aragorn looked a bit perplexed. “Legolas, I didn’t know you had a brother,” he said quietly, realizing he may be treading on painful ground. After all, he hadn’t known Legolas had an Uncle either.

Legolas chuckled ruefully, a twinge of pain in his tone. “I don’t, I never did. But tonight I miss him all the same. Strange, is it not?” He turned confused, open eyes upon his friend, willing the ranger to have some kind of miraculous understanding for him that would make this all go away.

Aragorn didn’t. The ranger looked almost as confused as the elf, but he laid a gentle hand on his friend’s shoulder all the same.

“I think I’m going crazy,” the elf murmured softly in the darkness. “Aragorn... Ever since the day the castle was destroyed... I fear I’m losing my mind,” he admitted quietly.

Aragorn’s eyes flashed with alarm and concern, but he said nothing, letting Legolas continue in his own way.

“My thoughts, feelings... they’re such a jumble. I feel like I’m losing myself. I ought to know, oughtn’t I? I ought to know what’s me and what isn’t... why is it so hard? Every time I go to sleep I am in a different world...”

“Is that why you haven’t been sleeping?” Aragorn asked with a hint of a smile in his voice. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Legolas snorted softly. “I have a nightly visitor Aragorn. If I sleep, she comes to me in my dreams and my pulse races and my heart screams for her...”

Aragorn’s eyebrows shot up. “She? A girl, Legolas? You never told me...” he tried to lighten the mood a little. Legolas was really starting to worry him. He didn’t understand a word the elf was saying.
Legolas buried his face in his hands in frustration. “But she isn’t mine!” the elf’s tone was small and miserable. “And I feel like a wretch for even feeling like I do about her and reacting that way, but I can’t help it!”

“Mellon-nín, you’re not making sense,” Aragorn pleaded to understand his friend’s distress around the confusing jumble of information he was receiving. “Who are you talking about? Why is it so wrong...?”

“Because she’s your mother!” Legolas burst out with the startling proclamation that left Aragorn blinking in dumbfounded silence for several moments.

WHAT? His shocked face questioned as clear as words. Maybe Legolas really was losing his mind.

“Or... she would have been,” Legolas swallowed hard. “She’s is your brothers’ mother, anyway.”

“You mean Celebrían,” Aragorn struggled to grasp what his friend was talking about. “But you never met her.”

“No,” Legolas shook his head miserably. “I never did. *f* never did... these aren’t my feelings Estel!” the elf turned sad eyes upon his friend. “They *aren’t*, but they are there nonetheless and I don’t know what to do with them.”

Slowly, realization was dawning on Aragorn. “Legolas, you told me it was my father’s knowledge, still retained in your mind, which allowed you to make the antidote. Does it not make sense then that these other feelings and emotions you are experiencing are also from the exchange that occurred the day you almost died?” he asked softly.

Legolas nodded as if that didn’t help much. “Of course it does. I know that is what it is. But why now, when they have never haunted me before?”

Aragorn had no real answer for him. “I don’t know Legolas. Maybe, when you sought out the knowledge to make the antidote, you opened a floodgate of sorts, allowing things harbored in the back of your mind to come forward.”

“Then how do I get it to close?” Legolas begged him for a solution. “It’s so hard Estel. If I force every thought, every reaction through my conscious mind, I know what must be his and what is
mine. But if I don’t, if I relax for even a moment, if I’m not careful... Estel, I feel I’m losing myself. Even now, my mind may be accepting things as facts that are not part of my reality and I don’t even know it! I know, I know, that doesn’t make sense... but you can’t know what this is like unless it’s happening to you,” the elf sighed in defeat.

“Do you think if you talked to father about it...?” Aragorn started to suggest, but Legolas cut him off.

“No!” Legolas shook his head vehemently. “Do you think I could admit this to Lord Elrond? Do you think I can look him in the face and tell him of these... these *feelings* I keep having for his WIFE? If it plagues me so much having a life that is not my own in my head, what do you think it would mean to him to know that a complete stranger is walking around with his memories and emotions bottled up inside?” Legolas shook his head in horror.

“Legolas, you’re hardly a complete stranger. Ada was the one who chose what happened that day. He chose to save your life at that cost. He won’t fault you for things beyond your power to control.” Aragorn tried to console, but it wasn’t easy for Legolas to accept.

The wood-elf sighed. “I love you, my friend, but you don’t understand. You can’t.”

Aragorn wished there was something he could say. There wasn’t, so instead he reached out and gave his friend a gentle hug. “Legolas, you are right, I can’t understand what this must be like, but I am certain that it will pass. Give it time, mellon-nín give it time. It will fade.”

“You think so?” Legolas whispered softly.

“Yes, I do.” Aragorn nodded. “You are far too strong, Legolas Greenleaf, to lose yourself, this I know. You are weary and under much duress right now, so it is harder for you to cope with these things,” Aragorn coughed slightly, shivering against the chill of the night air and his own oversensitive susceptibility to the cold. He smiled wryly. “I know, I’m not doing so well either. But in time my friend, we will both mend.”

Legolas nodded slowly. He would still have to deal with the troublesome phantom memories as they arose, but he had to hope and believe that Estel was right. With time, it would get easier. Having at least spoken his fears aloud made him feel a little calmer.

“All right then, come. Let us both go back and get what rest we can. Gwaihir will return in only a
few days and we must be ready to leave,” the elf suggested.

Over the next few days, Aragorn teased Legolas almost unmercifully whenever the elf exhibited any kind of behavior that veered too close towards that of his foster father.

Despite many glares and death-threats, Legolas actually appreciated what his friend was doing. Aragorn was slowly desensitizing him to his own overactive paranoia that he was adopting too much of someone else’s personality. Taking a lighter view of things seemed to help a bit and Legolas was relieved when, on their last night with the Angmar refugees, he was finally able to rest in peace without dreaming of Celebrían or anyone else from Elrond’s life.

When Gwaihir and his companion, Minhalthain finally returned to collect their passengers, Aragorn and Legolas were both ready to go home, and yet, a small part of them hated to leave.

Goodbyes with Yrinvan, Tinald and Ahnna were brief and un-belabored, and yet surprisingly heartfelt. Legolas promised Ahnna that, when he returned home, he would inquire in Laketown to find out if any of her kin yet lived there. He would send word of what he discovered, as well as supplies to aid them along their way. It would take time, but the former slaves were patient.

Right before they left, Yrin shook both of their hands one last time. “Legolas, Strider, we are a people who have come to see goodbyes as a way of life. Thank you. Thank you both for showing us how much can happen before that goodbye. For giving us a taste of freedom.”

Legolas smiled. “Your freedom is your own doing Yrin, no one handed it to you. You took the chance; you, Tinald and all the others, you made it happen. Let your people be a proud people again and remember that you are servants of no one. Remember that, and tell it to your children, that they may know the gift you have given them.” The elf smiled down at little Mahdi who was clinging shyly to her mother’s skirts. The child was slowly returning to full health, as were the other sickly children.

Tinald smiled. “We will. Your words are true, but you still have our thanks. We might have sat in that mountain until we died, too afraid to act, had you two not come and given us hope.”
“Then I say we are even,” Aragorn replied with a smile of his own. “For Legolas and I would never have survived without you and Yrin.”

“It is time to leave while the winds are good,” Minhalthain advised.

Aragorn and Legolas complied with the eagles’ wishes and made their way out onto the ridge where the great birds awaited them.

“May the Valar bless you, your people, and your new start!” Aragorn called back to Yrin and Tinald.

Their last view of the former slaves was of Yrin standing next to Tinald with his arm around Ahnna’s waist. All three were waving. All three were smiling.

Spring was coming to the frozen wasteland and here and there crocuses and new greenery were beginning to appear. The refugees of Angmar were reaching the new spring of their lives and it was already beginning to bud. Silently, Legolas and Aragorn both wished them well as the Eagles carrying them caught a thermal clime and spiraled up into the air. Flying away from Angmar they winged their way south.
Night had finally descended and the stars were out. The valley was quiet and the breezes had cooled slightly, lifting up from the floor of the ravine and brushing through the trees as they rushed passed Imladris.

//"Thank Ilúvatar they are out."// Elrond sighed softly, thinking the words to himself as he gazed up into the dark sky adorned with silver pinpricks of light. Their distant beauty did little to ease the tightness in his chest.

The elf lord was seated on the steps that led from the northernmost balcony to the gardens below. He made no attempt to hide his presence and made no excuse for it either. It was not often that the steps made a good bench, but tonight it was as far as he had gotten in his nightly walk of the grounds.

Another sigh escaped his lips as he subconsciously crossed his arms, pushing his hands up underneath the overlarge sleeves of the tunic he wore. He hadn’t slept in days and had taken less food than could even support an elf. Elrohir and Elladan were out again. He didn’t even know where they were, but they never could sit around and wait. On the other hand that seemed to be all he ever could do. They had had no word from Mirkwood since Raniean and Trelan went home, but Elrond knew that, if they discovered anything, Thranduil would inform him. It had been months since Legolas and Aragorn had all but disappeared. Elrond felt each moment acutely.

It surprised the elf lord when he sighed again. All of Rivendell seemed to be holding its breath, waiting on what he would do next. Only, he had no idea. He was at a loss and his heart was weary, more so than it had been in a long time. Tonight the weight of the years pressed down on him and he did not resist. Estel was going to be the death of him yet. He had never had cause to spend so much time worrying and grieving over any of his other children.

