Unforgettable

by Zhie

Summary

A young warrior and an old scholar learn more from one another than they expected to.

Notes

Unforgettable is a massive undertaking by Zhie spanning many years, both in-story and out.

Co-writer credits for the following chapters/parts:

Chapter 9: AnnEllsbethRaven

Musicals and Drinking Songs: Smaug
Chapter Notes

This work is currently being edited, revised, and added to. Chapters that have been (at least for now!) finalized will have 'named' chapters and (provided I am diligent about it) notes (such as the one below) that show the update history. Chapter titles will also have notes as to whether or not they existed in all versions, or only version 3 (all chapters existing in v.2 existed in v.1 - v.2 only had chapters 1 through 21 published; v.1 published chapters 1 through 116; 117 should be considered v.2a). Also, I feel this is so extremely appropriate for a fanfic based upon the Silmarillion and the History of Middle-earth. Enjoy, darlings -- you've certainly waited long enough for this if you've been here since the beginning, and if you're just joining in now, welcome and I am glad you did not experience the heartache of waiting over a decade for the culmination of this story.

v. 0 - October 13, 2005 - 11:57 a.m. (@Livejournal)
http://zhie.livejournal.com/70017.html
v. 1 - July 25, 2007 (@ Phoenix)
v. 2 - 6/30/2011
v. 3 - 5/20/2017 (@ AO3)

Gondolin

122 First Age

Lifting the latch on the gate, Erestor swallowed hard as he walked out into the pasture. The sun was shining brightly down on the fields, and the horses grazed here and there.

At one end stood the stable-hands, with Glorfindel at the center. Erestor gathered up his courage and drew himself up onto the fence, resting on the high wooden barrier. He tried to act as if it were a most natural thing, to sit here on a fence in his midnight-colored high-collared robes, in the middle of the day with the sun beating down. He knew that a good number of those tending to the horses were now watching him and whispering to each other, and he kept his focus on the lazily moving clouds.

Curiosity brought Glorfindel closer, as Erestor expected it would. Like a moth to flame, Glorfindel sauntered over to the misplaced scribe. "Something I can do for you?" he asked curtly, his arms heavily draped over his chest.

"There is," replied Erestor. "But first, I must make apologies to you," he said as Glorfindel joined him on the fence. "It was absolutely inappropriate for me to laugh at you. I am truly sorry, but I honestly thought you to be jesting."

"Apology accepted," said the blond, keeping himself steadied with one hand resting on each of his own thighs. "I do hope, however, you do not respond in that manner every time someone asks you for help."
"No, I do not," Erestor answered. "You must understand, I thought that you must be making some joke."

"Is it funny, that an elf was never instructed on how to read and write?"

"Nay again," came the answer. "I only assumed, wrongfully, that you were teasing me. I have lost count of the number of people here who have targeted me as the recipient of their merriment. I have pulled snakes out of my desk, had my inkwells filled with pitch, and once I was invited to a celebration only to show up and be laughed at that I would truly believe anyone would want to invite me to any sort of social engagement. Again, I am sorry. I should not have counted you among these rogues. You are far too noble for such nonsensical prankery. I would gladly tutor you in these subjects."

"Privately," insisted Glorfindel. "Please, I want no one to know. Least of all Ecthelion."

Erestor nodded. "A shame that Ecthelion did not teach you; I would have thought he would have most willingly."

"He does not-" Glorfindel cut himself off and grasped for an explanation.

"He thinks you older than you truly are," offered Erestor. Glorfindel's eyes met his with sudden fear in them, and Erestor discreetly raised his hand from where it rested on the fence. "I have no reason to tell him or anyone else, but to me it is obvious you are barely past your majority. How you came to be here at such a young age, and to have been given such responsibilities- I can only imagine the hardships you have endured on your own."

Scanning the area as if he were simply watching the horses and not making sure there was no one within earshot, Glorfindel gave Erestor a sideways glance. "Perhaps one day I shall tell you that tale, but for now know that I am older than my years, made so by my own choice."

"Fair enough," said Erestor. "But now, let us speak of the terms of my instruction to you, and yours to me."

"You would have me instruct you?" Glorfindel tried to think on what, and finally voiced this concern.

Looking out at the beautiful horses that grazed and romped across the grass, Erestor said, "I wish to learn to ride. If you teach me to ride, I shall teach you to read."

"And what is your exchange to tutoring me in the art of writing?" questioned Glorfindel.

"Teach me to fight." Erestor breathed in sharply, and it was obvious this had been difficult for him to say. "I know how to protect myself if it comes to fistfights, but in Valinor, we only hunted with bows and arrows. We were never meant to kill others, never meant to know how to slay orcs. I do not know how to hold a sword, let alone wield one. I am against war and battle; I do not wish it or to partake in it, but times may come when such skills are needed. If it should come to it, I would want to have means to defend myself and others."

"Make me a scholar, and I shall make you a soldier," promised Glorfindel.
"Ehtele, we are borrowing your horse!"

"Must you use that name to call to me? Blast it, Glorfindel, shout it so the whole city can hear!" grumbled the chief Captain of Gondolin. He had spent the morning riding her, but had only been around to the guard posts, so the creature was neither tired nor yet stripped of her saddle. He had removed his cloak of rank and was draping it across his arm as he realized with whom Glorfindel was walking. "Oh, this I must see," he said as he doubled back to the stables.

Ecthelion leaned over the rail of the stall as Glorfindel led Erestor to the cream colored horse and waved the groom away. "I think eventually we shall have you ride my horse, considering how much taller you are and the fact that mine is bigger," he said, to which both Ecthelion and his horse snorted. Glorfindel ignored them both and said, "This is Lord Winnikins. At least, that is the name by which she will respond to you. Her real name is Asfaloth, but some elves," he said with dramatic flair, as his arm waved in the direction of Ecthelion, "think it amusing to change the name and apparently the gender of their mount."

"You are just jealous that my horse has such a fabulous name and yours sounds like one that should be prancing through a field of flowers." Ecthelion was interrupted by one of King Turgon's messengers, and with a nod to his fellow captain, made his way back to the palace tower.

"I feared he was going to stay and make commentary," Erestor said to Glorfindel very quietly.

Glorfindel looked at Erestor quizzically. "You always seem a little nervous around him," he said of Ecthelion.

"I am always a little nervous around anyone who has taken up sword against kin," he answered honestly. "Be thankful you knew not those days of darkness."

Glorfindel did not quite laugh, but there was some sort of ironic humor in what Erestor had said- at least there was to the blond and yet he did not share what. "Have you mounted a horse before?"

"Only twice, and I was aided both times." Rubbing the horse's nose, Erestor asked, "What was her name before? Her real name?"

"Asfaloth," said Glorfindel carefully.

Erestor was now very close to the horse, his nose nearly touching that of the mare. He began to speak to her, very softly, almost forgetting that Glorfindel was there. "I can tell you fear me because I am new to you, but believe me when I say I am more afraid of you than you are of me, Asfaloth."
Such a pretty girl you are," he continued, rubbing her cheek with his hand. Her eyelids drooped a little and she gave a slow nod of her head. "Please forgive me if I do something wrong, but I am new to this. I know that Glorfindel is going to teach me what to do, but I need your help, too. Will you help me?" Another nod. "Thank you, Asfaloth. I will be sure you are rewarded for your hard work."

"Why do you not simply ask her to dinner and a romantic walk in the gardens?" Ecthelion was at the rail again, grinning when Erestor dropped his hand from the horse's cheek and blushed. "Glorfindel, Turgon needs to see you as well; the messenger neglected to make that clear."

Glorfindel frowned. "I am in the midst of a lesson."

"He wishes us at the tower now," said Ecthelion firmly.

"My afternoon and evening are free. I can wait," said Erestor.

"I will return shortly," promised Glorfindel as he opened the stall and let himself out. Erestor watched the two soldiers through the window, reaching up to pat Asfaloth while he waited. A few times he would smile as the stable-hands passed through the aisle and took note of him in the stall. After the passing of an hour or so, he began to hear them whisper among themselves about him and laugh as well.

Checking over Asfaloth, he decided that she had everything that he would really need. She had a blanket, and it was all he had ever seen on Nahar on the two occasions he had rode upon his father's horse. Asfaloth also had a saddle on her back that was buckled around her chest and also her stomach. Dangling down were footholds he had seen others use, not only to mount but also to 'hang on' as it were. Surveying the stall, he saw a wooden box and coaxed Asfaloth to stand beside it before he opened the stall.

"It will only be a moment," he assured her when he stood upon the box, trying to decide his next move. After a few unsuccessful attempts, the scribe managed to clamber atop the horse. "Very good," he said, more to himself than to Asfaloth, and then he waited.

Nahar, being the horse of all horses, knew just what to do once Erestor was on his back. Asfaloth on the other hand stood still, awaiting to be told her commands. "Uhm, can we go forward? Just outside, very slowly," he said, his hands resting on the small hump on the front of the saddle. Asfaloth turned her head around and gave him a strange look, but as Erestor wiped the sweat from his brow and tried to think of what to do next, he was relieved that the horse had decided for herself to leave the stall and take him out into the sunshine and fresh air.

"This is good. Very nice. We are doing really well," decided Erestor as Asfaloth emerged and walked slowly down the path from the stable to the pasture. Erestor gripped the part of the saddle he could hold onto, knuckles turning white from the pressure. He panicked a moment when another rider approached and it seemed they would cross paths too closely, but Asfaloth halted a moment to let the other rider pass. "Good girl," Erestor whispered after a sigh of relief. He looked around, curious if he would see Glorfindel returning, but it was another Lord of Gondolin who caught his attention.

Some say that there are no fat elves - there are 'chubby' elves or elves with 'love pouches' but no fat ones. Except for Salgant. Not only was Salgant fat, he was decidedly so and had been for some time. He was not simply a lover of good food and fine wine as his pleasantly plump and delightfully chubby counterparts were, he was a glutton. For whatever reason, he chanced to be walking the grounds of the riding and grazing fields just as Erestor came out from the stable with Asfaloth.
Salgant's pudgy fingers rested upon his expansive belly, where he drummed them as he surveyed the scene before him. One of the stable-hands who belonged to his house had chanced to stop by the hall he had been performing in and mentioned in passing that the tall, gangly scribe who had arrived from Doriath was making an attempt to ride a horse. Of all horses, Salgant had not expected to see the wily elf perched atop the chief Captain's mount.

With an amused look seen only by a few of the elves tending to the horses in the pasture, Salgant took himself over to where Erestor sat on Lord Winnykins. The horse had not taken Erestor far, and stood grazing on a patch of clover. "Splendid day for a ride," he announced in a low, harmonious voice. The sound practically scared Erestor off the horse, but he managed to hold on.

"Yes, it would seem that way," Erestor answered unsurely.

Salgant gave Lord Winnykins a pat on the neck, and the horse looked up. Seeing who it was, she began to nuzzle the rotund elf in search of sweets. Salgant pulled a piece of pressed sugar from his pocket and held it out for the horse to daintily take from him. "Looks as if she is all set to go," remarked Salgant as he circled around to Lord Winnykin's hindquarters.

"Y-yes, she is," replied Erestor. He had his feet in the stirrups, but they had been adjusted much too high for his long legs, so his knees were bent too far for comfort -- though his current level of skill with horses caused him to be unaware of this issue. As Salgant continued to walk to the other side of the horse, Erestor wiped his sweaty hands on his leggings. With a grin, Salgant paused, having hoped that the scribe would take his hands from the pommel.

"Well, do not let me keep you, then," he said, and gave the horse's rear a hearty smack with his hand. Lord Winnykins lurched forward, galloping much faster than Nahar ever had, with Erestor clinging for dear life around the horse's neck.

Ecthelion and Glorfindel caught up with Salgant's chuckles as they raced down the hill to the pasture, having just arrived back from their impromptu meeting. "Now, why did you have to go and do that?" scolded Ecthelion. He had expected to find one of the stable-hands laughing at the gate, but seeing the large figure of Salgant, Ecthelion growled to himself in fury. He could not punish the head of another house, for that was up to the King to decide, and he would not put forth a charge so petty
with the current worries that weighed on the King's mind.

"Oh, it is only the same as when you have a small child you wish to teach to swim. Just fling him into the middle of the pond and watch him so he does not drown. Instinct will kick in," reasoned Salgant, wiping a tear from his eye as he took note of Lord Winnykins leaping over the barrier of the field with Erestor scrambling to hold on, legs loose from the stirrups and flailing around mid-air.

Glorfindel had run past Salgant and into the stables, and emerged now on his own mount, riding her without a saddle. He glared back at Salgant as his horse, a more buttery color than Ecthelion's, sped toward the gate.

"Goodness me, can that one never take a joke?" Salgant pulled a cloth of fine linen from his pocket and wiped his brow. "How stern he is, for one so young."

"Young, but a lord of this realm, I remind you," warned Ecthelion. "I would not seek to upset him if I were you, Salgant. That goes double for Erestor."

"Phah. He will not do a thing, he knows it was meant in jest," countered Salgant. "Besides, what could Erestor do to any of us? He is a skittish bookworm who rarely steps foot out of the library. I am doing him a favor, to give him such adventure!"

"He is not one of us, Salgant," said Ecthelion, and his parting words were, "He is a rogue, and you should not put so much trust in him. I knew him in Valinor, and even I am wary to trust him fully."

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Meanwhile, Erestor had managed to avoid a number of low tree branches, but not the long spindly ones that scraped against his arms, scratching him through his shirt. He could feel the sting on his neck and face where the branches had nicked him. With his arms around the horse's neck, he had tried practically every command he could think to yell to make the horse stop. As they came to a clearing, Erestor opened his eyes and saw before them the fishing pond, coming closer and closer. Too close, in fact.

"Whoa!" His unintentional shout of distress came as they seemed to be headed right for the pond. Without a moment's hesitation, the horse came to a halt, sending Erestor tumbling off and into the icy water.

Sitting up and pushing back the stray hairs from his eyes, Erestor had landed only a few feet from shore, but in one of the muckiest parts of the pond. He was sitting in slime with his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms around his legs when Glorfindel emerged from the game forest.

Glorfindel's first reaction was to warn Erestor that it had been dangerous to have mounted and attempted to ride without him, but when Erestor looked up with his large eyes apologetic and his cheeks red in shame and frustration, Glorfindel smiled weakly and dismounted. With a spiteful look to Lord Winnykins, he slapped the horse much as Salgant had. "Go home, Winny," he directed, and without fussing the horse trotted off into the forest again. "Are you hurt?"

"Just cold. And very damp," answered Erestor as Glorfindel helped him up. "A little bashed and bruised, but I should survive." He wrung the water from his hair and shivered as the wind blew through the trees to where they stood.

Removing his cloak, Glorfindel draped it over his horse's back and then motioned to Erestor. "Take off your shirt, it is soaked. You can wrap up in my cloak and we can ride back."

Doing as Glorfindel instructed, Erestor asked, "How? You sent Ecthelion's horse to the stables."
"Aye. We can ride on mine, you in front of me. I promise you will not fall off or into a lake," he said.

"What is her name?" asked Erestor.

Glorfindel took the dripping shirt from Erestor and walked with it back to the pond. "She is Buttercup. All of the horses in my team are named after yellow flowers. A bit of a tradition." He wrung out the shirt and then stepped back to the horse...

...and Erestor, who was crooning to his horse as he had to Ecthelion's. Only the image was a little different. Standing in the sheltered sunlight, shadows from the trees playing off his skin, Erestor looked so much more natural than he had in the stable- and so much more beautiful. Glorfindel didn't know where the hell that thought came from, but another soon followed as he watched errant drops of water glide down Erestor's hair and slide across his skin.

Most would agree that Erestor was indeed a beautiful elf- pretty, perhaps even. This was not simply an admiration of a glorious specimen of Eru's creation, this was a desirous longing that inexplicably crept upon Glorfindel. Yet, he walked to the horse with nothing but a friendly smile upon his face, for his reaction to ellyn whom he found attractive was nothing less than a crime, and here in Gondolin it was one punishable by death. This was different, though - it was not just a passing fancy. There was a hope, a fleeting wish, that everything else in the world could just go away, and he could stay here in this moment for all time. Glorfindel deliberately moved slower, savoring what he felt -- but he knew not to tarry long, for Ecthelion would come in search if too much time passed after Lord Winnykin's return to the stable.

"Here, but do not put it on," he said, handing the shirt in Erestor's direction. Erestor gave Buttercup a final pat before taking the shirt. Glorfindel placed his cloak around Erestor's shoulders, and kept his hands lingering upon them, the cloak the only barrier between them. He then made a sort of whistling sound through his teeth. Immediately his horse sank down to her knees, giving Erestor an easy way of mounting her.

"I did not mean to ruin our first lesson," apologized Erestor from the saddle as Glorfindel directed Buttercup to stand again, but the blond waved it off.

"Just a moment, I will be right back," he said, and walked the few steps to the edge of the water. Kneeling down, he dipped his hand in and lifted the water to his lips, already and unknowingly to anyone else plotting his revenge against Salgant.

He took a look over his shoulder, to see Erestor patting Buttercup. The cloak had slipped down from one shoulder, baring once more the pale flesh for Glorfindel to see. His lips were unconsciously licked, and he turned away, hoping Erestor had not seen.

Ecthelion had told Glorfindel that Erestor's heart had been broken by an elleth long years ago, but would say no more on this. It was best to put the idea out of his mind before it fully formed. Slowly he returned to the horse, again giving Erestor a friendly smile, which was finally returned. Glorfindel flexed his fingers to keep his hands from shaking in hope beyond hope before mounting behind Erestor. "Sometimes it helps if you lean back, to keep from being jostled around. I can brace the impact of the ride for you." Glorfindel hoped he did not sound too uncertain as he said the words, which he immediately regretted. Erestor was no idiot, and Glorfindel considered how obvious his 'assistance' was.

If Erestor had any reservations of Glorfindel's motives, he showed no reaction to them. Erestor leaned back against Glorfindel without hesitation. Their difference in height meant that Glorfindel's chin was resting over Erestor's bare shoulder, his cheek to Erestor's neck. "Where should I put my hands?"
Perhaps Glorfindel had never noticed before just how deep Erestor's voice was, and how it tore through him and sent an odd sensation to his core. Maybe it was always like that - smooth and rich and dark, like the chocolate that flowed in the little novelty fountain Ecthelion had at his most intimate social gatherings. "Here. You can hold the reins," he said, and he successfully transferred them to Erestor.