Elrond watched quietly as Celboril lit the lamps situated about the garden grounds. The servant was caught up in what he was doing and not quite paying attention to his surroundings, so it startled him when a soft voice requested that he kindly not light the glow globe next to the winding staircase.

“My Lord?” Celboril questioned, stepping around the ivy that wound about the stone balustrade. The greenery had blocked his view of Elrond.

The elf lord smiled softly. A smile that did not reach his eyes.
“Are you ill? Do you have need?” Celboril hesitated in his questioning as he saw the weariness that lined Elrond’s face. “You have not eaten or slept in days. I know you are troubled, but the whole valley grieves your absence. Come, take your rest.” Celboril extended his hand, intending to help Elrond to his feet, but the gesture was not accepted.

The ancient elf that sat before him simply refocused his gaze out into the darkness of the gardens and shook his head slightly.

“Not tonight.” The piercing gaze that Elrond laid on his old friend touched Celboril’s heart. “I do not require food or rest at the moment.”

“No, what you require is your sons home... all of them. But, denying yourself what you need will help no one and only hurt you and those you love.” The elf pressed quietly.

With the barest hint of acknowledgement, Elrond shifted his gaze back out into the night shrouded gardens. It was the same evasive tactic he always used when he knew Celboril was right but intended to ignore him anyway.

“I will be in later, Celboril,” was the nearly whispered answer and the servant knew he would get no more out of his lord.

Quietly, the house servant moved off to continue his rounds. He would check back in with Elrond when he had completed them. He had seen Elrond through many trying times, but he had never really seen the Elf Lord manifest his distress by denying himself food and rest this way. It worried the servant. He was not about to let his old friend fade away for lack of the necessities. Perhaps he could even slip some of Elrond’s own tea to him. He feared that the elf lord was distracted enough that he might not even notice.

Elrond knew full well what his friend was thinking. Celboril hadn’t served in the house of Rivendell as long as he had without the elf lord learning his habits and ways. He smiled softly as the servant moved off into the dark. It wouldn’t be long before the Lord of Imladris would notice that Celboril had returned. Celboril had a penchant for watching over his liege. The elf would come out to look after Elrond, standing in the shadows of the balcony where he thought his vigil would be unnoticed.

Elrond shook his head. He was fine. He just needed solitude this evening and a chance to sort out the chaos in his heart.
Dread...and an overwhelming darkness...

They had been his companions for the past few months. Seething to the top and receding to the farthest recesses of his heart, the emotions had haunted his waking hours. Sometimes it felt as if the weight of Middle Earth rested on his decisions, or lack thereof. And yet the ones that caused him the greatest distress, his sons, had minds and wills of their own. He had to learn to trust them to let them go. Elladan and Elrohir were old enough... but Estel? His head said yes, but sometimes his heart said no. His dealings with the race of men, a people that was perpetually younger, had taught him that distrust was the best choice. They never lived long enough to see the results of their impetuous decisions, never were privy to the long ranging effects of their choices. They died too young, too swiftly and often too brutally to ever know if they had been a hindrance or a blessing to their race. Only those far older could ever recount their course and weave it into the tale of humanity.

And how would that tale read...after all was said and done and his own part in their history was told someday, far into the future? Would he have helped, or would he have failed them?

Elrond let his head sink into his hands. No, it wasn’t Estel he doubted. It was himself. He had treated Estel as an adult for long before his brothers had been ready to accept him as such... but he had to wonder if he had made a mistake somewhere, if he had fed rather than tempered his youngest’ natural inclination towards danger.

Not too long ago he had been forced to re-look at all the pain surrounding the loss of his wife, and the dull ache of that had only just begun to fade. Now, faced with the probability of having lost Estel, the grief was simmering just below the surface, waiting for him to let his guard down. His wife, his brother, his parents, maybe someday his own children, not to mention the countless Dunédain he had befriended and sheltered over the years... Why? Why was he destined to always love and lose? Why did he keep taking that hurt upon himself so willingly when he knew so painfully well that, in the end, all humans perished?

//“Tell me, Peredhel, is your heart that calloused or do you simply enjoy pain?”//

Elrond had long ago forgiven King Oropher for speaking those unthinking words to him shortly before the final battle of the Last Alliance. He had to wonder with a wry smile what the elf would have thought of his grandson. Yet at the same time, the former King of Mirkwood’s words came back to him often, perhaps echoing with a faint ring of painful truth.
Fishing in the pocket of his robe, he retrieved the Ring of Barahir. It had been cleaned and polished and it sparkled brightly in the palm of his hand. Closing his fist tightly about the heirloom he glanced back into the darkness of the garden.

Too much. It was all too much for his heart to consider, too much for his mind to wrap its logic around. Another sigh punctuated his weariness and he glanced upward, finding the twin stars above Imladris and hoping they would guide his sons home. All of them.

~*~

The journey home had been a long one. When the great eagles finally came to rest in the courtyard of Imladris Estel was asleep, sprawled forward over Gwaihir’s shoulder blades and nestled into the downy feathers for warmth. The repetitive motion and feelings of weightlessness had lulled his tired mind and body into a deep peaceful sleep, something he hadn’t experienced in many nights.

Legolas slipped quickly from Minhalthain’s back and walked to Gwaihir’s side.

“Your friend has fallen asleep.” The bird’s deep, soft voice finally stirred the ranger and he groaned slightly.

Aragorn’s mind was on the verge of deciding whether he should get up or snuggle back down, when Legolas’ hand touched his shoulder and shook him gently. Jumping lightly up onto the low retaining wall of the courtyard, Legolas was able to reach his friend on the bird’s back.

“Estel.” Legolas laughed as the human frowned and tried to move away, nearly falling off the other side of the great eagle.

Gwaihir compensated quickly, stretching out his wing and catching the man.

“Come on, you are not abed yet. Wake up.” The elf shook the ranger harder, trying to lift the man into a sitting position.

The jostling motions finally woke Aragorn who pushed himself groggily up and looked around, momentarily disoriented. His tousled hair and confused gaze caused the prince to laugh lightly.
“We are home. Now come, quickly. Gwaihir tires of hauling your dead weight around.” Legolas jumped back to the ground lightly from his position on the courtyard wall.

Much slower than his companion and with far less grace, Aragorn slid to the ground. He was finally pulled back to partial alertness when his boots hit the stone walkway. He swayed slightly as he reoriented himself to being upright. He didn’t even shrug off Legolas’ hands as the elf gripped his arm tightly keeping him on his feet.

“Strider, are you awake?” Legolas asked quietly, turning the man to face him.

Silver eyes stared at the elf prince for several heartbeats before Aragorn drew in a deep breath and blinked several times.

“Aragorn?”

“I’m awake.” The ranger responded softly as he followed Legolas towards the house. It took him a moment to realize they were at Rivendell and a moment longer to catch up with Legolas’ softly spoken thanks to the eagles as they left.

“We’re home.” He stated flatly as his boot hit the first step.

“Strider, are you all right?” Legolas stopped. He still fretted that the antidote hadn’t worked correctly. He reached for the small vial he had brought back for Lord Elrond, fully intending to make the human take an extra dose if he had regressed.

Sitting down slowly on the large step, Aragorn concentrated on his surroundings. His sleep had been deep and peaceful. Nothing had intruded on it, not even the night terrors he had suffered from constantly in Angmar. His thoughts were sluggish and he was having a hard time waking up his mind. He could still feel the receding fingers of poison in his system and shivered slightly.

“That’s it! What’s wrong? You must tell me. Strider, do you need more antidote?” Legolas was kneeling in front of him now, uncorking the glass vial.

Legolas tried to banish the sick feeling that chased around the pit of his stomach. He had done his
best, but the fear that it had not been enough, or that, Valar forbid, he had unintentionally created even more problems was never very far away. The prince was glad that he wasn’t really a healer by trade. He would never have been able to take the nervous strain.

Aragorn’s fingers slowly wrapped around the elf’s, halting his movements.

Blue eyes focused intensely on grey, searching the ranger’s face.

“It is well, Legolas. I just... I had a hard time waking up. I haven’t slept that soundly in over a month. And my mind is still sluggish.”

“Is it the poison?” Legolas’ eyes were locked on his friend, his gaze searching. “I knew we shouldn’t have stopped your treatments already.”

“Yes.” The ranger answered simply. “But it is leaving my system, slowly. So you can stop sounding like Elladan. Let us give the sample to Ada and if I continue to need more treatment he can make more with the extra lichen we brought back.” He smiled softly at the elf. “Let’s go in, it’s cold out here.” Aragorn rose slowly to his feet once more.

Legolas was not at all convinced, but followed his friend into the main house.

Rivendell was quiet. The lights had been lit for the evening but no one was about. In fact, it felt as though no one were home at all. Legolas trailed a bit behind Estel and walked from room to room looking for any occupants.

They found no one. Even Elrond’s study was empty, which was unusual. It was slightly unnerving.

“I think I’ll go look out back.” Aragorn spoke softly into the quiet that surrounded them. “Will you be in your room?” He turned to gaze at Legolas. His eyes were brighter and he appeared more coherent than he had earlier. The wood-elf relaxed a little. Perhaps everything would be all right after all.

With a small laugh Legolas stepped towards the hallway. “I think I shall go see if Celboril is in the kitchen and has anything left over from dinner. I could eat!”
“That’s because you refused to in Angmar! I swear Legolas, if you always insist on skipping meals whenever you’re worried you will waste away into nothing.”