"What will you hold onto?" Erestor's voice was slightly concerned, but it was no less husky, and if Glorfindel did not already know better, he might have thought that the question was more layered than it truly was.

"You," answered Glorfindel, as if caught in a spell. He cleared his throat, and added, "Just around your waist here, to steady you." He placed his hands at Erestor's hips, and willed himself not to dig in with his fingertips, not to caress his student in such an inappropriate manner. The word 'forbidden' flashed in his mind, and he loosened his grip, yet kept his hands in place for the journey back. "Fear not," he said when Erestor tried to look over his shoulder, but almost bumped noses with Glorfindel. They both chuckled after a moment, and Glorfindel coaxed his horse to take them back to the stable. "I promise I will never let you fall."
"My word! Please, Glorfindel, tell me you have not turned to sparring with the scribes now, have you?"

"Heavens, no, Duilin," laughed Glorfindel sarcastically. "Salgant has taken to trying to have my pupils thrown from their mounts- speaking of that corpulent comrade of yours, where is he this evening?"

There was a pause as Duilin rolled his tongue back and forth along the roof of his mouth as he smiled wryly. Duilin was a tall Sindarin fellow from Nevrast, known to have keen sight and be fast-footed. There were times when he would be elected to deliver messages to hard to reach places in Gondolin, and the roads would clear to see him swiftly rush by, as if carried on the wind to his destination. There was a distinct possibility that his speed was the reason for the naming of his house, the House of the Swallow.

DUILIN spent much time in the company of Salgant and Egalmoth, though he was not unfriendly with the other lords of Gondolin. It seemed that his familiarity with Salgant caused him to come under Glorfindel's ire as of late, and following the incident at the pasture, Salgant himself had not dared speak to Glorfindel. "I take it you plan not to dine at the head table with us this eve," said the archer in hopes of changing the subject.

"Why, only if Salgant choking on his dinner is on the menu," replied Glorfindel with mock sweetness.

Again, Duilin paused and looked down at their feet. He nodded his head in contemplation and clicked his tongue. When he looked up again, he pushes his light brown hair behind his ears and addressed Erestor directly. "So, from what little I have gleaned from Glorfindel's conversation, you are his latest student."

"That I am," answered Erestor carefully, "though already I am off to a bad start. I fear I am not much for horsemanship."

"Fear not. Glorfindel is an excellent teacher, even if he himself is a novice when it comes to proper etiquette." Duilin seemed to want to say more or add an aside to this, but not knowing Erestor well, he held his tongue from saying more. "Which arts of the warrior is he instructing you upon? Nothing too difficult for a beginner like yourself, I would imagine."

"The sword, the bow, and the horse," spoke Glorfindel before Erestor could answer, "though not in that order exactly." He gave Duilin a challenging look, which was answered with a proposition.
"When you have shown him how to ride and how to swing a sword around, send him to me for his archery lessons, Glorfindel." Turning back to Erestor, Duilin said, "There is a fine precision to the art of the archer, one that is not matched by the clumsiness of swordsmanship or riding. You have the build to be well-trained with a bow, and no doubt as a scholar, the attention to detail and patience that it requires. Do seek me out once he is done with you. Good eve to you both," he then said quickly, for Egalmoth arose from where he had been speaking to another lord in the courtyard and Duilin moved to follow him inside the palace.

Watching them go, Glorfindel gave a snort of dissatisfaction when the duo met up with Salgant near the entrance. He felt a hand upon his shoulder, and turned to see Ecthelion. A look of disappointment crossed his face- somehow he had hoped it would be Erestor who had touched him in the familiar fashion. His expression, at least, was easily covered by what had transpired. "I do not feel like dining in the hall tonight," announced the captain and Lord of the Fountain, who had seemingly appeared from nowhere.

"Barracks?" questioned Glorfindel, and Ecthelion nodded. Erestor, whose minor injuries from his second sword lesson had been bandaged up by the healer on duty and was dressed once more in clean clothing, made to bow and say his farewells, but Ecthelion slapped him on the back, making him take a step forward.

"You are going to join us, are you not?" Ecthelion was already steering Erestor along with them. "Have you taken meals there before?"

"Ah, yes, ahm, no, ah-" Erestor shook his head to clear it. "I suppose I could join you, but I do not wish to be a bother. I usually take my meals with the other scribes down in the lower hall with the stable-hands and servants, or directly in my room if I buy something from the market on my way home. I did not know of anywhere else to eat," he said as they rounded the palace and made for a large building from which boisterous music came and smoke billowed up from a huge chimney. "I suppose these are the barracks," he said dumbly as they came to the entryway, the doors of which were propped open with large rocks.

"Good evening, captains!" came the voice of one of the soldiers sitting at a log table eating his supper.

"Fine night, m'lords! Good health t'ya," said another who was at a different table. Many of the soldiers began to speak their regards and to wave or raise a mug to the captains that Erestor walked beside. They in turn would bow their heads or nod, smile or call back to something particular with a grin.

Inside, there were rows and rows of tables, with soldiers sitting on long wooden benches having conversations that roared with laughter. There was an area where elves were lined up, receiving plates of food from a line of young maidens who seemed just as rowdy as the ellyn they were serving. Instead of going to where the food was, Ecthelion and Glorfindel led Erestor away from this part of the barracks to a long counter where the officers sat on high stools with elegantly carved wooden backs that depicted deer, boar, and other game, and armrests covered with leather padding, drinking from large glasses of wine, though eating the same fare the rest of the warriors did. "Instead of each of us having our own separate training, resting, and dining halls, Ecthelion and I built one massive one," explained Glorfindel.

"Where do they sleep?" asked Erestor. Glorfindel pointed towards the floor while Ecthelion waved his hand at the roof.

"You may have noticed that we had to walk up a few steps into the hall here. There is a level below this one, halfway below ground. Some call it a cellar, but you should see it for it would have anyone
fooled. My soldiers sleep there, while Ecthelion's stay up on the second floor."

Glorfindel and Ecthelion each sat upon one of the chairs at the counter, and almost immediately there was a young elleth there to serve them. Before Glorfindel she set a goblet of blood red wine, and a similar one of a paler hue was placed in front of Ecthelion. As Erestor tentatively sat down to the left of Glorfindel, the barmaid stood in front of him and asked him, "Red wine? White wine?" She left it to linger there, for there were other liquors besides these lining the shelves behind her.

"Beer. Well, if you have that," he said, not seeing a barrel anywhere.

The maid looked a little baffled as she eyed up the slender ellon, but asked, "What kind?" as if it were a quiz.

"I would prefer a good stout, but if all you have is an ale, then-" The maid held up her hand before Erestor could continue. She stuck two finger in her mouth and whistled, looking across the hall to the serving line. Erestor shrank down, half-expecting the noise in the hall to cease, but it continued.

"Bring me two pints of the dark, will you, Tir?" At the end of the hall where the meals were being served, there were a number of kegs from which the honey and amber liquid was flowing. The ellyn she called to signaled that he had heard and filled two mugs from a barrel that stood by itself, then brought the foaming, muddy colored drinks up to the front and set them upon the counter.

Erestor nodded his thanks and picked up one of the mugs while the maid lifted the other. "Cheers," she said, knocking her mug against his before sipping from it. Erestor lifted his with a smile and drank deeply, finishing half the contents before setting it down.

"Ah, now that brings back memories," he said to himself.

Beside him, Glorfindel and Ecthelion had both turned to regard him, and with a deep chuckle, Ecthelion said, "My friend, you simply amaze me sometimes."

"My respect for him has doubled this day," said Glorfindel, raising his glass in Erestor's direction before taking a drink himself.

"So how do the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower and the Lord of the House of the Fountain come to build their training facilities together?" asked Erestor. "This is the sort of collaboration I am not used to seeing. Even in Valinor, things are very segregated."

"Flowers need water to grow," teased Ecthelion as he moved his arm so that a platter of food could be set before him. The same was placed before Glorfindel and Erestor: The trays consisted of a bowl of thick meaty stew, a small loaf of brown bread, and an apple. Ecthelion used the only utensil on the tray, a spoon that mismatched those the others had, to still the stew before he sampled it. "And the golden flower is the sun, and the sun keeps water from flooding by drawing it up to it in the sky so that it can continue to be in bloom."

"We need each other," Glorfindel said simply. "We teach our soldiers different techniques. I emphasize defense, and Ecthelion's troops are more offensive in their fighting style. We spar against each other as well - mock skirmishes and one-on-one tournaments. It makes all of us better."

There were other differences that Erestor observed of the two lords. Glorfindel, though bright and shining with his long flowing hair of gold and his youthful appearance was stern and serious, and always paused thoughtfully when engaging in conversation (though perhaps not while speaking to Duilin as it related to Salgant, recalled Erestor). Ecthelion, on the other hand, had hair that was dark and curled, and was kept trimmed to his shoulders and never caught in his mantle or whipped around
into his face the way Glorfindel's sometimes did. Ecthelion himself was full of mirth, and known on more than one occasion to be warned by the watchman that he was up too late and being too boisterous in the Courtyard of the King. They were, however, both very loyal to their King, and were said to be his favorites, along with Egamoth, whose part in this tale is yet to be told.
"Buttercup, Sunflower, Daffodil, and Daisy. Sunflower is the only boy of the bunch," said Glorfindel as he gave each of the horses a rub or a pat as he walked down the line of stalls that displayed the crest of the Golden Flower on the wall overhead. "None of them are saddle-trained, and that was why I hesitated using them. There is a greater desire to ride with a saddle rather than without."

"Well, if you ride without a saddle, I can probably learn that way." Erestor’s voice was a little unsure as Glorfindel opened the gate and asked- not told as many of the other elves in the stable said to their horses- if Daffodil would be so kind as to come out for a ride.

As the horse emerged, Glorfindel led the way out of the stable. "No bit, no bridle, no restraints of any kind. I will use a blanket on their backs to show the house colors and to keep my armor from hurting them if I am wearing it, but I do not believe in such a thing if I can help it. They are kind enough to carry me, and I even dislike the harnesses I must use if they are pulling a wagon.” Glorfindel fished a handful of large chunks of carrot from a pouch he was carrying and handed the rest of the pouch to Erestor.

"How is my girl today?" Glorfindel asked, and he received a whinny back. He fed her the chunks one at a time as he told her of his plans. "There is a clearing near the water’s edge I think we should go to. I promised Lord Erestor I would teach him to ride horses. Poor Buttercup had a workout yesterday, and Daisy needs to stay with her baby. And we both know about Sunflower." Both he and the horse laughed at some private joke, and Erestor smiled as he followed, listening to the two of them, horse and rider, carry on a conversation. Along the way they passed various others who bid them good-day, and Glorfindel took the time to give each of them his regards.

"It seems everyone here simply adores you," remarked Erestor as the trio began their journey through the woods.

Glorfindel gave the last of the carrot pieces to Daffodil. "It takes very little effort to be nice; it takes much more to be an angry little spiter."

"You seemed to be less than polite with Duilin the other day," said Erestor.

"It has to do with the company he keeps. If he and Egalmoth would stop fawning over Salgant, I would be nice to them, too."

Furrowing his brow, Erestor asked, "Why do you so dislike Salgant?"

"He deserves it. He picks on people. I do not trust him. He called me a bastard once because I have claimed not to know my father, however, just because my father will not acknowledge me does not
mean I do not have one.” Glorfindel paused, both in speech and in step. “Please do not allow this conversation to be repeated elsewhere. That is not something I meant to say.”

“I will tell no one. I was asking on my behalf– not so that I could start rumors across the city.” Smiling wryly, Erestor added, “Some who have known me a long while know for a fact that I truly am a bastard, so if ever discussion arises on the topic, I am a much easier target for such things.” Glorfindel seemed shaken by this and Erestor continued. “That is not the response you expected.”

“I suppose I just assumed you had a wonderfully loving mother and a brilliant and important father and were brought up in a fine household on a gorgeous estate somewhere. Every conversation we have had in the past two weeks has led me to believe you had a very proper upbringing, and all the best tutors were brought to instruct you. You probably apprenticed in the house of a Lord or King, and once your formal training was complete, tutored others in a vast array of topics while continuing to read and research on your own, thus gaining a breadth of knowledge incomparable to others.” Glorfindel shrugged. “Completely wrong?”

“Could not be further from the truth. I was born in a river, raised in a tent, and my 'father' never did a lick of hard work from what I could tell- though it took a good swift kick for me to put two and two together and realize my father was not my father. I was schooled by some prominent scholars, but it was much hard work that got me there, and I was thrown out of the school before I could finish. I did tutor the children of a prince - that is about all from your tale that I will admit to be true, but never did I have time to research with seven children to mind and educate. The last place I lived was a cave in Doriath, where I was jailed twice, on trial once, and practically run out of the city.”

“Damn.” Glorfindel took a deep breath and then shook his head. “I guess you win.”

Erestor placed his hand upon Glorfindel’s shoulder, and the blond felt his heart race at the simple contact. “I may have great troubles of my own, but I can tell your life has not been an easy one, either.”

“I- I cannot-“

“There is no need for you to tell me. Just know I will listen if you need someone to lend an ear.” Erestor gave Glorfindel’s shoulder a squeeze. “And I am here even if you do not wish to speak. Sometimes it is simply nice to have a kindred spirit close by.” Erestor lingered another moment with his hand upon Glorfindel's shoulder, before he abruptly moved it and turned away.

Glorfindel was uncertain in that moment, but he thought he saw Erestor blush. He said nothing of it, and kept the thought tucked away. Erestor's phrasing in calling him a 'kindred spirit' gave him hope.

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"This is ridiculous.” Glorfindel threw down the brush in frustration, splattering ink across his paper and the table he sat at. They were in the library after hours, and had been since immediately after supper. “Almost all of these look the same – how can anyone remember what anything is? It looks like scribbles!”

Calmly, Erestor removed the ruined page and positioned a fresh sheet. “Let us start with ‘noldo’ again.”

“'I meant to ask you about that,” Glorfindel said, picking up the brush. “Why is there a letter called ‘noldo’ and not one called ‘vanya’ or ‘teleri’ or anything of the sort?”

“Because it was a Noldo who created this,” answered Erestor simply.
“Well, that was bloody arrogant,” complained Glorfindel. He began to practice the letter, placing two rows of ‘noldo’ across the page before he let out a snort of frustration. “Whoever designed this should not have made nwalme and noldo and numen and malta the same—“

“They are not the same,” interrupted Erestor quietly.

“And hyarmen and yanta are the same bloody thing. Look, hyarmen,” and Glorfindel hastily dipped his brush in the ink, trailing speckles onto the page from the bowl. “And, yanta.” He drew the other letter beside the first, and then haphazardly tossed the brush aside, leaving it to roll toward Erestor.

The elder picked up the brush. After dipping it into the ink, he smoothly painted the two letters onto the page. “Hyarmen has a long stroke here along the right side, and yanta has a short stroke, like... that...” Erestor offered the brush back to Glorfindel. “Try it again.”

“I hate this,” he grumbled, but took the brush anyhow. His hand had not the practice that Erestor had in writing, and so shook as he dragged the brush across the paper. “There,” he said when he had finally finished.

“Very good,” complimented Erestor. “Perhaps we should stop for the evening?” The midnight bell had tolled from the watchtower some time ago, and more than once during the later part of their lesson the scribe had stifled a yawn.

Glorfindel nodded. “Can you- would you- oh, never-mind,” he said, but Erestor put a hand upon his shoulder.

“What is it?”

Squirming a bit in his seat, the warrior replied, “I was wondering, if you would mind showing me, well, not how to write my whole name, but... I can never sign anything. I always get one of my scribes to do that. I have always told them I have not the time for it. I would like for it to be my mark on the pages.” Glorfindel smiled wryly. “Stupid, is it not?”

“No, not stupid at all, my friend.” Erestor turned the paper to give them more free space to paint on. “This is anga, the first letter of your name.”

“Oh, it would be one of those complicated curly ones,” mumbled Glorfindel as he took the brush. He concentrated for the next few minutes, making one anga after another, over and over and over, until they began to look more and more like the one Erestor had placed on the page. “This should be enough, then, right?”

“For now. We shall continue to practice. Wait until you know all of the letters.” Erestor dipped the brush into the bowl and then proceeded to write the rest of the letters in Glorfindel’s name. “Or, you can join them together like this,” he said, and rewrote them, flowing one letter into the next.

“That is nice,” remarked Glorfindel, looking at the connecting characters. “What does yours look like?”

“Mine? Oh, well, just like this.” Erestor made fewer curves and lines on the paper, and shrugged.

“Beautiful,” murmured Glorfindel, touching the part of Erestor’s name that had dried.

Erestor gave him a little smile. “Well, if you want to write like this, we must start at the beginning and work our way to that point.”

With a sigh, Glorfindel plucked the brush from Erestor’s fingers and tried to copy the letters of his
name. “Aiya, this is so hard!”

“Practice, Glorfindel,” Erestor said, patting him on the back. “Practice, and more practice, and a whole lot of patience.” This time, he was unable to muffle his yawn, and covered his mouth. "Oh, excuse me."

Glorfindel set the brush down. "It is very late. You probably need rest before work tomorrow."
Glorfindel tapped the brush against the bowl to coax the extra ink off so he could wash it.

"No rush," he told Glorfindel as the soldier hurried to clean the brushes he had been using. "I think I am going to finish my correspondence from yesterday so I can take the day off tomorrow. Then I should be able to catch the early merchants in the market as I walk home."

"Do you not live here in the tower?" Glorfindel asked.

Erestor shook his head. "I rent a room above a cobbler just outside the lesser market."

"And you walk here to work every day?" Glorfindel's voice was slightly higher in pitch than usual.

"I obviously do not ride here." Erestor gathered up the papers that had been used for practice. The normal procedure was to toss them in the kindling bin, but Glorfindel stopped him before he reached his destination. "Sorry, did you want these?"

"Just... this one," said Glorfindel as he found the sheet with their names on it. "It seems bad luck to burn them, and I think I should use this to practice on my own time. Practice my name, that is."

"Of course." Erestor took the rest to the bin. "You are much improving. Practice on your own will certainly help you reach your goal quicker - and practicing letters alone is far less dangerous than practicing riding alone," he joked in reference to his own first lesson.