“Whereas, if I followed your example, I would be able to punch holes in the snow like a great, cloddy human. I see your point!” Legolas’ cheerful retort trailed off into laughter.

Aragorn shook his head, smiling as he headed for the northernmost balcony, hoping to find his father or brothers there.

~*~

The night had deepened and passed. Elrond realized with a start that it had slipped by without his awareness, so deep in thought had he been.

When he pondered on what had drawn him from his thoughts, he felt the small tug at the back of his mind alerting him that someone was on the balcony behind him. Thinking it was Celboril come to draw him back into the house, he sighed and spoke aloud.

“Yes, yes I know, I have lost all sense of time once again. As you wish, I will...” Elrond’s smile faded as he stood and turned. His gaze lighted on the slender figure that stood at the top of the stairwell. It was immediately obvious that no elf had come to retrieve him.

“Ara?”

That voice. That was the one he had hoped to hear every night. Now that he could, the elf lord inexplicably felt a hot ire rise in his heart. The emotion surprised him and he found he had no voice.

Aragorn lived. His son was alive. With a start, he realized that he hadn’t actually expected him to return home alive this time, but here he was. He had come back, again...again after who knew what had happened to him. Whatever had befallen his mortal, human son, Aragorn had once again been beyond his reach, his aid, his help. Perhaps it was destined to be this way for the rest of Estel’s achingly short, human life. The elf lord didn’t know if he could handle that. Turning on his heels Elrond walked out towards the gardens, needing to clear his thoughts.
His father’s abrupt reaction surprised the human and he moved quickly to follow. It was dark on the balcony and his eyes had not yet adjusted to the lower level of light. He was simply fixed on the gently glowing elf as he stepped forward. In his haste he stubbed his boot against the edge of the balcony railing, throwing him off balance and into the opposite wall. His wounded shoulder hit the stone hard and he winced, sucking his breath in quickly and stifling a groan.

The sounds of distress were not lost on the sharp elven hearing.

Elrond turned quickly back and took the stairs two at a time, his ire temporarily forgotten. When Aragorn opened his eyes, the elf lord was standing directly in front of him. Things were moving much too fast for the human this evening and he was having a hard time keeping up with everything. So he was surprised when strong hands gently took hold of his shoulders and moved him back into the dim light of the nearest glow globe.

Before he could explain anything, Elrond had pushed back the ranger’s tunic, exposing the still healing wound. The black tendrils of poisoning were still easily visible beneath his pale skin.

“Estel...” Elrond’s voice held so much sorrow and horror that it nearly broke Aragorn’s heart.

“Ada, I’m...” His explanation and apology was cut short as the elf lord pulled him quickly inside the house and drew him into the pantry where he stored all his healing herbs and medicines.

Indicating he wanted Aragorn seated on the wooden table, the elf lord kept up a running, one-sided conversation, his voice soft and inflected slightly with the sadness in his heart.

“Estel, that wound has morgul poisoning in it. Do you know how much danger you are in?” He shifted aside vials and pouches looking for just the right one. He didn’t even want to ask how the ranger had gotten the wound. Didn’t want to know why it looked so dangerously old.

“Ada, I know...”

“No, you don’t! You are mortal, Aragorn!” Elrond’s tone of voice took on a slightly harsher edge as he spoke over the top of the human.

The ranger cringed imperceptibly at the use of his name. It was rare to see Elrond this upset. Aragorn had heard the ‘mortality’ lecture before, but never with quite as much pain or striking ire.
behind his adopted father’s words.

“Mortal,” Elrond repeated the word as if it were either painful or distasteful to him. At the moment, Aragorn couldn’t tell which. “How much do you think a father’s heart can suffer your adventures and escapades, never knowing if you are coming home or the reason for your absences? Even your brothers are not as slack in keeping me apprised of their whereabouts as you have been these last few years.” Elrond’s anger had found a voice and it was fear and worry for his youngest child that colored his words. He found he was repeating himself out of total frustration at his helplessness the past months. His worry vented on his youngest son, coming out harsher than his hurting heart had intended.

“Then you show up in the middle of the night with morgul poisoning as though nothing were the matter! And it’s not the first time Estel, it’s not. Do you realize the darkness that has been my companion the last few months? It was as though hope itself had been extinguished in Middle Earth, and I feared for you. Obviously I was right to worry! And what state is Legolas in?” Elrond turned back to the human that sat behind him, causing the ranger to pull back slightly. The hurt in the young man’s eyes softened the heat in the elf’s lord’s heart, but it was the quiet elvish voice behind him that brought him up short.

“Legolas is fine.” The elf prince replied softly in the grey tongue. He moved into the room, stepping in front of Aragorn and staring up into the huge silver eyes that watched him carefully. The ranger’s ragged breathing belied the fact that the man was near tears and Legolas smiled sadly at him. Tonight, the human looked as young as the elves around him truly believed him to be. Aragorn hadn’t been prepared for the full force of his father’s worry. He was still recovering from his time with the Nazgûl and wasn’t handling Elrond’s response very well.

Legolas knew from past experience that this lecture had been coming and it was only a matter of time. Elrond was infinitely more patient than his own father, but that didn’t mean he worried for his children any less, or was any less hurt by the nearly constant trouble Estel seemed to have been in lately. Having lived nearly a thousand years longer than the human, Legolas had the lecture down pat and could recite it in his sleep, although he wished he could spare his friend the experience this once.

Gently Legolas began untying the ranger’s tunic and pushed the leather jerkin back off of Aragorn’s shoulders, providing Elrond with a clean view of the ragged, black cut. Knowing how the rest of the speech went, Legolas continued talking softly, trying to forestall it for the most part.

“Nothing that has happened the past four months was Aragorn’s fault. In fact, if the truth be told it was probably mine.” He shushed his friend when Aragorn started to protest. “Something that has haunted us from my past caught up with us again.” The elf hesitated, realizing how much of their lives that phrase described. He regretted always dragging Aragorn into the battles of his past, another detriment of having lived so long.
“Be angry with me, my Lord, not him,” the prince said quietly.

Legolas turned his full attention to the elf behind him. Elrond stood with his arms crossed, listening to the Silvan prince. His face was set, not unlike Legolas expected, but he was listening, which was more than the prince’s father would have been doing at this point.

“Go on,” Elrond prompted. He wanted to hear this story.

Legolas took a deep breath. It was just as well he had to tell it this time. He wasn’t sure Aragorn could have.

“We ran afoul of the Nazgûl, the Witch King who took me so many years ago and tried to enslave me. He wanted to interrogate us.” He wanted…” Legolas had to stop a moment before continuing. “He wanted to know who Estel was and why we protected him.”

Elrond pushed past Legolas, his anger forgotten as fear gripped his heart. Aragorn had remained quiet through the entire explanation - too quiet. So that was the reason Elrond could not see his son’s past or present the last few months. That was why Barahir had been abandoned. The human *had* been wrapped in a dark void, isolated from the elf’s ability to find him through the gift of foresight. And that void had been a Nazgûl.

Gently the elf lord took the human’s face in his hands, looking deeply into the silver eyes that gazed back at him. Aragorn swallowed hard, allowing his father to search his soul.

“I’m sorry, Ada.” He whispered softly, finally finding his voice.

“Oh, Estel.” Elrond pulled the young man forward against him and held him tightly. “Did he discover…?” the elf lord could not finish the question. His arms tightened about his son as he felt the tremors that chased through the human. If it was known, then Aragorn was safe nowhere on Middle Earth. Yet the hounds of Mordor themselves were going to have to come knocking at Rivendell’s gates before they could have the human while Elrond had any say in the matter.

“No.” Aragorn answered quietly, “But he tried.” It was enough of an admission to make Elrond’s heart clench. He could well imagine just *how* the Nazgul had tried to coerce confessions from his captives.
The elf lord stepped back, his hands resting on the ranger’s bared shoulders. The fading bruises were easier to see now and Aragorn dropped his gaze.

“I was coming right home, I swear, we both were,” he started to explain when Legolas reappeared in the doorway, his departure having been unmarked by father and son. The elf carried a blanket with him. He knew that Aragorn was easily susceptible to the cold while he was still healing. He moved forward and held it out toward Elrond, but the elder elf was not paying attention to him at the moment, his gaze still locked on the human.

“I never meant to worry you. I’m sorry,” Aragorn apologized again.

Elrond cupped the ranger’s face with his right hand and nodded in response to the admission. He knew. He smiled softly when Aragorn leaned forward wearily and rested his forehead against the elf lord’s.

“I’m *glad* you are home.” Elrond whispered quietly. He did not stay upset long, he never did. The hot, tightness in his heart had dissipated, leaving behind the knowledge that perhaps he would have to say goodbye to Estel someday, but not today. Perhaps he would always love and lose, but to not love, would be the true loss. That was what his heart reminded him every time he looked into his youngest son’s eyes.

“I promise not to leave for awhile. I will stay near.” Aragorn answered just as softly. Truthfully, Aragorn had no desire to go anywhere. If he never set foot outside of Rivendell again for the rest of his days, he would be happy.

With a grateful nod Elrond withdrew the ring of Barahir from his pocket and held the silver circle out to Aragorn. “I do believe this is yours,” he spoke softly as the human drew in a small breath. “Your brothers found it when they were out searching for you with Raniean and Trelan.”

Aragorn smiled slightly and slipped the ring on his hand. The memories he had so long repressed in the Nazgûl’s keeping crowded to the front of his mind and settled quietly once more deep within his heart. He accepted them back as easily and readily as the heirloom on his finger. His secrets were safe once more and so was he now that he was back amongst his family. He realized that both he and Legolas had totally forgotten that they needed to retrieve the ring. He was glad his brothers had found it for them.

“I hid it so he would not find out who I was,” Aragorn spoke quietly almost as though answering his
own question. “And because of Legolas he never did.”

“The poison still causes him to chill easily.” Legolas explained after a moment, hesitant to break up the quiet conversation. He had heard the softly spoken confession and smiled gently at the ranger. Elrond realized Legolas was still standing there, awaiting his attention. The elf lord turned towards him and accepted the blanket, draping it lightly around Aragorn’s shoulders as the prince continued speaking. Grateful for the warmth, Estel held it tightly about him and listened as Legolas continued.

“The Witch King poisoned Estel so that we had no choice but to go to him in Angmar. He used this poison on many other people as well. It is how he kept control of his servants. He administered only enough antidote to keep them alive, never enough to fully heal them. After we were free, we created an antidote and administered it to all the infected. I fear Aragorn was worse off than most however, for the Witch King often lengthened the time in between doses of the antidote and lessened his strength, trying to wear him down. The servants took to the cure we created very quickly, but I fear Aragorn needs more and all I have is this one vial with me that I intended to give to you.” He passed the small corked glass to the healer along with a bag of the mosses they had collected from the cavern pool. The explanation was quiet, automatic almost. Legolas was hiding behind his ample diplomatic training and Elrond wasn’t sure why. Legolas was like family, but now he couldn’t seem to bring himself to meet the older elf’s eyes.

“Estel provided the base, and the rest was simple enough, once I figured out the ingredients.” Legolas turned to the bench behind them and began pulling herbs from the cabinets that lined the walls, assembling the necessary items on the counter. He was trying to sound reassuring, but insecurity lay hidden just beneath the surface. “But perhaps too simple... Lord Elrond, please, I would that you examine what I have done. I fear it may not be adequate.” The terrible thought that at any moment Estel, Yrin, Tinald and all the others up north might simply drop dead because he had miscalculated something would not leave the younger elf alone. He had never considered the incredible weight of responsibility a healer carried and he felt woefully inadequate under its crushing press.

Elrond nodded slowly. “Of course, Legolas. Tell me what you did.”

Legolas detailed each step of the antidote preparation carefully, trying to make sure he forgot nothing, and sometimes indicating various ingredients now on the table with a gesture. Often he glanced hesitantly to the older elf, seeking confirmation that he had done the right thing.

Elrond stared intently between the ranger and the prince, surprised by what the young, Silvan elf was saying. What Legolas had done in creating an antidote from scratch was something that even experienced healers found difficult.

He had not thought when Legolas said he made the antidote that it had been such a complicated one
to construct. The essential careful balance of the elements alone was a staggering task for a
beginner.

Legolas stopped speaking. He saw confusion in Elrond’s eyes and his stomach tightened
nauseatingly. “Did... did I err? Was that not the correct thing to do?” Color drained from the
prince’s face and he felt ill at the thought.

“No, no,” Elrond shook his head quickly. “I will examine the compound more closely to be sure,
but as far as I can tell you did everything exactly right Legolas. That was not what I... forgive me,”
he assured quickly, seeing the fear tugging at the wood-elf.

Legolas looked relieved, but Elrond was still puzzled.

“Legolas, you say Estel was unconscious. How were you able to create the antidote? Forgive me
for saying this, but I did not think that the Silvan elves were as adept in the healing arts. Have you
had some degree of training?” There was something more to what had transpired under the Witch
King’s care than they were letting on and Aragorn’s wide-eyed stare told him volumes. “How have
you come by this knowledge?”

It was Legolas’ turn to drop his gaze. He stepped aside and glanced at Estel out of the corner of his
eyes, unsure how to proceed. Leaning around his father, Aragorn gently touched Legolas’ shoulder,
reassuring his friend.

“Ada will understand.” He whispered softly. The blanket shifted off his shoulders and he grabbed
the edges, pulling them tightly about him once more for warmth.

“Your wound should be bandaged so you can get back into some clothing.” Legolas countered,
trying unsuccessfully to change the subject.

“Legolas...” Elrond questioned again.

“Mellon-nín, he has to know.” Aragorn pierced the elf with a gentle look. “You can say anything in
this house and you will be safe.” The ranger turned to his adoptive father, “Won’t he, Ada?”

“Of course. There is nothing you cannot divulge here.” Elrond pressed, his voice gentle as he
realized the subject must be difficult to discuss.
With a simple nod Legolas assented. He had known that someday he would have to tell the elf lord about the memories he carried. He just hoped it wouldn’t have come so soon. He felt uncomfortably as if he had somehow stolen the knowledge. As if he was an offensive intruder in a private place he should not have been. He wasn’t sure how Elrond would react to idea that someone else held intimate glimpses into his mind and heart that no other being on Middle Earth really had a right to know.

“I have memories and knowledge that are not mine.” Legolas glanced up at Elrond. He could have limited what he said, but he opted to tell Elrond the whole truth. He respected the older elf and felt he had a right to know. “Sometimes... sometimes they are like a dream, barely remembered. As if I lived another life... but I know I have not. I see a beautiful golden haired elf maiden, and the emotions that go with the sight of her face are not mine, for she passed onto the Undying lands ‘ere I had chance to meet her. Yet,” he faltered for a moment, wishing to be released from having to explain all this and yet knowing he must go on. “Yet, sometimes they *feel* like mine, and I miss her,” he touched his hand to his heart absently. He chuckled mirthlessly, his eyes begging understanding and forgiveness. It was uncomfortable to think that he was having these feelings about the lady he knew had been Elrond’s wife, and even more uncomfortable telling Elrond about it. “But I *didn’t* know her. Although I met her mate when he was younger and his twin sons, younger still than myself.” He stopped speaking when Elrond drew his breath in sharply. Legolas had to look away. He couldn’t meet Elrond’s eyes and tell him all this, he simply could not.

Almost hoarsely, the prince pressed on quickly. He had to get it out in the open. If Elrond despised him for what he knew, what he had somehow stolen from him, then that was as much as he deserved.

“I see battles in my minds eye that I have never fought, although the sorrow of them sweeps over me if I give them too much leave. I miss a brother I never had...” he shook his head. “I thought I was going insane. Most of the memories have faded but I find that I also have knowledge that should be foreign to me. The craft of creating medicines and knowing herbs that I have never had contact with in my life.”

Legolas swallowed hard as he continued. “I wasn’t really aware of any of this until I was trying to make the antidote. I was desperate. Estel was dying and I did not know how to save him. Knowledge came to me then, things I should not have known, but I latched onto them and forced them to consciousness... unfortunately I seem to have brought everything else forward with them. When you saved my life, when I died... there was a point where I did not know if I was you or myself, so jumbled together were our thoughts and emotions. I fear I have some of your knowledge now and retain some of your memories. It was this skill of yours with medicines that saved Aragorn’s life, not mine.”

Elrond was shocked speechless for several moments. “I never realized...” he glanced back and forth between the human and the prince. “Although that would explain some of the strange dreams I have
had of late...” his voice trailed off quietly.

Actually, that explained a lot. The odd, random, out of place thoughts he had occasionally, the child constantly crying in the dark that wouldn’t give him peace; that had all been Legolas’ influence on his mind. He had been troubled about Aragorn, but it had obviously been manifesting itself through nightmares from the Prince’s past. He understood now. It made sense. He was relieved, rather than disturbed by the news. Now that he knew, it would be simple to put the prince’s thought patterns aside when they troubled him. He could see how deeply this situation was disturbing Legolas and smiled faintly. He would have to teach the prince how to do the same.

“I won’t retain the knowledge for long; at least, I pray I won’t. Already most of what I remembered on waking is gone, faded, even as the memories grow faint now. With time all that was not of my memory will gradually disappear, of this I am sure,” Legolas tried to assure. “I meant no intrusion Lord Elrond...”

“No, of course you didn’t.” the older elf agreed, still somewhat stunned by the knowledge that his memories were held by another. It was surprising and perhaps a little embarrassing, but he certainly did not hold it against Legolas, and he did not want the younger elf thinking that he did. A small smile crept slowly across his face.

“Is that also why I desire to have ketrals in my house?” The elf lord was mostly joking.

Legolas laughed and shook his head, relieved that Elrond was not angry. “I am afraid so, My Lord.”

Leaning against the wooden table, Elrond nodded knowingly. “I hadn’t given the after effects of what that type of healing would have on another. The only time I used it before was on my wife and we already shared an oneness of thought and mind because of the marriage bond. I never realized there was any further blending that occurred.” Elrond had to wonder now, if his own sense of devastation at their parting had been heightened by unknowingly sharing part of Celebrían’s pain.

When Aragorn returned his smile, Elrond turned his full attention on the human. “Worry not, Legolas, it was not your fault. And I am very glad you did retain that knowledge.” He patted the human’s knee, noting the sleepy eyed look the man was giving him. “Let us administer a half portion to you, my son and we can make more should the need arise.”

Aragorn complied, drinking down the foul tasting draught with an appropriate grimace. He hated the stuff. One would have thought that after being forced to drink it for so many months he would have gotten used to it, but he hadn’t.
Elrond insisted on washing and dressing the slowly healing cut on Aragorn’s shoulder. It looked much better than it had in weeks but it was painful and tender to the touch. The elf’s ministrations were gentle and careful. He smiled into the sleepy eyes that watched him.