Glorfindel tucked the sheet safely away in his vest pocket. "I just... I had a thought," he said, and he hoped his cheeks would not give him away.

"Oh?"

"I actually have a room here in the tower, but I rarely use it. It seems a shame for you to walk all the way back home at this hour. I was going to retire to the barracks, because they are not very far from here," he said, which was true when it came to distance, but a lie when it came to intent. "If you would like, I should be very happy to give you the key and have you use them instead. They are very convenient; just on the second floor, in fact."

"Oh, but would that be appropriate? Just what would someone say if they took note of me going to your private room, or emerging from it?" asked Erestor.

Glorfindel had already removed the key from a ring attached to a length of chain that hung from his belt, and now took Erestor's hand and placed it within. "I should think they would say that we are very good friends," he said.
“Good morning.”

“Morning.”

Glorfindel smiled at the reply and shut the door behind him. “I trust you slept well?”

Erestor stretched and yawned. His heavy robes, forest green and a bit on the tattered side, were draped over a large, plush chair in the corner. He still had his leggings and shirt on, and he turned side to side to awaken his muscles before he sat up and scratched his head. “I only meant to take a nap. I guess I have been working harder than I thought on the translations.”

Erestor’s arrival had been a welcomed one, for he was linguistically well-versed, and read, wrote, and spoke Quenya and Sindarin with great fluency. It made him a perfect candidate to turn scrolls from Nevrast into books that the Noldor could read, and vice versa for documents that survived the Helcaraxe.

“No worries.” Glorfindel sat down on the edge of the chair to remove his boots. The reality of the situation was that he had arrived back hours ago, but did not want to wake Erestor, and so he had been watching him, secretly and silently, until the sun began to peek through the curtains, and Glorfindel staged his entrance. “I was out late again, so it is good that the bed gets regular use.”

“Ah, to be young again and able to stay out the entire night.” Erestor pushed back the blanket and vacated the bed.

Glorfindel dropped one boot to the side and began to work on the second, eyes on Erestor the entire time. “You cannot be that old,” he said.

Erestor politely smiled, but did not comment on Glorfindel’s observation. There came a knock at the door, and it kept Glorfindel from enquiring further. With one boot on and one half-off, Glorfindel struggled to get the second one free. The knocking became more insistent, and Glorfindel cursed his luck as the laces knotted. Suddenly, there was Erestor, crouched on the floor before him. While their hands were of similar size, Erestor’s fingers simply seemed more dexterous, and swiftly the knot was just two ends of the leather strip. There was only a quick flick of Erestor’s gaze, and a warm smile, but it caused Glorfindel to freeze and capture the memory in his mind.

“Lord Glorfindel! Are you within?”

The voice was female, and it brought Glorfindel back to the present moment. “Aredhel,” he whispered down to Erestor.

“I know,” whispered Erestor back. He stood up in one fluid moment and stepped back to give Glorfindel room, and so that he could step into a shadow while Glorfindel answered the door.

Glorfindel set his hand on the knob. He looked over his shoulder to give Erestor a half-smile (for he realized he had mostly stared and leered since Erestor awoke), and then opened the door and
immediately bowed. “Your highness.”

“Glorfindel! There you are! I wanted to go for an early ride, but you know how my brother is about chaperones. I looked everywhere for you, all your usual haunts, but even Ecthelion had no idea where you were! The nightwatchman said you came back to the tower before nightfall because he passed you as you entered, but I just knew that could not be the case. You are always out after dark!”

“Oh…” Glorfindel could feel the heat of Erestor’s questioning gaze upon him.

“So I thought I would check for myself, and look, here you are! Oh! Do you have guests?” Aredhel peered over Glorfindel and suddenly squealed. “Eresse! When did you get here?!” She dodged around Glorfindel, white gown wisping behind her, and embraced Erestor in a tight hug, while he in turn chuckled and hugged her back. “How? When?”

“Accidentally, and not terribly long ago.” Erestor grinned and patted Aredhel’s shoulder. “Still hunting?”

“Do you need ask?” She slapped Erestor’s shoulder and laughed at him.

“Guess what Glorfindel has been teaching me to do.”

“Oh! Glorfindel!” Aredhel turned and put her hands upon her hips. “How dare you keep Erestor from me!”

“I…” Glorfindel merely shrugged.

“Aredhel and I knew each other in Valinor,” Erestor quickly explained. “There were times when I accompanied her on hunting trips if they were on foot.”

“He is also a really great dancer,” said Aredhel, and this caused Erestor to blush just a bit.

“Is he?” Glorfindel filed the information away for later. “I had no idea your meeting would be such a happy reunion.”

“I did not realize she was here,” said Erestor.

“What, did you think I went off with Fingon? Or my father?” Aredhel rolled her eyes and leaned closer to Erestor. “Between you and I -- and dear, sweet Glorfindel -- Turgon is much easier to control than the other men in my life. Although, I am not entirely happy about this secret, hidden city business.” Aredhel linked her arm with Erestor’s. “So tell me, oh, tall-one, what ever has Glorfindel been teaching you that you do not already know?”

Erestor smirked and leaned in to whisper the answer to Aredhel. Glorfindel frowned as he watched, less because he cared that Erestor was being secretive, and more due to the close proximity of Erestor’s lips to Aredhel’s ear. When Erestor stopped speaking, Aredhel clapped her hands. “You taught him how to ride horses?! Oh, thank you, Glorfindel!” Aredhel hugged the golden lord (and had to stoop just a bit to do so) before she clapped again. “This means I have two escorts now!”

“I am only just a novice rider,” Erestor warned. “I can only walk, trot, and canter.”

Aredhel grinned. “Do you whinny as well?”

Erestor chuckled. “You know what I mean by it.”

“I wish ever so to see how you ride. Are you free this morn?” she asked.
“Erestor has been busy at work on the Quenya-Sindarin translation project,” explained Glorfindel. “He could probably use a respite.”

“Oh, that project… I really should get back to it,” Erestor realized. He spied his robe and retrieved it. “I shall have to beg forgiveness and schedule an engagement to ride another time.”

Aredhel bit her lip and furrowed her brow. “That project is going to take many decades to complete.”

“Yes, I know,” agreed Erestor. “However, I am paid by the word, and my room and board is due for the month in two days.” He shook out the robe and draped it over his arm.

“You can just stay here,” offered Glorfindel a little too eagerly.

No one dwelled upon it long, for Aredhel’s eyes lit up and she grabbed Erestor’s arm excitedly with her white gloved hands. “Glorfindel is right! There are so many empty rooms in the tower. I am certain my brother will grant you one of them. In fact, if you come riding with me now, I will speak with him this evening.”

Erestor looked from Aredhel to Glorfindel. Glorfindel realized his council was being sought, and he felt quite proud of the moment. He cleared his throat and said, “It is a nice day for a ride, and if anyone can get you into the tower, it is our city’s most benevolent white lady.”

“Oh, Glorfindel,” said Aredhel with a roll of her eyes, and she giggled behind her glove.

“You may use my horse to ride, Erestor,” added Glorfindel. He clenched his teeth to keep from yawning and nodded at the door. “Best to go now before it is too hot for it.”

Erestor folded his robe in half twice, and looked down at the fabric. “Umm…”

“Here.” Glorfindel took hold of the garment, and then shooed Aredhel and Erestor from his room. “Go forth, ye merry riders,” he commanded, and once he was alone with the door locked, he hugged the robe to his chest and breathed in deeply, then remembered that Erestor had been sleeping in his bed not an hour before. Glorfindel set the robe beside his pillow, then pulled off his clothes and climbed into bed. He did not need the robe; the scent of the bedsheets reminded him of ink and paper, earth and leather, beer and bread and moonlight. Glorfindel wrapped himself tightly in them and fell asleep with a smile on his face.

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“I heard your pet project moved into the tower.”

Glorfindel looked over his shoulder to see Egalmoth leaning over the stall. The House of the Heavenly Arch was an average sort of Elf -- he was of average build, wore his hair at an average, medium length, and general was neither too plain, nor was he considered flamboyant. He was well-read, but not exceedingly bookish. He was active, but not overly athletic. And he was pleasant, but not overly charismatic. Glorfindel would not have found a flaw in any of this -- but he did find fault in Egalmoth’s friendship with Salgant (and Duilin), and therefore appeared bored as he answered. “Oh, is that so?”

Egalmoth laughed. “Lady Aredhel has taken quite a liking to him.”

Glorfindel let out a ‘humph’ and returned to his task of brushing his horse.

For a few minutes, Egalmoth stood and watched before he asked, “Do you enjoy doing that, or are you just avoiding everyone because the Princess stole your new pet?”
“He is not my pet,” Glorfindel shouted. “He is my--” He paused when he realized how loud his voice was, and he lowered it. “He is my friend,” he said firmly.

“You know what King Turgon says about mingling with the peasants,” warned Egalmoth.

Glorfindel shrugged. “As of yet, I am unaware of a rule that forbids me from choosing with whom I wish to associate.”

“Be that as it may, Glorfindel, do not get too attached to him. He is not one of us.” Egalmoth walked away before Glorfindel could respond.

A few minutes passed before Glorfindel whistled over a stable-hand to finish his task. He left the stable and walked an unfamiliar path. Egalmoth was not wrong about Glorfindel’s intent -- ever since Aredhel had managed to find Erestor a room, and a room in the same corridor as hers, far from Glorfindel’s room -- Glorfindel had brooded and avoided the tower and slept in the barracks -- and that was if he slept at all. Fatigue was catching up to him, and he knew he needed rest soon. It was too early to sleep at the barracks; everyone would be having supper. Glorfindel weaved his way back to the tower, and upon entering, crossed paths with the person he was trying to avoid.

“Oh, good!” Erestor sighed with relief. “I was beginning to think you were avoiding me.”

“Oh?” Glorfindel attempted not to show too much emotion of any sort. Since Aredhel’s swift relocation of Erestor, she had taken to riding with him every day, and sometimes in the evenings Glorfindel had seen them at a distance shooting arrows at targets and sharing a bottle of wine. Glorfindel had not dared ask about his lessons; it seemed he had been all but abandoned in exchange for a fairer friend.

Erestor held out a small, wrapped package. “I know it is not much, but I wanted to give you something as a thank you. If you had not shown me how to ride, I would not have been of use to Aredhel, and in turn she would not have alerted her brother as to my talents, and I would not be so fortunate as I currently am.”

Glorfindel took the gift and held it a moment. “Should I unwrap it now or later?” he asked, trying not to sound suspicious.

“Whichever you like.”

Glorfindel choose sooner rather than later, and after a few seconds of shucking paper, he was holding more paper, in the form of a small book. “This is for me?”

“I am still uncertain of your interests, but it is obvious you like horses, so I wrote down everything I know about Nahar, a famous horse of Valinor. I thought it would be something you could practice reading,” explained Erestor.

The pages were thumbed through. Here and there, Glorfindel already recognized words, but still knew it would be a challenge. “And I can keep this one?”

“Yes, I wrote it for you. There are no other copies.”

Glorfindel turned back to the first page and slowly read, completely oblivious to the fact he was struggling through the words in an open hallway where anyone might have heard. “To my de-- derst-”

“Dearest,” coached Erestor.
“--dearest friend, Glorfindel, from your de-- de-vote… devoted student, Erestor.”

Erestor nodded. “You are improving every day.”

Glorfindel smiled and looked up from the page. “I shall cherish it always.”

“I hope you shall read it as well.”

The pair laughed at the tiny jest, and then stood quietly for a moment before Glorfindel asked, “Have you eaten yet?”

“No. I am still trying to acclimate myself to eating in such a fine place,” said Erestor. “The transition has been a little overwhelming for me.”

“Perhaps you might like to have something in my room with me,” offered Glorfindel. “We just need to let one of the pages in the hallway know, and they will bring food to us.”

Erestor’s mouth gaped open. “They really do that?”

“So long as you order before the nightwatch,” Glorfindel confirmed.

“That would be really lovely,” decided Erestor. “Oh, speaking of your rooms,” he added as he followed Glorfindel around the corner, “would you happen to know if I left a robe there?”

“Uh… I will have to look for it,” Glorfindel said quickly, even though he knew well that it was hidden in the bottom of a trunk under some extra blankets. “I may have sent it to be laundered.”

“Oh, nothing to worry about. I am just glad to know it is there. I looked all over for it when I was unpacking before I considered where else it might be. I lose things sometimes,” admitted Erestor.

“Oh,” Glorfindel stopped a moment. “I only just remembered. All I have is that one chair in the room. Unless, of course, you do not mind sitting on the bed.”

“If you do not mind, I do not mind,” said Erestor.

Glorfindel nodded, and continued on his way to the page. His spirits lifted once more, he decided he should perhaps get rid of the one chair he had if it meant having seemingly innocent ways for Erestor’s scent to permeate his bedsheets.
Gondolin

123 First Age

“Population growth has been stagnant over the last five years. Currently, the expectation is less than one percent growth in the next twelve months.” Glorfindel stood up and walked to a chart he had created. “At the current rate of growth, we expect it to take roughly 380 years to reach minimum efficiency in the city.” Glorfindel’s developing skills with language allowed him to study books on other topics, and mathematics was now one of his greatest interests. He moved to a second chart. “This shows the deficit we have in the workforce. Many of the crafting and trade occupations are very short on apprentices. This leads to long wait times for things like bricks, paper, and wood and metal work. It is leading to disappointment and unrest.”

Turgon’s brows were so tightly knit together it seemed they may not come apart again. “Whether eighty or three-eighty, we are not at liberty to wait. News comes from other realms of the multiplying of our people. Something must be done.”

“We should increase the stipend offered for a successful birth,” suggested Voronwe. Of all of the Elves Turgon surrounded himself with, Voronwe was the one the others were most wary of. While there were times in the partial privacy of the pasture and stables that small groups would discuss a council or the city in general, tongues were held around Voronwe. It was said that the fair Elf who was fond of the small ships he built to ferry the way over some of the wider streams was related to Turgon, though it was somewhat indirectly. Nonetheless, the others were cautious of how much they revealed to Voronwe, and also tended to treat his suggestions with more scrutiny.

“That could lead to a difficult situation if we have a sudden population boom. Where will the funding come from?” asked Egalmoth.

“Where does the funding come from now?” asked Salgant.

Turgon raised a single finger, and when everyone turned their attention to him, he answered, “My treasury.”

“Awkward,” whispered Duilin to Egalmoth.

The group sat around several tables that were placed together in a large rectangle. “Excuse me - and I know I am really only a guest - but might I make a suggestion?”

Everyone turned their head to regard Erestor. While he sat between Glorfindel’s chair and Aredhel, he had been bid to come by Ecthelion. Erestor cleared his throat when Turgon gave a single nod.
“Something I noticed when I first arrived is that there are very few places for children in the city.”

“Just what do you mean?” asked Voronwe.

“The few children I have seen playing are in alleyways or running around tents in the market. There are no parks or amusements for them. What parents wants to raise children in this sort of environment? There are pubs, a theatre, several brothels, and an opium den. These are not the sort of things, if I were a parent, that I would be looking for in an area to raise a child. There are also many residents who are unmarried, and those same parks would be ideal for walks and light courtship.”

No one spoke initially, until Duilin whispered “Blasphemy,” under his breath, and Salgant stabbed his plump finger accusingly at Erestor. “How dare you suggest that there are houses of ill-repute in our fair city! Never have I seen a brothel in Gondolin!”

“You must not get out much,” Erestor replied without flinching. “Go to the lesser market. Do not simply cut through to the pastry chef and back home again. You will find them.”

Salgant wrinkled his nose. “I never go to the lesser market. My butler does all of my menial work.”

“And it shows,” shot back Erestor.

“Your highness, will you truly allow his insults here at your table?” demanded Egalmoth.

“What insults me is the inability for my captains to solve a problem. It would seem to me that Erestor is the only one offering anything new.” Turgon looked to Erestor now, and rebuked him sharply. “I implore you not to anger my captains. I cannot be responsible for the consequences.”

The corners of Salgant’s mouth turned upward, and Duilin, who had narrowed his eyes at Erestor, smirked as well. They sobered once again when Aredhel patted Erestor’s hand comfortingly, and steel her gaze at the pair across from them.

“Other than parks, what other amusements would you suggest?” asked Turgon. “Our resources are limited.”

Erestor glanced at Aredhel, and she nodded. This was not unnoticed by Glorfindel, still at his charts. He suddenly felt quite left out of a prior discussion that was obviously had between Erestor and Aredhel. “There is a theatre. What about puppet shows?”

“Puppet shows are an excellent way for children to spend an afternoon,” agreed Aredhel. “During the week, when all are at work, it would provide a very good means of entertainment for the young ones.”

“Pppup…puppet… shows?!” Salgant lifted a hand to his forehead, and closed his eyes as if in a swoon. “My theatre is no place for puppetry!”

“Why not?” This question came from Turgon, and Salgant floundered with his lips silently moving like a fish caught out of water. “Does anything actually happen in that theatre of yours during midday?”

“With all due respect, sire, much happens at midday. Sets are built, practice is conducted, and the musicians learn their cues. If we had to manage puppet shows, it would delay everything.” There was a growl to Duilin’s voice, and Salgant nodded at all of the points made. Even Egalmoth gave a final nod as Duilin finished.

At another part of the table, Penlod and Galdor had been whispering quietly, with Rog keeping an
eye and an ear on their conversation. This trio, in some ways, mirrored Salgant, Duilin, and Egalmoth. Penlod was quite tall, and Galdor certainly shorter, and spent almost as much time in shared ventures as Duilin and Salgant. While Penlod was physically similar to Duilin, Galdor had sun-kissed hair in contrast to Salgant’s onyx locks. They were both the most vocal of the triumvirates they traveled with.

Rog was much like Egalmoth in that he was the strength of the group. Rog had his arms crossed over his chest, and his words were often the punctuation to the thoughts of Galdor and Penlod. There was one particularly striking facet of his appearance - his smoothly saved head, which was presently covered with a round, flat cap. A hammer hung from his belt, and had on occasion clunked against a table leg or a chair.

Penlod politely raised his hand, elbow on the table, and once recognized, said, “My son has been looking for ways to expand usage of the glade where he reads poetry and tells stories. I think I can talk him into some afternoon storytimes for children.”

“I have some patterns for wooden marionettes,” added Galdor. “I can make a few and we can see if anyone has interest in learning how to use them.”

“Maybe the children could even put on their own shows,” suggested Penlod.

“And you think your son is just going to become Gondolin’s child care expert?” questioned Egalmoth. “What if he says no?”

“Pengolodh will do whatever I tell him to,” Penlod informed the others. “He is obedient and still outside his majority. More than that, he is loyal to Gondolin and his King, and if he is told that it is for the good of Gondolin, he will not fuss over it like a crazed hen.”

“And what will you do when the weather is bad? Surely Pengolodh cannot stop the rain,” Duilin said.

“Instead of finding reasons we cannot, why not find a way to do it?” Rog clasped Penlod’s shoulder and said, “While Galdor makes the puppets, I can work with you to create a structure for days when the weather would prohibit outdoor amusements. Perhaps we might even build a few seesaws or swings, if you are amiable to them being there,” said Rog, and Penlod nodded. “Though she is a little older than the audience you are seeking, I think my daughter would enjoy a few more things to do in the city. Perhaps in a few years, she could assist Pengolodh.”

“It would be wonderful for Idril, too,” suggested Aredhel. “I am sure she would be willing to help with the children.”

“I shall speak to her,” agreed Turgon. “I think there will be interest enough in this project to find others willing to assist.”

“As for the idea of the park,” said Ecthelion, “we have limits to the space we have in the city. That said, the courtyard right now consists solely of a fountain and some crude stone pathways. If Galdor would be so kind, I believe there are members of his house who are knowledgeable on the types of plants which would grow in the rocky terrain we have there. I think there is a way for us to construct a nice garden area, and perhaps even use some hardy groundcover to make use of the open rocky field to the east of the tower. Erestor, I know you have a great deal of agricultural knowledge. Does that extend to horticulture as well?”

“My expertise lies with edible crops, but I have a general ability to do well growing plants,” he said. “I would be happy to help in whatever ways I can.”
Turgon looked around the table. Only Enerdhil had not spoken, and he simply shrugged. It was typical for him to remain neutral in most matters. Enerdhil spoke little and remained secretive in most matters. He was of average height, but with so many tall Elves in the room, appeared shorter in stature. His muscles rivaled Rog’s - Enerdhil was a smith and a miner, and in addition, a fierce opponent in the yearly games of strength and speed. His wealth, however, rivaled that of the King, whose treasury was made rich for the most part on the tributes from Enerdhil. “If I am needed, I shall help,” he finally said.

“Ecthelion, I am appointing you to head the rehabilitation of the courtyard,” said Turgon. He motioned to Glorfindel, and immediately the blond knew he was to take notes on this decree. Glorfindel’s penmanship, due to his intense practice of Tengwar, was nearly perfect in comparison to the styles developed by others who had been writing for years. When Turgon saw how well Glorfindel could write, he immediately chose him to take all future notes of the council, stating he was tired of deciphering Aredhel’s chicken scratch.

“I shall see it done, sire,” promised Ecthelion with a bow of his head.

“Penlod, as the land in question belongs to you, I am appointing you to be in charge of the…” He waved his hand, as if the words were in the air and he was looking to capture them. “…creation of amusements for children committee,” he settled on.

“Very good, your majesty. I am certain whatever we create will be to your liking.”

“I despise the idea of a ‘chief’ councillor,” said Turgon as he turned to address Erestor, “and I am not ready to make an appointment just yet, but I believe it would be in our mutual interest for you to be in attendance at these gatherings.”

“As you wish,” said Erestor as he closed his eyes and bowed his head. Aredhel grinned and reached over to squeeze Erestor’s hand, and he smiled.

Turgon looked up over the heads to others. “Sorry, Glorfindel, I did not catch that.”

Unaware the the noise of discontent in the back of his throat would be heard by the King, Glorfindel looked back with wide eyes. “Just… something… caught in my throat,” he said, and cleared his throat, and looked back down to the tablet of parchment he was writing on to avoid Turgon’s seemingly burning gaze.

“It has been a long night. We shall adjourn so that the parched may have their thirst quenched and the hungry may be well-fed.” Turgon stood first, and the others followed.

Glorfindel sat down as others vacated so that he could finish his notes. He looked up abruptly upon feeling a touch on his shoulder. There was a moment of hope, but he saw Ecthelion looking down at him. “Are you going to Galdor’s house, or back to the barracks?”

“I am not sure.” He looked around, to see only Galdor and Penlod remaining, speaking at the door. “Do you know where Erestor went?”

“He left arm in arm with Aredhel, and they were following Turgon. If I had to guess, I would say to the top of the tower.” Ecthelion crossed his arms. “I do not know what sort of spell your friend cast upon the lady, but it bodes well for us, I think. To be in favor with Aredhel is to be in favor with the King. Oh! Glorfindel, your ink—”

Glorfindel looked down to see that the ink was dripping from his quill in a puddle on the page. He tore the ruined page off the tablet and began the task of rewriting his notes. “Are you going to
Galdor’s house?”

“I thought I would,” said Ecthelion. “I can wait for you,” he offered.

Glorfindel shook his head and continued with his task. “I can catch up.”

Ecthelion patted Glorfindel’s shoulder, which caused a bit of ink to splatter on the new sheet. “Sorry,” he apologized as Glorfindel growled and started over once more. Ecthelion backed away and left the room.

“Cannot even close the doors… brought up in a barn,” grumbled Glorfindel as he worked to rewrite the commentary from the meeting. He sighed several times and restarted a fourth time when he took note of mistakes in his spelling.

“Can I help?”

Glorfindel looked up to see Erestor standing in the doorway. “Oh. I… um... dammit!” He looked down just as another large drop of ink plopped onto the page. “My notes get getting ruined, and I just want to go and relax and have a drink,” he admitted as Erestor came around to join him at the table. “I just want to go home. And I thought you were going to go have dinner with Aredhel.” The words came out a bit angrily, and with far more emotion than Glorfindel had intended.

“Why would you think that? And here, let me help. I can write faster - you can dictate them to me,” said Erestor as he gently took the quill from Glorfindel’s grasp.

“She was with you when you left.” Glorfindel slid the ink closer to Erestor.

Erestor smiled and dragged the tablet over. “I only walked her to the stairway. Her brother escorted her back to her room. It is hardly my place to dine with the royal family.”

“Oh.”

“I was going to try to catch the others, but I came back to find only you here,” Erestor’s hand flew over the page, and he needed only glance at Glorfindel’s pages to complete the task in short order. “Were you to! join them, or did you plan to be here and then go home?”

“Well…” Glorfindel licked his lips while he collected his thoughts. “Ecthelion went to Galdor’s house with some of the others. The rest will be at Salgant’s residence.”

“And you?” Erestor turned his head. “What are your plans for the evening?”

Glorfindel folded the ruined sheets to keep the ink from smudging the table. “I am somewhat expected at Galdor’s,” he said carefully. “You would be welcome there, as well.”

“Let me try again. What do you want to do this evening? I already know you are ill at ease with large, boisterous crowds,” said Erestor. “While I enjoy a good gathering, I hardly know any of the people who were in this room tonight. I know you; I know Aredhel. I have some past experience with Ecthelion, but it was mostly me telling him and his friends to get off my lawn.”

Glorfindel smiled at this image. “I bet it happened more than once.”

“You have no idea. So, I have no plans. Now, what do you want to do?”

Glorfindel took away the quill and ink and put them into the cabinet with the remaining blank sheets. “Have you eaten yet?”
“Not since lunch,” admitted Erestor. As if he could already sense Glorfindel’s thoughts, he asked, “Your room or mine?”

He knew he was blushing, so Glorfindel ducked back down to reorganize the contents of the cabinet. “Well… mine are closer,” he reasoned.

“Excellent. After we eat, I can help you look for my robe.”

“You robe?” Glorfindel nearly banged his head on the cabinet door. “Oh! Your robe! Yes, the… what are they, blue?”

“Green,” corrected Erestor.

“Oh, yes, the green one,” Glorfindel stood up again. “I found it just the other day, and I think I placed it in the closet,” he lied.

“Great. I look forward to being reunited with it,” said Erestor, but his brow twitched and he bit his lip.

“So… do you want to wait for me here while I find a page, or come along to help me order some food?” asked Glorfindel.

“Or I could wait for you in your room and get a head start looking for the robe,” said Erestor. “I still have a copy of your key. Remember?”

“Oh… yes, you do.” Glorfindel swallowed hard. “Well… then if… if you want to just head back, I can order and meet you there.” He wiped his palms on his leggings.

“Excellent plan. Until then,” said Erestor.

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Dinner arrived, and drinks followed, until between them they had finished most of a bottle of wine. Glorfindel did most of the drinking, while Erestor did most of the storytelling. “And then there was the time Ecthelion dug holes in the back of my yard so that he could grow frogs.”

“Grow frogs?” Glorfindel laughed. “Whatever for?”

“Today, I still have no idea. He found that when the tadpoles were in the streams, other creatures ate them. So he would gather them up and bring them to the holes he dug, and he filled them with water. Well, the first time he did it, the water seeped into the ground and all of the tadpoles died. The next time, he made the holes bigger, but it only prolonged the doom of the tadpoles. Finally, he made a giant hole and lined it with rocks. That was when I found him. He was quite upset when I made him fill the holes back up with dirt again - he kept muttering about loss of profits and destruction of the frog economy.”

“That sounds like Ecthelion,” said Glorfindel. Somewhere, a rooster crowed, and Glorfindel looked to the window. “Oh, my! Have we been talking all night?”

“And clear into the morning.” Erestor finished the wine in his glass before he set it aside on the night table. As of yet, Glorfindel still had not procured additional chairs, and so they had been lounging on the bed for the last few hours while Erestor shared stories of Valinor with Glorfindel. “I should try to get a little sleep before I go to the library. I really need to get back on track with my project.”

Glorfindel set his own glass down so that he could see Erestor to the door. “I would love to hear
more of your stories. Perhaps… tonight? Tomorrow?”

“I anticipate working late tonight,” said Erestor. “I have an idea, though. Turgon holds these councils once a week - what if we make time after the meetings for supper or at least drinks together?”

“I would very much enjoy that,” said Glorfindel as he opened the door to let Erestor out.

“Next week, then.” Erestor stepped across the threshold, but then turned back around. “About my robe--”

“Oh! We never did look for them, did we?” Glorfindel felt his cheeks begin to burn.

Erestor smiled. “Actually, I thought about it, and I usually wear black or brown, because ink stains just about everything. Green suits you very much, and they are rather nice, if not a little worn. They were made in Valinor, and are very good quality. I am sure you could find someone to mend them and shorten the hem.”

“Wait -- are you giving the robe to me?”

“Unless you do not want it,” said Erestor uncertainly.

“On the contrary… however, I feel terrible to accept such a gift,” admitted Glorfindel. “First the book, and now the robe, and I have yet to give anything to you.”

Erestor smiled again and placed his hand upon Glorfindel’s arm. “Do not feel so. You have given me something greater, Glorfindel -- your friendship and trust -- and those are worth far more than a book and a robe.”
"There you are!" Glorfindel nearly walked right into Erestor as they both came around the corner at the same time. "You missed your last two riding lessons," he said. "Also, we never scheduled a time for your next lesson on swordsmanship."

"Oh... right." Erestor looked suitably guilty and clasped his hands behind his back. "We never set up another time for your lessons, either, but I have a feeling you have been practicing without me."

Glorfindel nodded. "That reminds me -- there is a book I need to return to the library. Erestor, if you have lost interest in--"

"No, no, no," countered Erestor immediately. "I have only been overly busy as of late. My project, of course, but also there have been new developments. It seems Turgon has much appreciated my counsel and ideas, and he offered payment of sorts. It is nothing substantial to him, but to me, it is a great honor."

"Oh? What is it?" questioned Glorfindel.

"He had some land - a few bits here, an acre or two there - that was just unsuitable for much of anything, or undesirable for others. In some cases, other things were sectioned off around it, and the placement is awkward. He offered me this patchwork of land, and I gladly accepted. I find it to be a great opportunity to experiment with ideas I have for crops which I think will take to these harder to use areas, and for those that have good soil, I will have a better shot at perhaps making a living here without doing so much stressful work in the library."

"It is interesting that you should call the library work stressful -- I would think it to be very easy for you," said Glorfindel.

Erestor smiled and shrugged. "In Doriath, I shared responsibilities for the library with two other people with whom I worked very well. Here, I do not even have a desk, nor a title to speak of. All of my work is freelance, and at any time I might be dismissed. My skills are helpful, but as others learn to translate, I may not be of need. I am not quite as spry as others are, and that can make the difference at times."

"Speaking of titles - you own land now. That makes you a lord," realized Glorfindel.

"I suppose it does," Erestor said. "I never thought of that."

"You will need a name for your house, and a crest, and I assume that others will decide to follow you now."

"Let us not get too far ahead. Right now, all I have to my name are three rocky patches near but not connected to the tower, and two other plots of land further than walking distance. I have not really seen the condition of things at either of those spots, but I have been told they are just much too far to
be of real use to the other houses.” Erestor shrugged. “Followers are some ways off, though. Before I can even think of clearing the rocks or planting, I need tools and equipment, and seedlings or at least seeds. Right now, most of my funds are tied up with the translation project.”

“How so?” asked Glorfindel.

“Well, because I am not officially a member of the library staff, I am required to provide all of my own materials, from the paper and parchment to the ink and quills. They purchase finished pages, but only if they are perfect. That means the entire folio, for binding purposes. If I miss a word, misspell a word, or misalign them so that the same words on the original page do not match to the text on the translated page, they have no interest in them -- and they are harshly scrutinized.”

"I had no idea that was what was happening," said Glorfindel. "What if I--"

Erestor shook his head abruptly. "No, Glorfindel. I enjoy our friendship, and I do not want to borrow from you."

"What if it was a gift?" asked Glorfindel. "You have given me so many nice things--"

"Just an old robe and a little book," warned Erestor.

"I know, I know. But they mean a lot to me. What I am suggesting is not money, no, I am no idiot. It would hurt your pride," he said bluntly, and Erestor smiled and nodded. "I am sure that I have an old wheelbarrow around that I do not need anymore, as well as a shovel or two that you can have. As for the plants, there have been many times that we have weeded saplings that managed to come into the fields via Galdor's homestead. If we look around, we may well find a few that you can offer a new home. Now, for seeds, I think all we would need to do is speak with the cooks. I would wager there are more than a few that would put aside the seeds from what they cook for us. I know most of them by name on account of how often I eat in my room." Glorfindel glanced over his shoulder and added, "To that end, are you free? We have gotten away from our weekly meals, and tonight would be ideal to discuss how to go about economically getting things to grow on your land."

"I..." Erestor rubbed his chin and looked uncertain of how to proceed. "I am supposed to meet Aredhel," he finally said.

"Oh." Glorfindel nodded and frowned. "Another time, then?"

"No... let me go and speak with her. I think that this is far more important, all things considered. I have the growing season to think about, and I need to figure out how to mark the land in some way. I think that she will understand why I need to break the-- um. Cancel the appointment."

Glorfindel blinked. "Right. Well, it is up to you. I do not want to jeopardize anything between the two of you."

Erestor bit his lip. "We are just... good companions for each other," he carefully said.

Glorfindel nodded.

"I am not doing it to become better friends with the King, if that is what you are worried about," said Erestor, speaking much softer. "My intentions are pure in this matter."

"I have no doubt of that." Glorfindel looked to the floor, and then up again. "I just remembered. I have other plans tonight. We will need to pick a different time to speak. Happy news - no need to break your date with Aredhel." Erestor opened his mouth, but Glorfindel kept speaking. "Just send someone to speak with my assistant about setting up an appointment," he said as he continued on his
way around the nearest corner. He nearly walked into King Turgon, who was on a rare stroll by himself. “Your majesty.” Glorfindel bowed low.

“Captain.” Turgon paused and clasped his hands behind his back. He was dressed smartly, as he always was in public, in indigo, red, and gold velvet and silk. He had a black velvet half-cloak lined with gold brocade, the pattern of which matched the blue-violet doublet lined with gold buttons. There was an orange and ivory mongoose wearing a black leather collar perched on his shoulder, tiny eyes darting about with interest, red nose constantly twitching. “Was that Lord Erestor I heard you speaking with?”

Glorfindel straightened up. Whenever he spoke to most of the Elves in Gondolin, he usually had to look up. With Erestor and Duilin, he always took a step back so that he did not strain his neck. Turgon was very tall, intimidating, and commanding. “Yes, sire. Shall I retrieve him for you?”

“No need.” Both the mongoose and Turgon appeared to look down upon Glorfindel with scrutiny. “Good day,” offered Turgon as he passed, and Glorfindel bowed and stepped to the side. He took a deep breath and went to his room, where he groaned once the door was locked behind him. He did little more than remove his boots before he collapsed onto the bed and decided his plans for the afternoon included a nap.

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“You really should take this key away from me.”

Glorfindel awoke to the scent of baked fish with drawn butter mingled with herbed potatoes. He saw, as he sat up and tried to smooth back his hair from the battle it had endured with his pillow, that Erestor was sitting in the single chair in the room. There was a wooden trolley from the kitchen near to the door, with three covered plates atop, a bottle of wine, two glasses, napkins, and silverware. “You should really learn to knock,” he said, but he hardly sounded upset.

“I did knock. I took your snoring to be a greeting and permission to enter so that I did not spend an hour in the hall looking like a lost servant from the kitchen.” Erestor closed the book he was reading and set it in his lap. “I had the dates mixed up. I am to meet with Aredhel next week. I went to the barracks to look for you, but Ecthelion said that you told him you were free the entire day and had every intention of schooling me with horse or sword, so I took that to mean you were not that busy. I brought a peace offering,” he said in reference to the dinner cart.

“I was the one who stormed off,” admitted Glorfindel. “I am sorry about that.”

“You have been very kind to me,” said Erestor. “I hear what others whisper when they think I am not around - even Ecthelion, kind though he seems.” Erestor stood up so that he could bring the trolley to the bedside. “Your friendship has been unconditional, and you have been so very helpful in so many ways. I do not think I would be where I am now and have the opportunities presented if not for your assistance, and I am grateful for that.” He lifted the lids and placed them on the lower shelf of the cart before he brought the chair over so that he could sit to face Glorfindel. “If I ever upset you again, please tell me outright. I do not wish to hurt or offend you. You are my best friend, Glorfindel, and I hope I am not too forward in saying that.”