All the while Legolas explained the antidote’s ingredients and measurements as he worked with the herbs, recalling the compound from memory by now. He laid the various items out in heaps and mounds so that the elf lord could experiment with them and look them over later. By the time Aragorn was shrugging back into his tunic, Legolas had another batch of the antidote nearly ready.

Celboril found the small family talking quietly in the pantry and offered to bring food and drink into the Hall of Fire if they wanted to move there for a bit more comfort. He was relieved to find that the two had returned home and knew it would only be a matter of time before his lord returned to his usual self. Already the sparkle in Elrond’s eye was back as the elf lord easily accepted the offer.

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The Hall of Fire was warm and comfortable as Legolas sat on the floor near Aragorn, perched on a huge overstuff pillow, recounting all that had happened to them.

Aragorn lay stretched out on his right side propped up on a pillow and covered with the blanket he had brought with him.

The ranger had been content to let Legolas tell his father everything. He was sure that Elrond would have questions for him later, but tonight he was simply content to be home, warm and safe. He added his agreement when asked, but remained happily quiet for the greater part of the evening.

Elrond had been intrigued by Legolas’ information on the Togiuith, although the reasons for its use bothered him greatly. For the most part, the elf lord had listened intently, interrupting only now and again for clarification or observation. He wondered briefly exactly how much of the tale Thranduil would ever know and how soon he would get it out of his son.

“But the people are free now, and the mountain is safe. Whatever lived in the water is gone, perhaps killed when the volcano shifted as it did. We do not know but it has not reappeared so the inhabitants of Angmar will have fresh water. I don’t think the Witch King will be back anytime soon. He will not find a warm welcome. Wouldn’t you agree, Aragorn?”
When the human didn’t respond, Legolas turned towards him only to find Aragorn fast asleep and breathing deeply.

“Let him rest.” Elrond answered, “He needs it. His system is not yet rid of the poison, but with extra treatment that shouldn’t be a problem. Tomorrow I will give him the last dose he should need.”

Legolas leaned over and gently pulled the blanket up higher around the man. Aragorn stirred and shifted slightly. Turning towards his friend he stilled as Legolas’ hand rested on his shoulder. “He was weary when we left Angmar. I can’t imagine he will wake for sometime.”

“Your room is ready, should you want to retire yourself. Estel can remain here tonight. Celboril and I will check in on him from time to time,” Elrond offered, standing from his seat and indicating that they should continue later. He knew that both his son and the prince were more tired than either wanted to admit.

“If you don’t mind, Lord Elrond, I would just as soon stay here with Estel myself.” Legolas glanced around them at the pillows and throw blankets scattered here and there. The fire crackled brightly warming the room and throwing light into the corners of the huge hall. “I do believe I am too tired to climb the stairs myself and if Aragorn should wake then there would be someone close by.”

Elrond smiled, “He will be fine, Legolas. You did well, gwaedh ion-nín.” The elf lord praised the younger elf, fondly including him into the family as a ‘son of the heart’. He could see through the prince’s pretense and knew that Legolas was still worried about Aragorn’s recovery.

Legolas’ eyes sparkled for a moment at the gesture of inclusion. Admitting he had been caught, the prince laughed softly, “Yes, my lord. Then, to ease my heart, may I sleep here in the hall as well?”

“As you wish.” Elrond consented, taking his leave. “I will see that no one disturbs your rest until the two of you are ready to waken. Good night, Legolas.”

“My lord.” Legolas nodded in respect as he stretched out next to Aragorn, laying his head on the pillow he had just been seated on. The warmth of the fire touched his back and he smiled, relaxing against the cushions.

“And, Legolas?” Elrond’s voice cut through the fog of sleep that was just beginning to steal over the elf. “Thank you,” he continued as he crossed the room and knelt by his son, gently placing a kiss on
Aragorn barely opened his eyes, subconsciously registering his father’s presence. “Ada.” He whispered softly, his left arm wrapped the elf in an awkward hug before sleep reclaimed him fully and he relaxed once more.

The fire in the great hall leapt and crackled in its alcove, the only sound that broke the still night. It was in the doorway to the large room that Celboril found Elrond. The elf lord stood watching over the slumbering friends. His heart was light, his burden gone. He knew the nameless darkness of his dread for Estel would haunt his dreams no more.

Lightly Celboril touched Elrond’s shoulder, “My lord, it would do you good...”

He was cut off as Elrond raised his hand, silencing his words. “I know, my friend, and I am going.” Blue eyes free from the shadow that had clouded them gazed at the other elf. “You are right. I do need rest. I believe will retire for the evening. But, would you do you me a favor...”

It was Celboril’s turn to silence the elf lord, “It would be my pleasure. I will see to it that they are not disturbed and should anything go amiss, I will call you immediately.”

Elrond returned the smile that his long time friend gave him. “Thank you Celboril. You may want to warn Glorfindel so he can keep the twins occupied should they come back early tomorrow.”

“Consider it done.” Celboril bowed as Elrond turned to leave. He breathed a sigh of relief as he watched the elf lord walk up the stairs. The cares of much in the world fell on Elrond’s shoulders, but he was glad that the worries for his youngest son had at least been relieved. It was a burden he had feared would crush the elf lord.

Gazing back into the room Celboril watched the sleeping youths. “Young ones.” He muttered under his breath with a smile.

Tonight the house would sleep. Tonight Rivendell had peace once more.
Part Twenty Five - Healing Comes Slower

//He was suffocating. He couldn’t breathe. The gag was back in his mouth and he was choking around the tears that streamed down his cheeks. Sweat stung his eyes and plastered his hair to his face. His hands were bound and he couldn’t remove the gag, couldn’t untie the hoods over his head. He was dying!

And he was alone.

He thrashed wildly against the bonds, every breath becoming more labored each gasp for air tightening harder in his chest.

He heard Legolas scream from another room and yelled out to his friend, trying to speak around the gag.//

“Legolas!”

Bolting upright in bed, the human shied away from the dark shadow that moved from the doorway and leaned over him.

“Daro, saes,” he pleaded with the night terrors to release him. His room was dark. The fire under the mantel had long since died and the embers were barely glowing.

“Estel,” the intruder spoke the ranger’s elvish name softly, reaching out to touch the man.

Pushing the hand away Aragorn scooted farther back. His bed creaked and gave way as Elrohir sat slowly down on the edge of the mattress. His younger human brother’s breathing was ragged and labored and the man watched him fearfully through wide sleep fogged eyes.

It had been a week since Aragorn had returned to Rivendell, but the nightmares had given him no respite, haunting his sleeping hours and dogging him any time he tried to rest.

Gently, Elrohir took Aragorn’s upraised hand in his own. The man was trembling softly as his breathing evened out.
“It’s me, El,” the twin continued softly.

“I can’t breathe,” Aragorn whispered hoarsely. He touched his face with his left hand, feeling for the gag he knew he would find there. The wisps of the dream still tangled his perception of reality. “I...I can’t breathe,” he repeated, softer this time.

Legolas stepped into the room, knowing immediately from the soft sounds of distress what was happening. He had heard the ranger call out his name and had woken with a start, running swiftly to his friend’s room.

He knew what Estel was remembering and walked quickly to the window, pulling the heavy curtains back and allowing the winds from the river below to sweep into the room. The cool night air and the light of the stars touched the man and he drew in a deep breath. His breathing hitched slightly as the fears began to recede and he looked up into the eyes of the two elves, finally seeming to see them for the first time since he had woken.

When Legolas sat down on the bed next to Elrohir, Aragorn gently reached out and touched the elf’s face. His shaking fingers lightly traced where the bridle had been in his dreams. He tightened his grip on Elrohir’s hand, trying to ground himself. Elrond had given him an extra portion of the special tea and his mind was having difficulty waking.

“You shouldn’t be awake, Estel,” Elrohir whispered quietly. He watched his brother with growing consternation.

Trapping Aragorn’s hand against his cheek, Legolas reassured the man. “It’s not there, Estel. It’s gone. It was only a dream.”

“I put it on you,” The man whispered horrified.

“He’s not fully awake.” Legolas turned to Elrohir seeking the elf’s help. “Go find a candle, or perhaps Lord Elrond. I can’t seem to wake him. He’s having nightmares and the sleeping portent is not releasing him.”

“You couldn’t breathe.” Aragorn whispered, still caught in the dream.
“I can breathe fine, Estel, and so can you.” Legolas answered gently, laying his free hand against the man’s chest.

Aragorn blinked sleepily as he watched the elf. He couldn’t shake the fears and tremors that held him trapped. Trembling slightly he tried to focus, tried to wake from the dream in which he was caught.

Elrohir returned in moments with a candle. Elladan trailed his twin, walking slowly into Aragorn’s room.

“What’s going on?” Elladan asked around a yawn.

Aragorn blinked as the light was brought in and drew in a sharp breath, finally waking and shaking off the last of the terrors that had gripped him.

“What?” He glanced at the elves around him questioningly. Locking onto Legolas he realized that he had been dreaming as the prince gently let go of his hand.

Aragorn traced the elf’s cheek carefully as the last vestiges of his nightmare faded. There was no blood on the prince’s face, no cuts from where the bridle had been.

“I was remembering,” he faltered for an explanation.

“You were dreaming,” Legolas corrected.