Best friend was not lover, but it was better than nothing, and far more than Glorfindel had expected. He had long considered Ecthelion to be his closest companion, but Ecthelion had somewhat taken charge of him, and raised him, and had still companions closer who went off to pubs and the late theatre shows and did things without Glorfindel. Now that Glorfindel really reflected on it, more of his freetime was spent with Erestor than with anyone else, and the reverse was likely true as well. “Deal,” he said. “I just wanted to help, and I--“
“Felt like I was shoving you aside because I wanted to spend time with Aredhel instead. That is a very delicate matter,” said Erestor as he pulled the chair a little closer and shook out the napkin to place in his lap. “She... intrigues me. Perhaps if she was interested in a family, she would intrigue me even more. I am a little surprised she has not bored of me already.”

“You are a very interesting person,” countered Glorfindel. “Well-read and intelligent, and willing to learn new things. You have many interesting stories.”

“Yes, but she was in Valinor for all of those stories,” reminded Erestor as he uncorked the wine. Glorfindel nodded, and his mind went back to something said earlier. “So you have an interest in having a family?” His fingers worried the edge of the sheet.

Erestor held the stem of one glass as he poured the wine. “At one point, I had it in my head that I wanted two or three children. Then I thought I would be content with just one. I think the further along I get in life the more willing I am to compromise. A wife would be fine. A child would be welcomed. Children would be more than glorious.”

Hope was dashed, until Glorfindel took a moment to consider what Erestor had said. If he was willing now to compromise and accept a wife, how much longer would further compromise take? He shoved the thoughts away -- it would do him no good to worry about it now. “I hope you will find the right compromise, then, be it with Aredhel or someone else.” Glorfindel lifted the glass of wine closest to him and clinked it to Erestor’s when his glass was raised as well.

“I wish for you all the best in life as well,” answered Erestor. “Mmm... before I forget, I procured the seeds as you suggested when I went to the kitchen. Not only that, but there were some empty pots in a corner, and when I inquired about them, the head cook just gave them to me. I have been keeping my eyes open for things like that which might be helpful.”

The pair spent the rest of the night and many weeks after making plans for the land Erestor had been given. It was not long before their hard work paid off. Their gains did not go unnoticed by others, and the seeds of jealousy began to grow.
This was not in the original version or v.2 for Unforgettable. It was added 9/1/2017 and is only in the v.3 or final version continuity.

Months ago, AnnEllspethRaven sent me a message with a file titled "A Snippet for Zhie-"The Cucumber Fucker". The note with it read: [Meant to occur between chapters 8 and 9 of UNF]

At first I thought perhaps it would be a nice BV stand-alone, but it really felt like it was supposed to be part of this massive thing. It sat through the summer untouched and unposted until tonight, when I had a sudden moment of clarity and finished the second half of it. So the first half belongs to AnnEllspethRaven, and the second half of Erestor shitting on someone's cucumber parade is mine. And now, Unforgettable doesn't seem in the early portion to make such a huge leap. However, this means I need to re-number some sections again. Please be patient with me, darlings, it's taken nearly twelve years to bridge these chapters, I should have renumbering happening soon.

“The pair spent the rest of the night and many weeks after making plans for the land Erestor had been given. It was not long before their hard work paid off. Their gains did not go unnoticed by others, and the seeds of jealousy began to grow.”

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“Cucumbers, summer squashes, okra and cherry tomatoes,” said Glorfindel excitedly, proudly showing Erestor the table filled with neat rows of starts growing out of little earthen squares. “One of the books in the library showed how to make seed-blocks of compressed compost; there was an abundance of such from the manure piles behind the stables. A cast-off bed sheet provided shade for the tables, and these were watered twice a day for the last four weeks. In three more days, they will be ready for transplanting.”

The dark elf cocked his eyebrow in amusement and approval at the extent of his friend’s ambitions. “Why these, in particular?”

“To that, I owe the comment you made at the captain’s meeting. When you mentioned going to the lower markets...it occurred to me, that it would be wise to see what sorts of items sold the most. Would be the most popular. So when the stall keepers were unoccupied, I made small purchases in order to gain more freely wagging tongues. It turns out, at the summer markets only a handful of fruits and vegetables have two very desirable attributes. Come, I have made a chart.”

“Of course you have,” laughed Erestor. Glorfindel’s enthusiasm for the application of mathematics had already blossomed freely.

“Are you making fun of me?” the blond asked, momentarily taken aback. A flicker of hurt passed over his face before it was immediately banished.

“No, Glorfindel. I am proud of you. It has been my privilege, to see teaching you some letters and
writing transform into all of this.”

“Really?”

“Really. Now show me your information. I wish to see it.”

The smile returned to the blue eyes. “Well, here then. This is a comparison of last season’s average sale price for each item of produce, versus the difficulty of growing each of those crops. You can see on the graph, that the plant starts on the table offer the most financial reward for the least amount of horticultural difficulty.”

“And how did you determine ‘difficulty’?” Erestor asked.

“From another chart. I researched time from germination to first yields, frequency of harvest, known susceptibility to insects and disease, and what steps are involved in caring for each plant to harvest. For example, onions are relatively difficult to produce and yet command a very low price at market. A single onion must be germinated, transplanted, grown, weeded multiple times, harvested and cured before it can be sold. Whereas a cucumber needs to be germinated, and transplanted, weeded minimally, and yields continually for a period of several weeks while selling at market for twice the money. Do you see?”

“Huh.” Erestor’s brow furrowed. It was a clever approach, with legitimate potential. “So what comes next?”

“The planting beds are almost ready; more thoroughly rotted manure will finish amending the worst of the sites. I would like to have more sticks to trellis especially the tomatoes, but if that cannot be the case so be it. Once the starts are in, they will of course require the usual care.”

“I have the rest of the afternoon free. Show me what to do, and I will help you finish the preparations.”

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Salgant grinned up at Duilin. “All the cucumber seed, you say?”

“Yes. It is a simple idea. It is called ‘cross-pollination’. Hybridizing. Most of the cucumbers sold at the market here come from five farmers, who raise their different sorts each year. But two of them have farms adjacent to each other, and found out that their saved seed yielded a new variety. One ellon grows a green medium sized cucumber with very bumpy skin and spines, while the other has a smallish one with smooth skin. Planted near each other, seed saved from these fields can yield a third kind; a highly desirable plant that makes medium sized cucumbers with beautiful skin. Pleasing to the eye, and perfection for slicing and salads. But they cannot dedicate themselves to growing a crop only for seed. That is where you come in. You have that small isolated field, not far from some of those scattered plots of Turgon’s.”

A frown crossed Salgant’s brow. “You mean, those scattered plots that he has given over to Erestor?”

Duilin smirked. “Yes, the same. Though I cannot see how their ownership can bear on the matter at hand.”

“I suppose it does not. So you would wish me to grow these two kinds and...sell the cucumbers?”

“No, not that. The two parent varieties would be planted in your field, in rows. Honeybees do all the actual work, moving pollen between the two kinds of cucumbers. But when they grow, it is only the
fruits of the smallish vines that we want to save; these of course we plant the most of, whereas the others are only the cross-pollinators. We do not harvest any of them; we leave them on the vines to deliberately over-ripen. It is the seed inside of those that is the prize, for when planted the following year they will grow into the special variety. It is little effort, and you will be able to sell the seed here and elsewhere. I have already spoken with Gildor about it; he is not above earning a little extra coin to ensure they make their way to interested buyers in the other elven realms.”

“Duilin, your mind works in strange ways, but why not? It is no difficulty for me, and a chance to put a patch of land otherwise unspoken-for to use.”

“Good. I will make arrangements, then.”

*****

Eight weeks later, Erestor went looking for Glorfindel. It was their evening to eat together, the night of the week that they made time for each other regardless, in order to discuss their plans and projects. And yet he was nowhere to be found. His rooms, the library; even a chance encounter with Ecthelion revealed no knowledge of where his golden friend had gone. Finally he turned his steps toward the stables, not knowing where else to look and beginning to worry. He found Glorfindel seated on a bench, his countenance written over with dejection, his posture slumped. And in the middle of the large walkway was their largest wheelbarrow, piled high with wilting cucumber plants. Many were loaded with yellow flowers, and baby fruits dangled here and there among the vines. Erestor looked at what he was sure were their plants to Glorfindel and back again. The ellon did not raise his eyes.

“You are going to be angry with me and I will not blame you,” he said quietly. “Erestor, I am such a fool.”

“Leave that decision to me,” the older elf said, with no reproach in his voice. “Tell me instead what happened.” Only silence followed. “Glorfindel?” He sat next to him on the bench, close enough for their arms to brush against each other lightly.

“Duilin came to me. He told me of this special project he and Salgant had planned months ago. It has to do with growing a vast amount of special cucumber seed, that will be a better kind than any yet seen in the markets. And that because of how the pollination must happen, our cucumbers being so near to theirs threatened to ruin their entire effort. He said that we would be paid in some compensation for the loss of our future yields. I did as I was asked, removing what amounted to two-thirds of all our plants. But when I went to Salgant to ask for payment, he said he had authorized no such arrangement. He laughed at me, Erestor, and sent me packing as though I were an errant elfling. I should have talked to you first. I have thrown away the easiest money we could have made all summer...I feel so stupid.”

Erestor listened and his anger flared, though he hid it well. Glorfindel was good, albeit naive, and had made himself an easy target for a scheme too petty to bring before Turgon. They would manage, without the cucumbers. It was the sheer unkindness toward a good elf that raised his ire. “I am not angry, Glorfindel. You were taken advantage of, and it was not your doing. I will have that payment, one way or another. And look--not all of these plants are lost. Come and help me. We will cut them back, trim away the vines and place them in very damp compost, in the deep shade. In a week, we will be able to replant them elsewhere. We will lose about a month, but no more.”

This pronouncement caused him to raise his golden head. “How? How will you get the payment?”

Erestor smiled. “I will only say in very general terms that on the night of the proper new moon, a great many of those cucumbers for seed will go missing, and that next year you and I will
mysteriously have quite a preponderance of this new and wonderful variety. They do not know how to start the seeds early as you have learned to do, which means that our produce will be the first to reach the market stalls. Once vendors have a supplier, they tend to be loyal purchasers for the remainder of the season. Now get up, no more moping. It is our night for dinner, and I intend to have it, right after we manage these plants.”

Glorfindel smiled weakly, and followed Erestor with the wheelbarrow. Though he still felt a fool, the one he cared about more than any other had not treated him with condescension. Only kindness. “I had forgotten about eating.”

“Fortunately, I did not. And there is even a special treat for you.”

“There is? What?” He brightened a little bit more.

“I am not telling, otherwise you will never focus enough to get this done so we can have our meal.”

For a moment, Glorfindel wondered if there really was a treat. He had already been duped once today. Erestor seemed to realize, and laid a hand briefly on his shoulder. “Strawberries, and sweetened cream.”

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“--and then he said, ‘I only came because the tickets were free’--”

“Salgant?”

“--and then she said, ‘I never heard such a lovely voice!’--”

“Salgant.”

“--and then I said, ‘You should be here when we actually charge for--”

“Salgant!”

Several paces ahead, Salgant only now realized that Duilin had fallen back. He turned and lifted his hands up questioningly. They were taking a stroll through the Greater Market post-council on their way to a late lunch. It was an off-day for the market, which meant less vendors than normal, but the regulars were still there. Typically, it would not mean anything of note at the stalls.

Duilin pointed to something near to where he stood, and Salgant waddled back. “I am expending precious energy, Duilin. I have not eaten since…” He paused and looked at the wooden crate, tilted to allow the best view of the produce. Within, rows and rows of perfect cucumbers were displayed, ready for purchase. “…since…”

“What the fuck are those?” Duilin picked up one of the cucumbers and held it squarely in front of Salgant. “What the fuck is this? I thought agreed to sell the seeds. Are you harvesting a portion behind my back to pad your profits? Did you think I would not find out?”

“I would never do that!” Salgant grabbed the cucumber away. “These are not mine -- nothing has grown yet!”

“Good day, fine sirs!” said the grocer cheerfully as he approached. “Are you interested? Second batch of the season; first crate sold in just a few hours last week. I have some lovely, hearty tomatoes that would complement--”
“Are these yours?” Duilin demanded to know. “Did you grow these?”

“N-no, m’lord,” answered the seller, and only now as he edged closer did he see the identities of those perusing his wares. “I contract with farmers and--”

“Who sold these to you?”

The grocer took a step back. “I prefer not to identify my sources for sake of privacy, but for you, m’lord, I shall make an exception,” he said, for while most were unarmed in the market, this pair was, and the grocer was wringing his hands as he spoke. “Do you know that librarian fellow who came from Doriath and--”

“Erestor! That fucker!” Duilin threw the cucumber down into the crate, and only by chance did it fail to split open. “I knew he was bad news! Did you tell him what we were doing?”

“He must have heard somehow,” growled Salgant. He picked up the cucumber to examine it again and shook it at the grocer. “Great in salads, I would wager.”

“The b-best for slicing,” answered he.

“Bah!” Salgant threw the cucumber back into the crate and stomped off. “Erestor! Always Erestor! The rest of us toil to get this city built, and he comes in as if he knows how to do things better than we do!”

“I think he just proved that,” responded Duilin, who was now keeping pace with Salgant.

“And Glorfindel needs to learn to keep his damned mouth shut, because he is most certainly the one who told him our plan,” realized Salgant.

“If you had just paid him off like we planned--”

“You promised him far too much!” Salgant shook his head. “We need to communicate better.”

Duilin rolled his eyes. “We need to get rid of Erestor. This shit never happened before he arrived.” It was a common conversation, with variations on a theme. Duilin was not above sharing the latest bit of gossip. “I heard a rumor at the Drunken Gull that Erestor used to be Luthien’s personal minstrel.”

Salgant came to a halt. “What?! Why did you never tell me this?”

Duilin shrugged. “Only heard it yesterday. Never got around to it. I guess he was the whole reason Thingol banned Quenya. Apparently he was a better singer than Thingol’s daughter, but he can only sing well in his native tongue.” He gave a moment for the comment to boil Salgant’s blood before he added, “I suppose we best hope that there is never a resurgence of Quenya in the theatre, or you may be out of a job.”

“That fucker! That cucumber fucker!” Salgant clenched his fists. “At this rate, he will control the markets in five years time, and whomever controls the markets truly controls Gondolin.”

“He already has the ear of the King,” Duilin reminded him. “Turgon has yet to declare a successor.”

“Over my dead body will it be that bookworm!” Salgant turned and began to walk in another direction.

“Where are we going?” asked Duilin once he realized they were on the move again.

“The fields. They border. I want to see what his crops look like. I want to see what he is doing,”
insisted Salgant.

“Just be careful not to trespass,” warned Duilin.

Salgant laughed, but it was not a very kind sort of laugh. “Impossible. He put up five foot barriers of posts with wire, and has two wolfhounds in each plot to guard them.”

“What? The fuck is wrong with him?” demanded Duilin. “Who puts dogs on their land to guard?”

“Apparently, cucumber fucking librarians.”

The comment was not meant to be humorous, but Duilin chuckled all the same. “Cucumber fucking. So how does that work exactly?”

“The fuck should I know?” shot back Salgant, but he had a smirk on his own face now. “Someone like that, the only relations they apparently get to have is with cucumbers.”

Duilin covered his mouth as he laughed again, and they exchanged further vulgar commentary as they traveled to their destination.

As they approached, they quieted their voices, for there was someone working on Erestor’s land. It was difficult to tell who it was, for they were veiled and dressed in baggy clothing. “That looks like smoke,” cautioned Duilin.

“I smell no fire,” Salgant replied, but he hurried his steps a bit.

“Wait.” Duilin reached out to slow Salgant. “What is that?” he asked as he pointed.

“What?” Salgant shielded his eyes from the sun.

“That. And there is another over there.” Duilin tilted his head. “Is that an apiary?”

Salgant blinked, mouth open slightly. “Egalmoth never said anything about one out here. We plotted all of that out when we started, remember? He promised me he knew what he was doing.”

“That does not look like Egalmoth’s operation, nor do they resemble the ones Galdor has.” Duilin was fuming now. “I think I know what that asshole is up to. Five silver says none of the cucumbers over there are the ones we saw in the market.”

Salgant frowned and watched Duilin walk toward the fenceline before he struggled to catch up. It had been a long walk, and he had been hungry, but unknown thoughts were making him feel positively sick. It was when they were a few paces from the wooden boxes built off the ground just at the corner of Erestor’s property that the mysterious figure identified himself as he stepped back, lowered a smoking pot on a chain, and pulled back the fabric that covered his head and neck. “Good day, friends,” he called to them.

“Do not give me that ‘friend’ bullshit,” warned Duilin. “We saw what you did at the market.” He crouched down to get a better view through the fence at the plants on the other side.

“Oh, well, if you want okra cheaper than that, we could negotiate a direct agreement,” Erestor offered.

“The cucumbers, you fucker!” burst out Salgant, and the sheer image of the minstrel huffing and running toward the fence, his council robes still on, his fist aloft, the scowl on his face, the slight bit of sweat or drool or both upon his chin, caused Erestor to do the only thing he could.

He laughed.
“What are those bees doing there?” Salgant stabbed a finger in the air toward the offending structures. “Who gave you permission to have them?”

“You are required to pay licensing fees for those,” announced Duilin, who had been crawling along the side of the fence to try to see what was on the other side, to no avail. “I do not recall that being discussed in council.”

“Actually, the rules on apiaries are really interesting,” said Erestor as he removed the baggy outer garments he had been wearing. “Apiaries do need permission if there are more than six total hives collectively run by the same person. I have five, so there was no need to inform anyone. I think of it more as a…hobby,” he said. “As for licenses, that is only required if one plans to sell the honey.”

“What are you going to do with the honey? Surely, you have no need for all of that,” declared Salgant.

“Oh, no, certainly not,” agreed Erestor. “Besides, clover and wildflower honey does far better at market. It would be a waste of bottles -- and the licensing would decrease the profit on the cucumbers. And seeds.”

Salgant narrowed his eyes again. “What are you going to do, just leave it?”

“I will leave some of it, of course. I do not want my bees to starve,” said Erestor. “However, I did find a brewer who makes excellent honey mead--”

“Aha! You are selling it!” accused Salgant.