Slightly embarrassed Aragorn glanced at the bed sheets that pooled around his waist.

“It’s all right, Estel, Elladan still has nightmares too,” Elrohir offered.

“I do not!” Elladan argued as he gently cuffed his twin.

“You do, and you know it,” Elrohir replied, ducking slightly. His smile put the other at ease. “We all do.”
“Really?” Aragorn glanced between his brothers, his gaze lighting lastly on Legolas. He frowned as memories haunted him.

“Don’t,” Legolas warned softly. “And yes, we all do. Forget the notion that elves can always control their dreams. It’s not always true.”

Elladan sat down in the overstuffed chair and swung his legs over the arm. “For me it was Mannyn, holding that knife to El’s throat.” He was watching his twin. “It was a reoccurring one for many years.” He shook his head slightly as he continued speaking. “I watched him die so many times whenever I closed my eyes. It has been years but I still have it from time to time.”

Nodding in empathy, Elrohir smiled softly. “My night terrors show that building falling on you when the earth shook so many years ago. I can never find you, and when I do, you have already gone on with out me and I cannot continue.” The sorrow and pain from that time still touched the elf’s words.

Elladan returned the gentle smile his twin laid on him.

“It did not happen that way, El. I’m here,” he quietly reassured.

“I dream of Doriflen,” Legolas whispered softly. He glanced down at his hands, not meeting the gaze of anyone in the room. “Sometimes he goes after my father, sometimes it’s Randomir. Sometimes it’s me. Most often lately, it is you.” The elf looked up guiltily at the ranger.

“Legolas...” Aragorn reached out and touched his friend’s shoulder.

With a small smile, the elf glanced sideways at Elrohir. “I never make it to them in time either. I don’t think one ever does in dreams.”

“Then perhaps we should be glad that life is *not* a dream,” Elrohir retorted with a small smile. “I always thought that people who wished such had never really considered the implications.”

Silence stretched between them for a time. The elves had shared their fears; they would give their human friend time to share his when he was ready.
“I dream of him,” Aragorn’s soft voice broke the silence presently. “His touch. The way I couldn’t breathe, the pain... And what he did to you.” The ranger turned sad, pain-filled eyes on the prince. “What I did. I dream of that thing and being forced to put it in your mouth. I can’t breathe...”

He shifted away from the others and turned his back on the elves. He hated himself for what he had done. He hated sleeping lately. He couldn’t get the images out of his mind. They hurt his heart too much. Every time he lay down, the Wraith haunted his dreams, holding a bridle in one hand and that dreaded gag in the other. He shuddered involuntarily at the thought.

Legolas scooted forward, following his friend. He gently touched the ranger’s back.

“Why don’t you stay in my room tonight, Estel?” Elrohir offered quietly.

Aragorn laughed softly. “El, do you know how old I am?” He remained staring at the far wall.

“You’re not that old. In elvish years, you would still be considered a child. Besides when El has nightmares he sleeps in my room and he’s much older than you,” Elrohir countered.

Elladan laughed lightly at the admission, but did not argue. Aragorn glanced over his shoulder at the elves, fearful of their opinions of him at the moment.

“When you take a wound, it does not heal overnight,” Elladan admonished lightly. “You must let it heal. And usually it heals slowly, depending on how grievous the infliction was. Yours has been deep. No brush with the Nazgûl can be easily set aside. You have to give yourself time and you’ll need help.”

“Remember how I often I stole into your room after the Nazgûl captured me?” Legolas smiled softly as the man turned around and stared hard at his brothers and friend. Their words were kind and he realized they were not hiding their weaknesses from him.

“I do remember it was quite some time before you slept through the night without waking.” He smiled at the elf. “I want it gone now,” He confided. His words were quiet and pained.

“Well that, dear brother, will not happen anytime soon,” Elladan said softly. Clasping the human on
the shoulder he half dragged the man out of bed. “Let us go into the kitchens. Beoma has been sending over regular batches of honeycakes since he heard you were missing and I know Celboril has hidden a few of them. Nothing cures nightmares better than that old Beorning’s pastries,” he fondly teased. With a smile, he led the foursome down into the pantry for a mid-night snack.

“That was kind of him,” Legolas remarked.

“Or maybe he just wants an excuse to send Pejor away over the mountains every few months,” Aragorn responded with a devilish grin.

“Strider!” Legolas elbowed his friend. “That’s not nice.”

“Mm, probably true though,” Elrohir said with a smile.

No one in the house was awake and the cellars were wide open, an easy target for the four hungry raiders.

Elladan was heating milk over the stove as Elrohir dished out the last of the honeycakes. The three elves and the man ate, sharing stories about their nightmares and mishaps. They kept their voices hushed, wishing to simply be together and not be disturbed by anyone else at the moment. They had confiscated stools from various places in the house and used them to sit around the worktable in the middle of the kitchen while they consumed their midnight snacks.

The conversation had died down and the room quieted. Aragorn propped his head up with one hand and stared sleepily at Legolas.

“You look like you will fall asleep any moment,” Legolas commented, laughing lightly as the human yawned.

“It’s Ada’s fault,” Aragorn murmured. “He’s always giving me that dratted tea. He thought I didn’t know. I don’t think I can fight it off much longer.” He blinked slowly, trying to focus on the elf across from him.

“Then let’s head for my room, it’s the closest.” Elladan stood from his seat and headed for the staircase.
They turned into the first doorway on the left and piled into the elder elf’s room. Elrohir lay face down on the large mattress, quickly making himself comfortable while Elladan stoked the fire and threw more logs into the hearth. Turning back to his sleepy-eyed twin he motioned the twin off the bed.

“Out, you, the bed is for guests tonight.” He smiled as he nudged the dark haired elf.

“There are no guests in this room, El,” Elrohir murmured nearly incoherently. He swatted at Elladan and snuggled down in the blankets, “I only see brothers.” Closing his eyes he fell fast asleep where he lay.

With a small laugh, Aragorn crossed his legs and sat down on the floor near the hearth. “He is right, my brother; we are no guests. Besides, I would rather sleep near the fire,” The human admitted sheepishly. “It’s warmer here.”

Legolas stepped back out into the hallway and disappeared for a few minutes. When he returned he was carrying two pillows and the blanket and coverlet from Aragorn’s bed. Kneeling down next to the ranger he passed the man a pillow and shook the blanket out, draping it around Aragorn’s shoulders.

“I’ll sleep on the side nearest the door,” Legolas teased, “That way if anything comes in, they’ll get me first.”

The elf laughed when Aragorn smiled and gave him a playful shove. He still remembered the first time that conversation had come up while they were staying in Orthanc.

Sleepily, Aragorn lay down with his back to the fireplace. His eyelids were heavy and he fought to stay awake as Legolas’ pulled the coverlet out and smoothed it over the prone human.

Grabbing his own pillow, Legolas lay on the floor facing Aragorn. They could hear Elladan talking softly to Elrohir, trying to get his twin to move over as he made himself comfortable in the bed.

Aragorn grabbed the edge of the coverlet and pulled it over so it draped Legolas’ slim shoulders. His gaze held the elf’s as he rested his head back down on the pillow.
“I never got to apologize,” he whispered.

Before he could continue, Legolas touched his lips and silenced him. “Yes, you did. Many times in fact. It was only a dream. I am fine.” He gently touched the ranger’s forehead and whispered softly in elvish, “Sleep, my friend, just sleep.” His memories of Elrond using the same incantation came to the forefront and he inflected the words perfectly. By the time he was through speaking, Aragorn slept deeply, no longer fighting the pull to rest.

The wood-elf smiled. Maybe that was one memory he wouldn’t let go of so easily; it was quite useful.

Elladan glanced down from the bed and smiled. It was good to have everyone in one room for the night. Content, he relaxed next to his brother and let sleep take him as well.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The house was oddly quiet for as late as it was. Elrond walked through the hallways looking for his sons. Glorfindel had left earlier, wanting to check the sentries. Celboril was somewhere about. The elf lord knew he had seen him, but of the four younger beings there was no sign.

Mounting the staircase he headed for Aragorn’s room only to find it empty. Expecting to find the human with Legolas, he moved to the next door and carefully pushed it inward.

No one.

The same emptiness occupied Elrohir’s room. Walking back towards the stairwell, the elf lord was interrupted by the sounds of his house servant. Celboril had watched from the floor below as Elrond searched the rooms and he was confused by the frown on Elrond’s face.

“Lord Elrond, what is wrong?” Celboril called up.

“Aragorn and the twins are missing. Legolas is gone as well. Have you seen them?” Elrond leaned
over the railing, answering the question.

“Have you tried Elladan’s room?”

“They never sleep there. Elladan does not waken easily. They would…” Elrond stopped speaking as he pressed the last door open. The fire had died in the fireplace and the glowing embers barely lit the room. Walking in softly, Elrond stopped just inside the door and smiled fondly down at the twins sleeping in the large bed. He and Celebrían had had the sleeping couch specially made when the elves were younger for just such occasions. Fortunately they had had the forethought to make them big enough to accommodate adult bodies.

On the floor near the hearth, he found Legolas and Aragorn. The prince blinked slowly and focused on the elf lord, careful not to move or speak. He did not want to waken the ranger.

“Nightmares?” Elrond asked simply.

“Yes,” Legolas whispered his response as the elf Lord kneeled down next to him.

Aragorn shifted slightly, drawing in a deep shaky breath. Reaching over the elven prince, Elrond placed his hand on the human’s forehead, quieting the tremors.