“Do you always interrupt everything everyone says?” Erestor sighed. “No, I am not selling it. I am giving it to him, and then, he has promised me two barrels each year.”

“A trade. Might as well be selling,” Salgant said.

“Except not selling, and legal, and your foot is on my land.”

Salgant looked down.

“Not you.” Erestor turned his head and tapped his foot as Duilin moved back from the fence. “Snake cucumbers.”

Duilin took another step back and looked down. “Where is there a snake?”

“No. The crops. The ones you are trying to identify.” Erestor pointed back at the nearby plants. “Actually, it is a type of melon. They grow every which way -- oh, and they cross pollinate with cucumbers. So you can end up with these really weird looking twisted hybrid cucumber melons. Quite good, but no value at market. Interesting, right?”

Salgant put a hand to his chest and gasped a few times. “You…. you… you…”

Erestor just came to the fence and put a hand on the top of it and nodded. “First word, you. Got it. Go on.”

“You fucker! You… fucking fucker!” Salgant clenched his robe at his chest and seethed. “You fucking ruined my whole damned field!”

“To be fair, it was my bees that fucked up your field,” said Erestor as a large grey dog with keen eyes diligently joined the party at the fence and stood by his master, tail low and unmoving, ears
pointed back. “I suppose I could have told them to go around, but--”

“What do you mean, told them? You talk to your bees?” Duilin crossed his arms over his chest.
“That is the most ridiculous thing I have heard.”

“How do you think the hound knew to come over here? I just called him,” said Erestor.

“You did no such thing,” argued Duilin.

Erestor tapped the side of his head. “We were busy talking, so I used a covert method. I do the same
with the bees. Well, with the queens, really. Sometimes I can get a drone to carry a brief
conversation, but you know what they say about bees. Busy, busy, busy!”

“If you are growing some sort of bastardized melon here,” said Duilin, “then where are these
cucumbers -- which we, I might add, actually created -- you have been selling at the market?”

“Oh, those,” said Erestor, as if they were having a friendly conversation at the pub. “Why, I did not
want to leave anything to chance, so I was able to find a carpenter who built a lovely greenhouse on
one of the other plots. They are safe and secure and perfectly pollinated.” He smiled. “Quite
delicious. Perhaps I shall bring some to the next council for everyone to snack on.”

“You… fucking cucumber fucker, you ruined everything! Everything!” Salgant lifted his fist above
his head again and shook it in rage.

“Cucumber fucker? How does that even-- no,” amended Erestor. “Do not answer the question. It just
seems it would be the other way around, if you get my drift.” He leaned on the fence and sized up
Salgant. “Is that why you were trying to grow such large cucumbers? I mean, in order to actually feel
anything past all of that… baggage, you probably need a pretty big one. Maybe you will enjoy these
snake cucumber hybrids, then.”

Salgant stepped as close to the fence as he dared, eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring. “I hate you,” he
ground out.

On the other side, arms relaxed, resting on the top of the fence, Erestor leaned forward so that he
could speak soft and sweetly to Salgant. “I hate you, too,” he said with a grin on his face.

Duilin set a hand upon Salgant’s shoulder. “Hate is too basic. I hate beets. I hate sand in my shoes. I
do not hate you, Erestor,” he said as he stepped so that his toes were touching the property line. He
was taller, and so he looked down upon Erestor, who now straightened up and had to tilt his head
back to make eye contact. “I loathe you, Erestor. I despise you. I will not waste my time with idle
insults, though. I will not give you the satisfaction of a reply. I am patient. I can wait. And I shall
wait. And some day, after careful, precise planning, or happy accident, I shall see your ruin, and I
shall revel in it.”

The pair left Erestor at the fence, with a wolfhound barking his dismissal of them. “What do you
think he told his dog to say to us?” Salgant asked Duilin.

“Oh, please. Do not believe his bullshit,” snapped Duilin, who was now choosing their path. “He
said nothing to that dog or to the bees. He is just a… fucking house servant who figured out how to
play the game better than we do.” They arrived shortly at Egalmöth’s house, and at once were shown
to his den and promised food and drink to be ready for them immediately.

“To what pleasure do I owe seeing both of my dearest friends twice in one day?” asked Egalmöth.

“Were you aware that Erestor is establishing an apiary next to--” Duilin stopped and pointed to a jar
on Egalmoth’s desk. “What the fuck are those?”

“These?” Egalmoth turned the jar so that the side with the label glued to it could be fully seen. “Golden Flower Dills. I had no intention of buying them, but-- oh, well, sure, help yourself,” he said as Salgant yanked the jar from the desk.

“No! No, no, no!” Salgant sat down and appeared ready to faint. “‘Best packaged pickles in Gondolin’? No! My pickles are the best!”

“It seems like a small batch sort of thing, Salgant. I am sure you have the market on yours, from volume alone,” said Egalmoth as he reached over and retrieved the jar. “Have you tried these?” he asked as he removed the lid. “They have a sweetness to them -- like, just a bit of honey add-- what is wrong with him?” asked Egalmoth of Duilin as Salgant groaned, and soon the entire story was retold.

When it was over, Egalmoth turned to Salgant, who was fanning himself as he lounged on the couch. “You actually called him a cucumber fucker to his face? I would paid to have seen that.”

“I want to get back at him so badly,” admitted Salgant. “I need revenge for this. I will not let him win.”

“Well, you called him a cucumber fucker, and he stood on the other side of the fence and laughed at you,” Duilin reminded Salgant. “If there are words that will anger him, they are clearly not in a language we speak.”

“The trouble is, you could have said he fucked donkeys instead of cucumbers and he probably would have laughed at that, too,” said Egalmoth. “He is immune to character attacks, because we all know that while no one seems to know exactly what happened, the point remains that we have confirmation from Gildor that Erestor was banished from Doriath. He is not a kinslayer. So what did he do? Clearly something bad enough that suggesting he sodomizes vegetables does not move him.”

“Can you just move that fucking jar?” asked Duilin, and the pickles were tucked into a drawer for the time being.

“Glorfindel,” said Egalmoth as he looked at the label before closing the drawer.

“He was not there,” said Salgant.

Egalmoth shook his head. “Glorfindel was the reason Erestor did all this, right? That whole fiasco last summer with weeding the cucumber plants, and you not paying him what he was promised?”

“Glorfindel was the one to put up the capital to get the farming going. Erestor had no money to do much with the land he was given,” Salgant reminded them.

“In general, I have noticed at council that if anyone attacks an idea Glorfindel has, Erestor immediately backs him up, to the point of making up things he cannot prove,” said Duilin.

“So we attack Glorfindel? That sounds like a great way to piss off Turgon,” Salgant said. “I like living here. I have no plans to ruin that.”

“No, not physically attacking Glorfindel. Not necessarily even doing things to him directly.” Egalmoth stopped when a knock came at the door. Lunch was brought in for them, and they waited until the maid left to resume their discussion. “We need something where there will be witnesses, and we need a reaction from him that is more than verbal retorts or passive aggressive farming. It needs to be something where his reaction is so much worse that whatever we do to elicit it.”
“We should wait, though,” said Duilin. “If we do anything too soon, it will seem like retaliation for the cucumbers.”

Egalmoth nodded. “Waiting is good, but if there is an opportunity, we must seize it.”
No Second Chances (ch. 6 v. 1; ch 10 v.3)

Chapter Notes

v. 0 - October 27, 2005 (@Livejournal) http://zhie.livejournal.com/74387.html [posted with a note that it was the next part written, but that it was not 'part the sixth', and was likely the tenth or twelfth part] - and it only took 11+ years to get those other parts written and inserted in there
v. 1 - July 25, 2007 ? (@ Phoenix)
v. 2 - July 7, 2014
v. 3 - June 4, 2017 (@ AO3)

Gondolin

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No one recalled how it started, but it was much too obvious how it ended.

"Produce evidence to the contrary, young Lord Glorfindel," spat Salgant, emphasizing the fact that the fair elf was indeed the less long-lived of the two, "but until you do, you are nothing more than the bastard son of a forgotten elf, making his way only upon his charm and his luck. There is no doubt in my mind that you surround yourself with the more intelligent lords of the realm in an attempt to have some of their wisdom rub off on you. You are nothing more than lucky, and luck always runs out at some point. I suspect it will not be long before you are using the servants' entrance to the tower."

Glorfindel had tightened his fists until his nails dug into the skin of his palms. As Salgant sniffed at him and turned his head, Glorfindel made to spring forward and leap upon him, but it was Erestor's hand that held him back.

There was a very unamused and almost bored look in his dark friend's eyes. "Never get angry at stupid people," he said rather nonchalantly. Glorfindel blinked, for normally Erestor said nothing outside of council to these other lords, or spoke later when they were not around. Today, he had chosen not only to voice his opinion, but to do so while Salgant and his friends were within distance to hear such words.

"Did you... say something, Lord Erestor?" Egalmoth's words pricked with sudden anger. Erestor drew himself up to his full height, standing nearly an impressive six and one-half feet. In comparison to Duilin and Egalmoth, however, he generally looked average. "I thought I may have heard something, but I think again I may have been mistaken."

"I was not speaking in reference to you, Lord Egalmoth, but perhaps I should have been."

Duilin had made it the furthest from the group, but now he came racing back. They had been waiting on Ecthelion's balcony, having been asked there by the high captain himself. When he had not arrived on time, Salgant saw what he had believed to be an opportunity to persuade Lord Erestor to reorganize his small house under the banner of the House of the Harp. Currently, both Glorfindel and Erestor had their flags flying beneath the House of the Fountain, for Ecthelion alone commanded a
large portion of Gondolin, and to be affiliated with a larger house was a great honor. Rumors had circulated that Glorfindel was moving to establish himself as one of the twelve true house of Gondolin, for Turgon believed to have twelve houses would bring good luck and fortune to the now completed city.

"Lord Erestor, peace, I do not know what comes over him at times," Duiin said now to Salgant in an attempt to calm the seething musician. "A jest, perhaps," he added with an uneasy laugh. Erestor narrowed his eyes.

"A jest only to one who is a fool himself; I do not know who is worse: the idiots or the one who follows them."

"Slander!" shouted Egalmoth, and looked to the door in hopes that Ecthelion had arrived. Accusingly he pointed at Erestor. "You tread on a fine line, friend."

"It is friend only because I have something you wish to have." Erestor's house, though small, was comprised of scribes, scholars, and farmers. The 'outcasts', as he had once heard Egalmoth refer to them. Wealth came to them when they were able to find ways to use what little land was available for raising crops, and by creating new ways to utilize areas such as the rocky cliffs to grow things usually needing rich soils. It seemed perhaps trivial at first, but when the market square began to see items such as oranges and strawberries filling the booths assigned to the House of the Silver Stars, it gave the other lords reason to pause.

Salgant was not so careful with his words as Egalmoth had been. "You have nothing I want. You spend your time in the dirt like a pig, laboring in the sun like a commoner. You would disgrace my house with your presence- 'twas a favor I offered you protection beneath my own banner."

"I would rather be a pig than a coward, though," and now Erestor smirked, "I can see by your girth that you are a bit of both."

With a growl, Salgant turned and retreated with his minions in tow. When he reached the door, he turned again. "Tell Ecthelion I do not wish to have part in any plans that include a mud-wallowing creature and his bastard companion."

Taking himself to the door with swift, long strides, Erestor's sudden movement had shocked the trio into standing quite still, while Glorfindel also remained frozen in his place on the balcony. It had happened in a split second- Erestor's glove was yanked from his hand the thrown to the floor. With the back of his bare hand, he slapped Salgant across the face, sending him stumbling back against the door. "I shall let him know," said Erestor, retrieving his glove.

"You... you..." Salgant shook a chubby fist at Erestor. "I will have your title for this! I will see your house disgraced and disbanded! How dare you strike me!"

"That, was a warning," Erestor heard himself say.

"A warning? A warning!" Egalmoth's eyes were filled with rage. "To think I once sat in council with you." He spat upon Erestor's boots. "I stand with Salgant- (to this, Erestor rolled his eyes) I will see your doom."

"Well, if you are so certain of that," said Erestor, and again he surprised them for his hand, still bare, now came in contact with Salgant's jaw. The impact his fist had was much harder than his open palm, and Salgant fell down upon his posterior. "There. Now it will be worth losing my title over."

"Hold!" Ecthelion had come in through the side entrance, and hearing the commotion raced to the
balcony, but reached it too late, except to pull back Glorfindel as he was about to assist Erestor. "Lord Erestor, to the side please. I will have word with you and Lord Glorfindel in the study," he said sternly.

For a moment it seemed as if neither were about to go, but finally Glorfindel walked to Erestor and touched him upon the shoulder. After one final exchanged look of contempt with Salgant, Erestor followed Glorfindel into the small office. There they waited, with Glorfindel pacing and Erestor appearing far more relaxed than he likely was as he took a seat.

The door slammed shut behind Ecthelion several minutes later as he burst into the room. He made his way clear across, past the two elves who sat and remained silent, one looking to the floor and the other looking straight ahead and lounging on the chair more than he sat upon it. After pouring himself a drink, Ecthelion turned back around, looking at each elf in turn. “Glorfindel, look at me,” he said, not in the harsh tone he was about to speak in, but in a fatherly manner meant to comfort the younger one. When he did, he smiled solemnly, and then turned his momentarily masked ire upon the other.

“Damn you! Did you have to hit him?” Ecthelion drank the entirety of his glass before setting his eyes upon Erestor again. “What were you thinking? This is not Valinor; rules here are different. No matter what, no one strikes a lord or a king, despite whatever terrible things are said!”

“He was only defending me,” said Glorfindel dumbly, apologetically. He was embarrassed; his cheeks were aflame, and he could not bring himself to look at Erestor, though he forced himself to look at Ecthelion at least.

“Yes, I assumed as much.” Ecthelion sighed. “It was a matter of time before one of them did something they should not have. They can say whatever they damn well want, and unless they outright vilify the king no punishment will be imposed.”

Standing up suddenly, Glorfindel interrupted. “But they are both lords- surely it can not be so bad as-“

“Glorfindel, sit down!” Ecthelion even pointed to the seat with fury in his eyes. Unsure of what to do, Glorfindel glanced finally at Erestor, who gave a little nod and looked to the chair. Numbly Glorfindel felt his legs give way as he sat back down. Ecthelion took a deep breath. “Erestor, I have one elf calling for your dismissal, one calling for your execution, and one calling for both.”

“It is ever so nice to know that Duilin, Egalmoth, and Salgant all have their own opinions. For once,” Erestor said bitterly.

“Erestor.” Ecthelion made his way to the counter where the liquor was kept, set down his glass, and picked up the bottle. “Erestor, this is serious. They wish for us to go before the king himself. At this very hour. A time which was to be joyous and instead will be full of misery. Do you not know why I called both of you here?” Neither answered, but Ecthelion did not expect them to. “King Turgon wished to have twelve houses, of that you must have known. Glorfindel, yours he chose without hesitation to fill one of the vacancies. He has had his eye on you since the day you came into the city,” said Ecthelion, his voice a mixture of pride and sadness. “His second choice was more difficult, for he had two ideas in mind; the first to split a house, for both Penlod’s and Egalmoth’s followers are numerous. The second was to offer someone else the chance at the honor, and Erestor, he had chosen you.”

For a moment, Glorfindel began to smile. He and Erestor would be lords of the same level as Ecthelion, equal to Salgant and the others. His smile faltered. “Ecthelion, you do not think the king will change his mind because of this, do you?”
But Ecthelion did not answer this question. “Salgant has demanded that you be brought before the king tonight, Erestor. As chief captain, I must take you there.”
"Does anyone have anything to add?" Turgon had already heard the account from all five parties involved, and though he could tell that Salgant and Egalmoth were embellishing a bit, he was also able to tell that the guilty party showed no remorse for his actions despite several attempts made by Ecthelion and the king himself to verbally nudge Erestor in that direction. This appeared to bother the king greatly. Waiting a few moments more before reaching his verdict, he finally said, ‘Obviously, there is no doubt that Lord Erestor is guilty of assault. Do you deny this charge, Lord Erestor?’

“No, your majesty.” A slight apologetic tone, but all for Turgon and none for Salgant. An apology for doing something to lead him to have to make such a decision, to say such a thing.

Smugly, Salgant stepped forward. “I do believe a punishment is in order.”

“ Discipline, is in order,” Turgon answered back. “Punishment, is not acceptable. There must be law, order, rules, yes, and those who break them must be subject to some sort of penalty. However, there must be reason for it, a way to learn or train the one who is out of order not to break the rules again. What would you have for a penalty, Lord Salgant?”

“I would have his title removed and-“

“Unacceptable,” announced the king loudly, his voice echoing through the chambers. The meeting, called so late, was being held in private. It likely would have been at any hour, but the time caused it to be not only private, but secret as well. No servants were lurking at this hour, ready to spread the news on to others. Only a few trusted scribes might be about, and they were not ones for such idle gossip. “To remove his title would cast question as to what he had done, and to his credit he has pleased me with his use of the lands given to him. He is of use in council as well, and it pleases me to have him remain so. Lord Erestor,” said Turgon as he looked to the other side of the room, “what is your suggestion? How would you have me deal with you?”

“Perhaps I should be jailed, left to think upon my situation for-“

“No. Also unacceptable.” The king frowned. “No one would gain anything from that, and you know it. Jails are best used to scare the young delinquents into being obedient. You would use your time to think of other things while you were there. No lesson would be learned, and we would all be here again in not so long a time.” He looked to Ecthelion. “Have you a suggestion for me on how to solve this situation we find ourselves in?”

He gave himself time to consider, but eventually Ecthelion shook his head. “No, m’lord. I have no solution for you.”
“I have one.” Egalmoth stepped forward. “Sometimes,” he said, with mock sincerity, “no matter how hard we try to use friendly discipline, there is no positive result from it. You said one must learn, but also you say, one might be trained. I do not think Lord Erestor, in this case, can learn not to hit his fellow lords,” said Egalmoth, and he was on the receiving end of a dark look from Erestor. “He must be trained.”

Egalmoth circled the room, coming to a wall where a smattering of weapons were on display. “When I train my horses,” he continued, taking one of the weapons from the wall, “I use a whip.” He cracked the whip in the air, then looped it back up again as he returned to his king. “It takes very few strikes before the beast is broken in.”