“Peace, Estel,” Elrond’s low soft answer relaxed the man.

“Ada,” Aragorn barely whispered the word but the elven ears heard it clearly.

“Yes, I’m here,” Elrond reassured with a soft smile. He glanced down at Legolas who hadn’t moved. The prince was content to stay where he was until it was time to get up. It felt good to be safe.

“What time is it?” a soft question came from the corner of the room. Elladan was watching their father sleepily.

“Late,” the elf lord answered. He stood to his feet and paced back towards the door. “Do not worry. Sleep a bit longer. I’ll have Celboril make up some food and we can all break our fast in a few hours.”
With a yawn, Elladan nodded and closed his eyes. Elrohir rolled towards him, his hand reaching out to his twin. When his fingers touched Elladan’s shoulder he settled down and rested once more.

“Hard night?” Celboril asked from the doorway when Elrond turned to leave.

“Nightmares,” Elrond answered, closing the door softly behind him as he moved into the hallway. “At this point I am not sure if it were all of them or just Estel.”

“Then I think panjacakes are in order,” Celboril called over his shoulder as he walked down the stairs in front of the elf lord.

“I think they would be welcome dear Celboril,” Elrond laughed, following the cook into the kitchen.
Legolas inhaled deeply, savoring the sent of pine needles and moist earth. Turning his face towards the sun, he looked up through a canopy of green leaves, painted golden by the morning sunlight streaming through them. The tree limbs under him and against his back cradled him comfortably, inviting the elf to linger in the sunny upper branches of the tall oak. Trailing his fingers absently across the rough tree bark, the prince indulged himself in the welcoming embrace for a few moments longer, before regretfully parting with the perch where he had spent the night.

Descending back down to the forest floor of Mirkwood after the beauty of the upper canopy was never a very pleasant experience, but even the dark, closeness of the tainted forest did not dampen Legolas’ joy at being home. He had missed these woods very much. He had not walked through them and heard their song since he departed for Gondor, what seemed almost a life-age ago.

The prince kept a swift pace as he followed the winding forest road. It had taken him several weeks to reach Mirkwood and he intended to make it home by nightfall. He had been on foot only since he sent back the horse that lord Elrond had leant him. Elrond would have understood had he kept the animal longer, but Legolas could tell the loyal stallion’s heart yearned for the valleys of its home. The horse would have followed him anywhere, but clearly did not like the look of Mirkwood. So the prince turned the animal loose on the borders of the forest and bid it find a safe journey back.

Legolas would just as soon walk anyway. It wasn’t that he wished to delay his return home, but he did want to savor the trip there. He had missed these trees. Plus, it gave him time to consider what he was going to say to his father.

Elrond had asked the prince if he could send word onto Thranduil but Legolas had resisted, wanting to inform his father in person. He had stayed on in Imladris for two weeks; mostly to make sure Estel was fully healed. However, when it had come time to leave he had found his heart hesitant, even though he missed his father. Aragorn would have come with him if he asked, but the elf knew that for once, the ranger did not want to go anywhere. Aragorn needed to be home with his family now.

Legolas sighed. So did he. His life wound in and out of so many other lives now. It was hard to remember the days when he had made this forest his self-imposed prison, considering it the only place he was safe. It was ironic really, because in a way he had been right. Since he had met Aragorn and ventured out into the wide world he had encountered more pain and difficulty than could be comfortably recounted. Yet he had also found freedom, friendship, forgiveness and trust.

He worried a little about Aragorn. The prince could see shades of his own former world-wariness in the ranger’s nightmares and his reluctance to even leave the grounds of his father’s house. He hoped that with time he could help Estel as much as the human had helped him. For now, the ranger was in
the best hands possible, and that was a comfort.

Aragorn was going to need time to heal. The prince knew, that whether voiced or not, the ranger wondered why what had happened to them had to happen. Legolas understood the question only too well. It had eaten away at him for years before he met the ranger. Finally he had come to accept that there was no answer. But he had learned that sometimes good did come out of evil times.

The elf fingered a tiny lock of hair in his pocket. It belonged to a little human girl nearing her third birthday. A little girl, who would never have been born, had Legolas not been willing to face pain and sacrifice to save her mother and grandmother’s life.

Estelle and Garith had brought their daughter to Rivendell the day before Legolas intended to leave. The prince was glad he had not missed their visit, although he had been shocked to realize that so much time had passed since he last saw them. He was still of the opinion that if you blinked too slowly, a human could grow up right in front of your eyes and you would miss he whole thing. That idea amused Aragorn greatly and the whole situation had lightened what otherwise might have been an even more difficult parting between the two friends.

Little Fairiel resembled both her mother and grandmother. It had been good, after everything they suffered under the Nazgûl for a second time, to remember that not all hardships were endured in vain.

The sun was setting by the time Legolas finally approached the sealed gates that led to his home.

Legolas glanced up at the gates of the palace with a smile. It would have been easy to bid the portals open himself, but he had no wish to alarm the gate guards since they were by no means expecting him. The prince stopped and waited for the sentries to question his presence.

No question came however. Instead, the gates were summarily thrown open.

“Your highness!” It was Raniean, on his way out himself, who had seen the prince from the guard station and now opened the palace gates. He beamed, squeezing his friend’s hand tightly in greeting. “It’s good to see you, mellon-nín, we worried for you... *again*,” he added pointedly.

Legolas smiled and shook his head as he greeted his old friend. “Sorry Ran, it really wasn’t my fault, I swear.”
“Is it ever? Tell *that* to your father,” Raniean chuckled, simply glad that his friend had returned well and whole.

Legolas winced ruefully. “Is he very upset then?”

Raniean smiled with a mischievous glint in his eye, ushering Legolas inside and shutting the gates behind them. “Let’s just say that Trelan and I have been placing wagers over whether you’ll end up in the dungeons, or just locked in your room...”

The gate guards returned to their normal posts, leaving the prince in Raniean’s care.

Legolas gave the other elf a light shove. “Oh, thank you so much, my *friend*.”

Raniean raised his hands, denying any responsibility. “Well now, Legolas, you *did* bring this on yourself. It’s not *my* fault you insisted on going off alone. Or that you promised him you’d be home... oh... over half a year ago or so, and didn’t even send word.” A momentary flicker of hurt darted behind Raniean’s clear blue eyes before he quickly looked away. A slight bite had slipped into the other elf’s tone, although it was obvious Raniean had not intended for it to be so obvious.

Legolas sighed. “Things happened Ran, I couldn’t help it. Really, I couldn’t.” He paused, catching the look his friend tried to hide. Raniean was upset with him and Legolas did not blame him. They must have all been hideously worried. Maybe, if he had taken Raniean and Trelan with him, things would have been different. Maybe... but there was no use going down that road again. He and Aragorn had survived, that was what mattered. If he had erred, then he would simply have to live with the consequences of that mistake. He had certainly paid dearly enough. Past choices could not be re-made.

The prince’s voice turned soft. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you all worry. It’s a long story, one I should tell father first I’m sure...” Legolas sighed again. “But honestly, I had no choice Ran, you have to believe me. If I had hesitated or delayed, Strider would be dead. I’d do the same for you.”

“I know,” Raniean met his friend’s eyes again. Legolas was all right. At the moment, he could forgive him anything else, so long as he had indeed come back to them once more. “I don’t blame you Legolas, I am sure you had a very good reason and I can’t wait to hear your latest ‘long story’.” He smiled wryly. “I just... I was worried Legolas. We almost lost you once already.”
Legolas squeezed Raniean’s shoulders tightly. He knew the other elf was still getting over his prince’s brush with death in the mountains after the warg attack on Rivendell; it had to have been hard to consider losing him again so soon. “But you didn’t,” he assured quietly.

Raniean nodded and squeezed Legolas back. “No, we didn’t, Valar be praised. Now, if only you survive your father, Trelan and I may have our trio for the spring games next moon after all.”

Legolas smiled. “Isn’t that a rather big ‘if’?”

Raniean clapped him on the back reassuringly as they reached the end of the walk leading up to the palace. “Miracles can happen.”

Legolas rolled his eyes. “Well then pray I find one. I’d better go talk to him.”

The prince entered the palace without fanfare, bounding easily up the steps leading into his home with just a smile and a nod to the guards on duty. At Raniean’s bidding no one was sent to fetch the King. It was better for Legolas to go to him himself.

The prince made his way swiftly down the familiar corridors and he smiled to himself. No matter how Thranduil reacted to his chronic tardiness this time, at the moment Legolas could feel little but joy at being home again. It seemed forever since he had walked these well-loved halls. Strange thoughts for an elf, but Legolas had long ago given up trying to reconcile the odd, disparate ways in which he seemed to measure time now. Aragorn had permanently ruined him, but he didn’t really mind.

Thranduil was in his study, just as Legolas knew he would be. The prince stood quietly in the doorway for a few moments, watching his father as Thranduil wrote on a long piece of parchment with swift, smooth strokes.

The king had not noticed his approach and the prince took the moment to watch his father and remember the countless times he had stood in this doorway and seen Thranduil sitting at that desk. It was a comfortable feeling, for it felt like home. He almost didn’t want to break the spell; didn’t want to spoil the moment by alerting Thranduil to his presence and having to weather whatever response that would garner. Yet at the same time he wanted his father to look up and see him. Wanted to be welcomed back...

Legolas sighed inwardly. He knew he was welcome, whether Thranduil was in a mood to
acknowledge that right now or not. The prince didn’t even think he’d mind a little bit of house arrest for the time being, if only Thranduil wasn’t too hurt or upset with him over his broken promise. That was the only thing that would spoil his homecoming. Thranduil could be angry, he could say what he liked and punish him anyway he pleased. Just as long as he could tell Legolas he forgave him *now* rather than the prince having to wait for resolution indefinitely, as often happened. Then everything would be perfect.

Lightly, Legolas rapped his knuckles against the doorframe.

Thranduil looked up from his work. The distracted look on his face quickly bled away into shock and then joy and he rose swiftly from the chair, parchment forgotten.

“Legolas!” the Elvenking just stood there for a moment, trying to decide if what he saw was real. “When did you get back? Why wasn’t I told?”

Legolas shifted slightly, smiling a little hesitantly at his father. “Just now. I wanted to tell you myself.”

To the prince’s utter surprise, he saw his father’s strong eyes gloss over with unshed tears. “You didn’t come back. When the news came from Rivendell that you had not returned there either... I feared...” The king was uncharacteristically lost for words. “You promised.”

Legolas could have choked on the lump in his throat. Of all the reactions he had imagined, this was not one of them. He saw for a moment in Thranduil’s eyes the familiar sense of abandonment he had felt when Aragorn had left him behind outside Angmar. “Ada... you have to believe me, I’m so sorry. I tried to come back as soon as I could. Honestly I did. I would never have broken a promise to you like that if lives had not depended on it...”

Thranduil crossed the distance between them quickly and surprised Legolas for the second time. The king pulled his son into a hug.

“I don’t care. I don’t care, Legolas, just so you’re all right. Just so you’re really here,” he murmured.

The prince was stunned speechless for a moment, but readily melted into his father’s strong embrace. Thranduil almost never held him unless something was wrong, or when he was hurt. For the Elvenking to not want an exact accounting of his son’s reasons right up front was almost even
more shocking. Maybe sometimes, some things could change, even if only a little.

Legolas hugged his father back tightly, resting his chin on Thranduil’s shoulder. He realized that tears were sliding down his cheeks, but he wasn’t ashamed of them. “I’m here, Ada. I’m here.”

Thranduil nodded, slowly bringing his emotions back under control. “Good, because you’re going to *stay* here for a good long time now young one, is that understood?” his soft, almost pleading tone belied any harsh cast of the phrasing.

Legolas nodded against his shoulder. “Yes, Father. I would like nothing better.”

“Legolas, I’m serious,” Thranduil whispered into his son’s hair as he held him a moment longer, before finally releasing the younger elf. “I need you here with me.”

Legolas hesitantly squeezed his father’s hand. “Then here I will be.”

Thranduil caught and held his son’s slimmer hand in his own. “Good,” he said softly, before a slight glint came back into his eyes. “Then I will tell ElrOND to take the locks *off* the outsides of your doors.”

Legolas wasn’t sure if his father was joking or serious. “Father, you didn’t...”

Thranduil just smiled and changed the subject. “It’s good to have you home, Legolas. Very good. I’m afraid dinner was a long time ago, it’s late... are you hungry? Shall I send for someone?”

Legolas shook his head. “No, thank you, I’ll be all right. Right now I just want to rest, if... if you’ve really forgiven me.” He knew he shouldn’t push things, but he really couldn’t help asking. It all seemed too easy for what he was accustomed to expecting.

“Legolas,” Thranduil pushed his son’s hair back behind his ear gently, letting his hand brush the younger elf’s cheek. “I forgave you before you ever came back. Just so long as you *did* come back. Although, you can expect that I *will* want the full tale once you’ve rested. And don’t you think to start leaving things out either. I know how you are. If I think you’re holding out on me I will make Lord Elrond send Strider out here to tell me the truth. Don’t think I won’t,” Thranduil remonstrated with good humor.
Legolas laughed. “I promise I will tell you everything tomorrow, Father.”

Thranduil accepted that. “All right then. I have kept your rooms prepared in readiness for you. Rest well, ion-nín. I will see you at breakfast?”

The prince smiled. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

Thranduil had indeed kept the prince’s rooms ready and waiting for his return, and Legolas settled gratefully into his favorite chair in the corner by the window. The shutters were open and Legolas could see the starry night sky outside.

Soft scurrying sounds and small, bright eyes that reflected the moonlight alerted Legolas to the fact that he was not alone in his chambers.

Two small, slender creatures slid from the shadows in the corner of the room. Shiny brown, fur-covered, wiry bodies moved gracefully across the floor towards Legolas’ chair, almost gliding rather than walking. Smaller and thinner than a cat, but more comely than a ferret, the little creatures approached warily.

Legolas smiled. He was surprised that his father was letting his pets have the run of his rooms while he was away. He knew just how little Thranduil cared for his ketrals... and the feeling seemed to be reciprocal.

“Trasta, Lalaith... did you miss me?” The prince asked softly as the two ketrals sniffed cautiously at his boots. He had been a way a long time for their limited lives. Would they remember him?

That question was rendered moot when the small creatures quickly scurried up the prince’s legs and into his lap. Running in excited circles around each other for a moment, they quickly nuzzled their way under Legolas’ arms.

Trasta licked the fingers of Legolas’ right hand affectionately, reassured by the familiar taste of the light salt on the elf’s fingers. His small body thrummed and rumbled where it was coiled against Legolas’ side as the ketral purred contentedly.
Lalaith was less complacent than her mate and she stood on her back legs in the young elf’s lap, her nose quivering as she looked at Legolas, remonstrating him for leaving them alone so long with that grumpy older elf. Dropping back down onto all fours, she bit his left thumb lightly, as if to make her point.

Legolas pulled his hand away quickly, but chuckled and stroked her velvety fur in a placating manner. “All right, you made your point. I guess you *did* miss me.” The elf smiled, rubbing the creature’s small ears until Lalaith too purred in happiness.

Presently Lalaith jumped down from Legolas’ lap, only to return a few minutes later. This time, when she scrambled up into the chair she had something with her... three somethings. Small, hand-sized balls of fur rolled into Legolas’ lap. After a moment the small balls stretched themselves out into tiny, slow moving versions of their parents.

Legolas stroked the baby ketrals gently, smiling like a proud papa. Ketrals grew very slowly until they reached their adult size, much like elves in some ways. The babies were more than a few months old, but they were still very small and needed their parents’ protection. They would need it for another year yet as they aged very slowly for the animal kingdom. Maybe that’s why Legolas liked them; they weren’t quite as ephemeral as many of Arda’s creatures.

The little Ketrals wobbled uncertainly in the strange elf’s lap, looking up with big, trusting eyes at the prince while their mama fussed around them, cleaning them with her tongue as if trying to make them more presentable. She nudged them forward, allowing Legolas to pick them up and marvel at their soft, tiny perfection as they rested safe in the bowl of his palm. Ketrals were fiercely protective of their young, but Trasta and Lalaith, like their parents before them, had taken Legolas as one of their kin, their keeper. He was family.

“They’re beautiful,” Legolas murmured as the small family of ketrals settled down in his lap. “And tomorrow, I will give them all names. You should be very proud.”

The two adult ketrals looked as if they were.

With one hand resting on Trasta, and Lalaith and her babies sheltered securely under his other arm, Legolas smiled happily as his eyes drifted towards the open window.

The stars shone brightly in the night sky and a slight wind stirred the curtains framing the windowsill.
It was good to be home, so good. But he did not forget his friend and he wondered if across the mountains and miles that separated them Aragorn was also getting ready for bed.

He hoped the ranger was sleeping easier. It had been hard to leave with Aragorn still suffering the ill effects of the Nazgûl’s abuse. He missed the ranger acutely, but he knew that they would see one another again.

“Sleep well, Mellon-nín.” the elf prince whispered into the darkness of the starlit night, as the sleeping ketrals on his lap created a comforting hum that made him feel sleepy too. “Know that I am thinking of you, that we are looking at the same sky, no matter how many miles separate us. We shall be together again soon, I think. Until then, you are right here, in my heart, always. Rest well, brother. Rest well.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The night was peaceful in Rivendell. Gentle breezes caressed the waving tree branches, creating a murmuring rustle. Here and there a few night birds sang.

Aragorn lay in bed. The house was asleep. His brothers and father had already retired for the night. Save for the faint flicker of the small candle in the shell holder on his dresser, the room was bathed in darkened moonlight.

It was heavenly to be here, ‘good’ just did not describe the sensation well enough. In Angmar, there had been several times when he honestly did not think he would ever be home again, ever lie in his bed again and listen to the peaceful sounds of a night in Rivendell. But here he was. He was blessed, very blessed.

Sometimes, one could hear elven voices mingled with the soft song of the trees outside the window... although whether they were real or imagined, Aragorn had never quite known. Turning over so he faced the large open window, Aragorn watched the stars dancing in the night sky and let the sounds of Rivendell ease his weary mind.

Just as he was drifting off to sleep, the ranger swore he heard a very familiar voice whispering in the wind. It sounded like Legolas, bidding him goodnight. Half asleep, Aragorn smiled. “Yes, Legolas,” he murmured. “The same sky. May Eärendil shine brightly on you dear friend. Rest well, Legolas, until we meet again.”

A soft, errant gust of wind stirred the curtains, again seeming to carry Legolas’ soft whisper to his friend’s ears and Aragorn fell asleep with the return promise echoing in his heart.
“Yes, mellon-nín. Until we meet again.”

THE END

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