The whip was handed to Turgon, who held it thoughtfully. “Usually, I try to come to a compromise between the two parties. However, it is difficult to find a middle ground to losing one’s house and spending a few nights in a cell. Salgant, would you agree to this as fair and fitting discipline?”

“Ahh... yes. Yes, it is.” It took only one prod from Egalmoth for him to agree.

“Lord Erestor, you are to be disciplined by the whip. Have you any objections to this decision?” It was a formality, really, for how could one object to a king, but Turgon asked it anyhow.

Glorfindel flinched as he listened to Erestor agree. Somehow, this seemed so terribly, horribly wrong. There seemed no justice that so good an elf be beaten for one slap and one punch to an elf who deserved such things. He was dwelling on this and trying to come up with something to do or say to stop it, he did not hear his name called out until Ecthelion reached out and shook him. "The king is addressing you," hissed Ecthelion.

“Glorfindel, did you hear what I said?” Turgon looked thoroughly disgusted, and Glorfindel shook his head and mumbled an apology. “Come forward, Glorfindel. Ecthelion, find a way to bind Erestor here. The rest of you- I want none of this to leave this room tonight. No one here is to speak of it or discuss it. Is that clear?”

Salgant nearly objected, but Egalmoth bowed as distraction and made a bit of a speech on how important it was to uphold the dignity of the city and the houses while Ecthelion rigged something with a rope and a few timbers in the ceiling. He frowned and glared at his work in disdain before he beckoned Erestor over to it.

Glorfindel tried to take a step forward, but his legs were shaking. Erestor himself seemed quite calm - too calm. Already he had stripped off the clothing from his upper body and hastily braided his hair into one long plait to keep it out of the way. At any other time, Glorfindel would have been thrilled to have seen this. A hand fell upon the blond’s shoulder, nearly causing him to stumble to the ground. Then something was shoved into his hands. “Fifty lashes.” Glorfindel’s mouth fell open as he turned around, his knees nearly knocking together. “Make them count or I shall double them. I know your strength, and Ecthelion is too mighty for this.” Lowering his voice, Turgon stared into Glorfindel’s eyes and added, “I know your weakness as well.”

He gasped in his next breath, and knew he had been discovered. How and when was irrelevant. The whip in his hands was not only to discipline Erestor, but to instill obedience in Glorfindel as well. Turgon knew. Turgon knew not only what Glorfindel thought, but he know who those thoughts concerned. Somehow, he knew. Glorfindel walked to Erestor with slow, heavy steps, unable to look at him. He would tell himself for years later that he was forced to do it, that he had no choice. In the morning, it was himself he would be unable to look at.
Glorfindel tried not to reveal his trembling hands as he presented the bloodied whip back to King Turgon. He refused to look at anyone as he stepped back in place beside Ecthelion and avoided the intense gazes of the three elves only a few feet away.

“The task has been carried out. Are you satisfied?” Turgon looked to Salgant, waiting for his answer.

It seemed for a moment that the Lord of the Harp was about to object for some reason. This angered Glorfindel, and he gritted his teeth behind pursed lips to keep himself in check. He had made it thirty strikes before Turgon took the whip from his hands, seeking to quell the disgruntled murmurs of the scorned. The king struck three times, splitting the skin open on Erestor’s back with each blow. “Continue,” he had instructed, haphazardly dropping the weapon back into Glorfindel’s hands. “And do not count mine,” he added as the golden elf shakily positioned himself.

He had tried so hard not to hurt Erestor any more than he had to, but the wounds made it nearly impossible not to tear at his flesh. Each line of red that sliced across Erestor’s body was a stab at Glorfindel’s soul. Tears stung his eyes as he completed his task, but not once had Erestor cried out or shied from the whip; Glorfindel refused to allow the others any amount of pleasure at seeing their pain.

“Fine, then.” Salgant took a step forward, no doubt intent upon speaking to Erestor, his fingers posed to force the bound elf’s chin to face him. Turgon interceded.

“I think it best,” he said quietly, “if, from now on, the two of you avoided one another. Starting now.” Turgon pointedly looked to the archway leading to the hall.

With a cough of disdain, Salgant waddled to the door, followed by Duilin. Egalmoth paused, and with a false look of regret said, “I shall call for a healer and someone to take him down.”

“Are you King now that you make such directives before me?” demanded Turgon.

Egalmoth took a step back in shock. “No, m’lord. I only thought—“

“I shall do the thinking, thank you.” Turgon stepped away from Ecthelion and handed Glorfindel the whip again, and then walked to Egalmoth, placing his hand upon the elvenlord’s shoulder. “The night has been long, you were not correctly considering your words.”

“No, m’lord,” answered Egalmoth after he was given a chance to respond.

“Let us leave; we have matters to speak of.” When Egalmoth looked over his shoulder, Turgon added, “Worry not. Someone will take care of this.”
Once alone, Glorfindel flung the whip to the ground, causing it to leave a streak of blood in its wake. His fingers flew to untie the ropes that suspended Erestor.

“Careful, here, let me help you. He will not be able to stand on his own.” Ecthelion moved around to support Erestor so that when the last knot was loose and Erestor’s legs gave out, he did not hit the floor. “We should take him to a healer,” Ecthelion said absently.

“No, if we do that, everyone will find out about this,” argued Glorfindel. Retrieving Erestor’s discarded shirt, he held it gently against the wounds and then lifted Erestor away from Ecthelion and into his own arms. “I will take him back to his room. I know where they are. I can care for him.”

“Glorfindel, he should really—”

“My mother was a healer; I know enough!” snapped the younger elf. Taking a deep breath, he sighed, and said, “I am sorry, Ecthelion. It pains me that I am the cause of this. Let me make peace with myself by caring for him.”

Finally, Ecthelion nodded. “We can take some of the hidden passages so that no one sees us. Come, I shall lead the way.”

Glorfindel nodded and walked slowly in an attempt not to jostle Erestor. Now that the ordeal was over, Erestor no longer fought to keep a neutral expression. He kept his eyes shut, and bit at his hand to keep from crying out, though some muffled noises escaped. As Glorfindel struggled to make it up the stairs of one of the hidden passages, he nearly dropped his charge. "Can you put your arms around my neck?" asked Glorfindel as he leaned against the stone wall.

Erestor tried, but his limbs were too weak. He grunted and tried again as Ecthelion came back to where they were and helped guide Erestor’s arms. "This is just temporary," Ecthelion said as he produced a handkerchief and used it to tie Erestor’s wrists together behind Glorfindel's neck as gently as he could, for there were bruises around them from the earlier bindings. "Let us move quickly now," he advised, and he and Glorfindel navigated their way without being scene.

Once they reached the room, Erestor was able to direct them to take the keys from his pocket, though his voice was very distant. "Get him to drink some water," said Ecthelion once the room was opened. "I will fetch what you need for the next few days so that there is little commotion in and out, and hopefully, those three keep their mouths shut about this,” he said as he untied the cloth and eased Erestor's arms back down.

Glorfindel continued to hold Erestor and whispered words of encouragement to him (which mostly consisted of 'please do not die') until Ecthelion returned. "Why is he not on the bed?" demanded the captain in a whisper once the door was closed. There was activity in the hallway; people were stirring and beginning their morning routines, and Ecthelion had taken longer than he hoped in returning in order to avoid suspicion.

"I did not want to get blood on it," hissed Glorfindel.

Ecthelion set the items he brought back onto an empty table. Most things in the room were bare, from the shelves attached to the wall to the tiny desk shoved in a corner with a wooden chair that did not match it. He went to the bed to try to help, and paused when he turned down the quilt on top and found naught but a pile of straw underneath. "Erestor, where do you keep the spare bedding?” asked Ecthelion.

"That is all I have. I just sleep there, on top."
Glorfindel frowned. "Ecthelion, we cannot--"

"Yes, I know." Ecthelion pulled the quilt back over the straw. "Put him down on his stomach and start tending to his wounds. I will be back with some extra blankets to try to make it softer."

"I will be fine," mumbled Erestor, but it was delayed, coming after Ecthelion left the room.

Glorfindel managed to situate Erestor, and only then noticed that his own clothing was now blood-stained. He rolled up his sleeves and only then recalled Ecthelion's words about the water. There was a pitcher in the room, but Glorfindel found it to be empty. Luckily, Ecthelion had brought with him a bucket of cold water to be used to tend Erestor, and Glorfindel decided it was better than nothing. "Cups... cups... where are the cups..." He began to talk to himself to keep his sanity intact.

"Still at the market, I would wager."

Glorfindel soon understood Erestor's riddle, and brought the bucket to the side of the bed. "Here. Drink a little," he said. Erestor was on his stomach, but had his arms folded in front of him and his head raised just enough for Glorfindel to cup his hand and offer him a drink. Under so many other circumstances, Glorfindel would have allowed sensual thoughts to invade his mind as he felt the tickle of Erestor's lips on the skin of his hand, the errant drops running down Erestor's chin so that Glorfindel grabbed for the abandoned handkerchief to dab the water from Erestor's throat. The only thoughts in Glorfindel's head now were fear and remorse.
Seconds passed, seeming to lengthen beyond their ability. Hunched forward on a wooden chair he had dragged near the bed, Glorfindel watched for any sign of consciousness from the dark-haired elf who slumbered before him. He had done all he could. The salve covered the wounds; the injured elf was on his stomach, with only a thin, clean linen covering his back. Pillows had been fluffed, prayers had been said and tears were shed. Glorfindel sat now in silence, eyes red and barely blinking.

As the sun began to set, Erestor finally opened his eyes enough to take in his surroundings. When he locked eyes with Glorfindel, the blond looked away in shame. But the voice he heard was not angry towards him or at all bitter. It was concerned, but for Glorfindel’s welfare. “Have you been here all day? You should go and eat. And rest.”

“Not until you are able to come to dinner with me.” The younger ellon carefully lifted the fabric and examined the wounds for infection. They were healing, as they should be, but it pained Glorfindel to still see many of them still raw on the third night.

“Please, go and eat. I shall be fine. At least go out and get some air for a bit. Everyone is going to worry where you are - no doubt you have missed a council meeting by now,” reasoned Erestor.

Shaking his head and swallowing back his tears, Glorfindel said, “I am not going to go anywhere until you have healed. Ecthelion brought me some supplies the other day, so I will not go hungry, and neither will you. You are hurt, though. I can see it, and I can hear it as you sleep. ”

“It does not hurt that much,” whispered Erestor.

“Yes, it does,” Glorfindel argued softly. "There is no reason to lie to me about it."

"Alright. Maybe it hurts a little, but it is not your fault, Glorfindel. If anything, I am in debt to you for your careful consideration that night." Erestor took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, then did
so again before he continued. "Can you imagine, if Salgant had the whip? Or Egalmoth? Or Duilin?"

"They would have bled you dry," said Glorfindel as his lip trembled.

"Well, no, it was only fifty lashes," replied Erestor flippantly. "However, they would have been brutal. Though, I must admit, this experience has been very strange for me. It hurts in odd places and not as much where I think it should. You were striking my back, but I have an odd stinging on my left side."

"See, it does hurt. Stop pretending with me. That was my fault; I missed and snapped back the whip," said Glorfindel apologetically as he checked the very wound that Erestor described. He applied another thick layer of salve to all of the wounds caused by the whipping he had been forced to administer. "Ecthelion said that this should numb the wounds as well as help them heal. If you want something for the pain, let me know. He brought several draughts - in fact your room is beginning to look like an apothecary. There is no need to struggle through, so if you need something, tell me. As I said, I am not going anywhere until you can." Taking a deep breath, he slowly let it out, blowing a stream of cool air across Erestor’s back.

At the third pass, the dark elf shifted slightly. “Glorfindel? May I ask you something?”

Out of habit, the blond nodded, and then said calmly, “You may ask me anything, my friend.”

“How do you know how to take care of me so well?”

“My mother was a healer,” he said quietly after covering Erestor’ back once again with a layer of thin, gauzy fabric. “She had to be.”

“Lots of siblings, always getting into scuffles? Or was she employed to the court of a higher lord or of a king?” Erestor’s questions were so eagerly asked that Glorfindel wished he could answer yes to them. Instead, he bowed his head and heaved a sigh.

“She had to because of me,” admitted Glorfindel just as Erestor’s eyes began to close. “She had to because-” And there he left it until coaxed to continue.

“You have never whipped anyone before, but you have been whipped in the past, have you not?”

Erestor paused for only a moment. “‘Tis how you knew how to land the strokes; for the same reason you ride your horses unbridled and refuse to break them. Someone tried to break you once.”

Glorfindel shivered as the truth he had been hiding so long and so well came forth so easily from the mouth of this mysterious and unusual elf. Tears never meant to be shed now fell. “My... my father. He beat me. A lot.”

A pained breath was taken in by Erestor. “But you had siblings and he was not violent with them. You felt you needed to protect them at times and would distract his attention to yourself.”

“How do you know these things?” demanded Glorfindel.

“I am old. I watch and listen more than I act and speak - which is a good thing, considering the trouble I get into when I do act or speak. There is also the fact that you remind me of an elf I knew in Valinor. Middle child, but he was the ‘big brother’ type; his older brothers had been long grown before he arrived, and he was closer in age to his younger brother and sister. He crossed the sea; I am not entirely sure what has become of him,” admitted Erestor. “But you act like he did in his youth in some respects.”
“I... do have younger siblings,” Glorfindel shared. “A sister, and a brother that I hardly know.”

“Ah, just like Angrod then, but in the rev—Fin? Glorfindel?” Sitting up despite the obvious pain, Erestor took hold of Glorfindel’s hand. “What is wrong?”

Glorfindel shook uncontrollably. “Please... not his name... do not say it again...”

“Truly, I am sorry, I did not know it would—” Erestor gathered both of Glorfindel’s hands in his. “Was he your—”

Rapidly, Glorfindel nodded, and was now rocking in his chair. “Please,” he whimpered, “Please, please do not say it, please!”

“I will say no more on the subject.” Erestor coaxed Glorfindel to stand up, clenching his teeth as the pair moved slowly to an alcove that led out to the private balcony. “Let me get you something to drink.”

“No, you should be in bed. You should stay inside where no one can see you!” Glorfindel made an attempt to turn them around, but found himself gently pushed back into a thatched chair outside.

“I need some air, and I hate resting while on my stomach. No way to really relax in that manner. It gives me a headache.” Erestor brought forth a glass jug of liquor and two small glasses that were kept outside on a tray. As he sat down gingerly on the edge of a wooden footstool so that nothing would be against his back, the older ellon filled both glasses and handed one to Glorfindel. “Tastes horrible the first drink, but by the third you no longer notice.”

Glorfindel thanked his friend and then picked up his glass and tipped it back—indeed, it was foul at first, but the calm that washed over him made up for it. “I feel a fool,” he said as another portion was poured into his glass. “I should not have reacted with such anxiety.”

“There is no need for that.” Erestor nursed his drink slowly, sipping it now and again. “Forgive my constant and unintentional observation, but might I pose a different query?”

Laughing at the formality of the request, Glorfindel swished the liquid back and forth in his glass. “What else have you discovered about me, my friend?” he asked with unease.

“To be quite blunt, you are not really four hundred or five hundred or whatever it is you keep telling everyone.”

“That sounded like a statement and not a question,” teased Glorfindel, retrieving the bottle for another refill. Erestor nodded and waited. With a sigh, Glorfindel asked, “Well, then, how old do you believe me to be?”

“Oh, I am not very good at that game,” admitted the dark ellon. “I never really learned my numbers as well as others. Let me think... definitely younger, and knowing what I know now, that first number cannot be more than one. Perhaps, a hundred and fifty?”

“You would have been closer without the fifty. I am only eighty-seven; eighty-eight this spring.” Glorfindel awaited the inevitable, but when Erestor merely nodded, he added, “I came here as a child, more or less. I had matured early - my voice already sounded as it does now, and my hair was shorter so I did not look quite so young. In fact, I think I look younger now than I did when I arrived. I made captain before my majority, but no one really knew it.”

“You are more mature than I was at your age,” commended Erestor. “Actually, you may have noticed, there seems to be a part of me that never quite grew up.”
“The part that likes to dance on Ecthelion’s fountain in the early hours of the day after the festivals, the part that sneaks extra desserts at dinner, or the part that insults other lords back?” wondered Glorfindel out loud.

“Exactly,” grinned Erestor. “I can see I am not the only one who makes observations.”

After a stretch of silence, Glorfindel said, “I suppose you are trying now to determine just how it was that a nearly grown elfling ended up on his own in Gondolin.”

“I was, but I feared it might infringe upon the earlier forbidden conversation,” answered Erestor.

Glorfindel nodded. “The conversation is not forbidden; only the name. I never wish to hear it again, if I can help it.” As if a further explanation were warranted, Glorfindel then said, “He is a kinslayer, I think, and if he was not, he shares at least in their sins for he welcomed them into our home; he is no more my father than I am his son. He disowned me and I left before he could do what I knew he wanted to.”

“I am so sorry.” Erestor had set his glass down and was now fully paying attention to Glorfindel. “There were times when my parents and I disagreed, and I left as soon as I was able, but... no one should need deal with the sort of anguish you did. I can sympathize with you on one point. My mother was a kinslayer; not exactly something to be proud of. For what it is worth, though, I do not think he was with the host at Alqualonde. As you said, though, his condoning the others is as good as guilty.”

“I suppose your words should ease my mind, but I remain indifferent about him. He felt justified in everything he did. He felt he really had a reason to do whatever he decided to do. That it was his right to... abuse me, for turning out how I did.” Staring out over the courtyard overlooked by the balcony, Glorfindel sighed. “He thought I was sick- like some diseased animal that should be gotten rid of before they infect any others. He talked at times of locking me in the cellar so that I did not bring dishonor to the family. The view here is not so different.”

“Because you are- forgive me if I am off the mark,” said Erestor carefully, “but is it that you-- because you have a different... preference with whom you wish to have romantic relations, than most males.”

Glorfindel held Erestor’s gaze for a long while, contemplating just how to answer. When he finally decided he had no fear in telling his secret to his friend, he nodded slightly. “I suppose you picked that up from simply observing me as well.”

“Actually, I learned that from watching the way that the ladies act around you. You are trusted by them. Never a threat and more like a big brother instead of a suitor. They like you,” explained Erestor. “You do not leer at them when they turn around as so many of us do.”

“I suppose then it is only a matter of time before one of them gossips to the entire city, and then I shall have to be executed to be made an example of,” spoke Glorfindel ruefully.

Erestor shook his head. “Oh, no. They would never let on about you, and would defend you and your honor to the last. You are a treasure to them, and they will not see you lost. You are beloved of them, Glorfindel, that I easily know.”

Glorfindel’s gaze wandered back to to look over the courtyard. “Sometimes at night, when I was growing up, I would hide under the bed or outside under the window if I knew he was having a bad day and would come for me. If he could not find me, then come morning sometimes he forgot. It was always good to take the chance; if he did not find me, maybe I would skip being whipped that night.
“There were times when he would come home and slam the door. He would say nothing, he would just growl and start taking his belt off. If I was right there, my mother would rush my sister away and leave me with him. If I was not there, she might try to make excuses for me, but after my sister was old enough to talk back, I never wanted to take the chance. She stood up for me once, my sister, and he hit her; knocked one of her teeth out. Then, he just beat me harder for it. So I stopped hiding and just learned not to scream. If I screamed, he just hit me harder until I passed out from the pain.”

The blond looked up, wiping away the errant tears, to see the fiery anger in Erestor’s eyes. “How can anyone do something so horrible to their own child?” he murmured to himself through clenched teeth.

“I asked him before I left to help me. I wish I knew how to change so that I was not like this,” said Glorfindel sadly. “I wish I were not always in fear because someday the wrong person might find out what I am. There are days I pray with all my heart for Eru to take this curse from me.”

“Look, I know there are those who would say it is wrong. There are these rules and laws against it, and most of them are born of fear. But there is nothing wrong about being who you are. There is nothing wrong about having the feelings that you do. Never let anyone make you think they can change you or fix you or make those feelings go away.” Erestor lowered his voice and sighed. “Aiya. I wish you had made it to Doriath instead of this place. King Thingol is an ass, but at least he was accepting of the different ways others loved. Your father, Turgon, and many others- they are afraid of what they do not understand, and so they fight it and destroy it.”

“What if they are right, though?” Glorfindel rested his elbows upon his knees and bowed his head in his hands. “What if I am the one who is wrong?”

“Listen to me.” Erestor gently tilted Glorfindel’s chin up until they were looking at each other once more. “There is nothing wrong with you. Eru does not curse good elves, and you, my friend, my dearest friend, are one of the best.” The comment had Glorfindel blushing, and Erestor continued. “If we were all the same, there would be nothing to make us special. Wisdom from my father to me regarding the Nandor when they decided not to make the journey to Valinor with the rest of us.”

Tilting his head slightly, Glorfindel regarded Erestor in a new light. “Valinor. You keep mentioning it, and it only just now dawned on me. I knew from what Ecthelion said that you came from there, but you were not born there?”

Uneasily, Erestor said, “I was a child when we began to travel.”

“So you are one of The Eldar, not just one of the eldar,” said Glorfindel with a bit of awe in his voice.

“Not... exactly...” Erestor picked up his glass, frowned, and filled it, and then poured another drink for Glorfindel as well. “You revealed your secret; in turn it is only fair you know mine. My mother, as you may have assumed by now, was Eldarin. My father is an Ainu.”

“One of the Maiar?” asked Glorfindel with overwhelming curiosity.

Erestor shook his head. “One of the... other ones.”

“Really?” Glorfindel studied Erestor hard and then said, “Namo.”

“What? Oh! Oh, no, not him,” smiled Erestor. “You know, he is depicted quite wrong. He is quite fair, like his brother, and very calm most of the time.”

“I was going to say Lorien next, but the way you describe him, I would say that is a no as well.”
“Stop a moment. I just revealed to you my heritage. The fact I am half Valarin. And your greatest concern is guessing which was my father?” Erestor looked thoroughly amused.

Glorfindel shrugged. “I suspected you did not wish to have such excitement made about it, or else it was something you would tell to greater audiences. However, if it thrills you to know, my knees are shaking and my heart is racing to be in your presence!”

The laughter that came from Erestor cheered Glorfindel immensely, for it indeed could be the best cure, and he hoped in some way it might help the dark elf forget his pain (if the alcohol had not already dulled it). “As you should be,” he joked lightly.

“I know who it is- and for a moment I nearly said Tulkas because of your spirit, but it must logically be Orome. In all the history I have ever heard, it is always Orome who is with the host of the Eldar when they come to Valinor.” Glorfindel smiled quite smugly when he was rewarded with a nod from Erestor.

“The ellon I thought for years to be my father named me Tatannin, but my mother called me Eresse and soon after I was born no one called me by the other name. In fact, I only recall the first one because I once asked what it was, and my friends would use it to taunt me,” said Erestor. “But Orome has not told me what he named me. Not yet.”

“A coincidence, then- Glorfindel is the name my mother gave me.” The blond nodded to himself. “My father called me Anglorel, but I long ago stopped using it. My father encouraged my using my mother’s name. It was Laurefinde, actually, but because of the ban on Quenya, no one used that. It was always Glorfindel, except to my Uncle Aegnor, who often said he dared King Thingol to come stop him.”

“You have very lovely names,” said Erestor after a moment’s hesitation. “Nothing like Eresse or Erestor.”

“Your names are just fine,” argued Glorfindel gently. “Nice and short, too,” he chuckled, recalling a past lesson from many months ago, before Erestor had joined Turgon’s council. Once Glorfindel knew all of the characters in the alphabet, he worked on writing words. Glorfindel had found, of them all, his name was by far the most challenging to write. When Glorfindel got discouraged, Erestor had lightened the mood by teaching him how to write short words that had no place in polite company.

“Glorfindel, I must ask you not to reveal anything I have told you to anyone else,” Erestor said in a more serious tone.

“I am certainly not going to say anything. Remember- there are no rules against mixed breeds here, only ‘the unclean’. You hold all of the cards, my friend.” Glorfindel finished his drink, shaking his head when Erestor picked up the bottle to refresh it. “As soon as you are well, the first thing we are going to do is go riding.”

“With the horses? No, thank you,” answered Erestor disdainfully. While the archery and swordfighting were improving, Erestor had another setback when one of Aredhel’s horses threw him. Since that time, he had declined invitation to ride with her, or to train with Glorfindel.

With a simple shrug, Glorfindel replied, “Half-Valarin or not, it would be a terrible tragedy if the son of Orome never learns how to ride a horse.”
“You can do it! Nice! Great job! One more! Yes!” Glorfindel thrust his arm into the air, fist held high before he jogged to where Erestor had just managed to perfectly jump the last hedge on the horse he was riding. Several other stable-hands in the area who had been aware of the lessons paused to clap politely before they returned to their work. “That was magnificent!”

“Maybe I was just riding the wrong horses,” reasoned Erestor as he dismounted and began to lead the mare back to the stable. He and Glorfindel chatted as they strolled, and were intercepted by Aredhel, mounted on a pure white gelding. “Your highness,” said Erestor as he and Glorfindel stopped and bowed.

“‘Tis a lovely day for a ride,” she said. “I am ever so happy to see you here in the pasture again, Erestor.” She snapped her fan open and waved it at her face. “The heat will not be quite so intense at the river, and the ride will be cooling. Have you plans for this afternoon?”

“Oh… I--”

“We were about to acquire lunch, but considering the circumstances, perhaps I should ask a picnic be brought to you,” suggested Glorfindel. Following Erestor’s recovery, he had made the decision that he needed a friend far more than he needed a love interest, and so he spent much time with Erestor and their friendship thrived, though he also made a point to let others know that Erestor was an eligible and desirable bachelor. At first, it seemed that Aredhel cared little when she overheard Glorfindel talking up Erestor’s finer points at festivals, but after some of the maidens showed interest, she renewed what Glorfindel took to be an attempt to woo Erestor. He was only too happy to help, for if a wife and children were Erestor’s desire, he decided one night when he had trouble sleeping, then he would be a terrible friend not to help. “Your horse is still saddled, Erestor, and she does not seem tired.”

“How thoughtful!” Aredhel reached down and patted her saddlebag. “I have already had the foresight to have a picnic packed, and I do believe there is enough for more than two.” She turned her attention to Glorfindel, for it already seemed a foregone conclusion that Erestor would be joining her. “And where is your horse, Lord Glorfindel?”

“in… the… stable,” he answered with uncertainty.

“You should get her, then, m’lord -- we do not wish to keep Idril waiting.”
Glorfindel blinked twice, and then turned to look at Erestor. “Worry not, my friend,” said Erestor, “I shall keep Aredhel amused while you are away.”

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“That was the worst thing ever!” Glorfindel fumbled to remove his riding gloves while Erestor retrieved the jug of spirits from the balcony. They retired after the ride and subsequent picnic to Erestor’s rooms. “She tried to hold my hand, Erestor -- and so help me, had she kissed me—”

“You would have passed out. You were milk-white when she leaned against you.” Erestor suppressed a laugh as he filled their glasses. “I thought you were going to either throw up or piss yourself.”

“Maybe I would have if I had actually the stomach to drink anything.” For the entirety of the picnic, Glorfindel had done little more than nibble on the crust of one of the tea sandwiches in the basket. Aredhel convinced Erestor to wade ankle-deep in the river with her to look for shiny rocks while avoiding crayfish that snapped at their toes. This left Glorfindel and Idril with the horses under the cover of a maple tree, to guard the picnic from ants and have merry conversation. Idril, it seemed, had been coached by her very forward aunt, and tried a few times to close the gap between herself and Glorfindel, be it to reach around him to pick up something from the picnic cloth or to blame the wind when she bumped a shoulder to his. Each time, Glorfindel froze and looked with wide-eyed panic down to the shore, where Erestor kept a watchful and mirthful gaze on the golden-haired pair.

“Here. I think you could use this now.” Erestor held out the glass to Glorfindel, who tilted it back to drink the contents immediately. He made a noise at the taste, but held it out again for a refill. “Careful, there. You should eat something before you drink too much of it,” advised Erestor, but he was already pouring the liquor.

“Where do you get this stuff, anyhow?” asked Glorfindel.

Erestor set the jug aside and pulled the balcony chair inside so that they would both have a place to sit. “Lesser market. It has all of the things no one wants to admit happen in Gondolin, like gin and vermouth.”

Glorfindel took another gulp from his glass before he sat down. “And what is this?” he asked.

“Strong,” replied Erestor. He sat down as well. “I hope the page gets the order to the kitchen quickly, but with it being midsummer eve, I fear we will still need to wait.”

“Fine by me. I am still regaining my bearings.” Glorfindel leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes.

“So what is it about men that you find so enticing?”

Glorfindel’s eyes snapped back open. He looked at the glass in Erestor’s hand. “How many of those have you had?”

“None yet,” said Erestor, though he took a sip now. “You need not answer. Consider it rhetorical or something.”

“I like the sound of their voices,” began Glorfindel. They had both been facing the same direction, looking at the bed, but now each shifted a bit to regard the other. “I like their scent. The way they walk. How they stand.” He drank again, but held Erestor’s gaze. “I like conversations with someone I consider to be my equal. Someone intelligent and well-read, though I find often that ladies of lower standing would be versed in these skills if they were not withheld education as they often are.”
Erestor topped off their glasses and simply nodded. “I was trying to figure out who he is. I thought for a while it was Ecthelion, but today when we returned and he quite adamantly asked to escort her to the festival, I realized it must not be -- or if he is, then it is one-sided.”

“Ecthelion?” Glorfindel frowned, and then it dawned on him. “Oh! Oh, no… no, Ecthelion is a mentor to me -- the father I needed versus the one I was stuck with.”

“I understand that now. I just recall those times when you would tell me you were out, and then someone would say they had been looking for you, and I guess I have been assuming that you must have a special someone you are secretly seeing.”

“Me? Oh… no,” said Glorfindel a little sadly. “I have no idea where to start looking.”

“You could try the Silver Dagger,” suggested Erestor.

“I have no idea what that is.”

“It is a pub on the outskirts of the Lesser Market. It looks like a brothel - well, it is a brothel - but in the basement, which you get to by going back as if you are going to leave to go to the outhouse, but then entering the cellar doors outside, it is dimly lit and a lot of things go on that Turgon probably has no knowledge of.”

“And you know of this place how exactly?”

“I know a lot about Gondolin,” said Erestor quickly.

“I see.” Glorfindel ran his finger around the rim of his glass. “I doubt I would find what I am looking for there.”

“Just what are you looking for?”

There came a knock on the door, and Erestor rose to retrieve the trolley.

“Smells great, and I am starving,” said Glorfindel.

“No idea why,” teased Erestor as he pushed the trolley between their chairs and then closed and locked the door again. “Some sort of bisque and vegetable pies,” he said as he lifted the covers from the plates. “Beet salad and custard for dessert.”

Once the wine was poured and they were enjoying the meal, Glorfindel turned the question around on Erestor. “What is it about women you like so much?”

“What is there not to like?” Erestor stabbed at the salad, and held up a forkful of baby greens. “I mean, what other choice do I have?”

Glorfindel stirred his soup. “You sound a little defensive.”

Erestor set his fork down and picked up his glass of wine. “Maybe I want children a little more than I have been letting on.”

“And a wife?” pressed Glorfindel.

“Peril of being a father.” Erestor sighed. “I mean, I like women. They have all of those nice curvy bits and… stuff. Most of them can cook well, and sing and play music, and--”

“You just want to be a father more than you want to be a husband.”
“Well, companionship is nice, too.” Erestor sighed again. “I have had my heart broken before,” he said, and upon hearing this, Glorfindel set his utensils down and listened. “It hurts immensely, but so does the thought of an eternity of solitude. However, for now, I find myself not discontent with my life. I cannot say the same for many of the years I lived through.”

Bells rang outside, and while the sounds of laughter and fireworks had been heard in the distance, all noises outside stopped. “The ceremony,” realized Glorfindel.

Erestor looked through the doors to the balcony, left open to combat the heat, and nodded. “Shall we finish supper, and go to join the others in the courtyard, or wait for dawn on the balcony?”

“I would honestly prefer to stay here, if I would not be a burden to you.”


Following supper, they made their way out onto the balcony and looked over the courtyard, where many had gathered. Still others were on their own balconies, or on one of the many walls encircling the great city. As was custom, they stood in silence together as so many others in the city also did. Unlike most of the others, they brought the wine with them. It was still hot, and they stood for about an hour before they went back inside to play cards until just before dawn, when they returned to join in the singing to greet the day.

It was windier now, and gold and ebon tangled together as they offered their voices to join with the whole. As the sun appeared on the horizon, there was much cheering and merriment seen in the courtyard. Turgon himself announced the opening of the annual games. Erestor turned to address Glorfindel, and chuckled to find their hair winding together. “Are you planning to attend the games?”

“I plan to compete - and to lose, like most years,” answered Glorfindel.

“Oh! Which contests?” asked Erestor.

“Archery - but, Dúilin and Galdor and so many others better than I, so, that one is more to be polite. I will also compete in one of the horse races, but I tend to be less willing to risk injury to any of my horses, so I may place, but will probably not win.” Glorfindel untangled his golden tresses and held them aside as the wind picked up. “Do you plan to be there?”

“I was not certain, but I think I shall attend to cheer you on. If you are competing in two events, though, you should get some rest before they start,” said Erestor as he led the way back inside.

Glorfindel laughed. “I suppose I should. I was just so excited for a chance to participate in the dawn-bringing. You know, I have never stayed up for the singing,” he said as he helped to get the empty plates on the trolley to be left in the hallway. “In my early years here, I just never made it that long. When I started to compete, I never did because I wanted to be fresh for the races and matches.”

“It was a beautiful ceremony,” agreed Erestor. “This was my first time to experience it as well. To hear so many people singing in both Sindarin and Quenya at the same time was moving.” He smiled. “Thank you for sharing it with me.”

Glorfindel blushed a little. “I cannot think of anyone else I would have more wished to be with last night.” He hastily crouched down and fiddled about with the items on the cart. He hoped to cool his cheeks, and wondered if Erestor knew exactly what he meant by what he said, or if enough wine had circulated to keep Erestor’s head hazy.

If Erestor had managed to interpret correctly, he said nothing of it. Instead, when Glorfindel stood
up, Erestor waved him away from the cart. “I can take care of this,” he said. “You need to take a nap and then get to your contests.” They walked the short distance to the door, and before it was opened, Erestor leaned in and gave Glorfindel a brief yet warm hug. “Good luck,” he said as he unlocked the door.

Glorfindel knew he offered some words of farewell, but even moments after he could not recall the words. He walked back to his room with a smile plastered on his face. Even if he lost all of his contests later that day, he already felt as if he had won.
“Ladies,” began Ecthelion with a bow and a leer, “although I welcome you to the House of the Fountain, I kindly ask you pay the toll to sit upon my bench.”

“A toll? Your bench?” questioned the golden haired maid. She and her darker companion giggled as Ecthelion nodded.

“Aye, I am the Lord of the House. I demand prompt payment.” Ecthelion waggled his brows.

From across the courtyard, Glorfindel sighed inwardly. Caught between letting his friend have his fun and not seeing these ladies be inappropriately addressed and perhaps even touched, Glorfindel cleared his throat loudly as he approached. “Captain Ecthelion! King Turgon has a question of great import to ask you!”

“I am a bit... occupied at the moment. Know you this question, Glorfindel?” Ecthelion’s eyes never left the demure pair on the bench.

“Aye, he wishes to know what name you would see inscribed upon your blade; the one he hath forged to be a match to his Glamdring.” Impatiently, Glorfindel stepped between Ecthelion and the bench. “Do you need the question repeated, or have you the time to come to answer our king?”

Taking a moment to glare at Glorfindel before stepping directly around him, Ecthelion said as he glanced briefly over his shoulder at Glorfindel, “I have a more pressing matter to attend to. Two matters, that is.” From the direction of the fields and stables, Erestor suddenly appeared, removing his riding gloves and stomping the mud from his boots. “Erestor! Come here, please!”

The dark ellon walked briskly to where the bench was, dipping a hand into the fountain to wash something from his fingers. “How can I be of assistance?”

“These ladies,” proclaimed Ecthelion, waving his hand at the pair, “will not believe me when I say that there is a toll to use my bench. Please, if you would tell them indeed that there is.”

For a few seconds, Erestor gave Glorfindel a sideways look, then nodded his head to the ladies. “Oh, yes. The toll. They must pay it.” Though perhaps convincing to a small child, Erestor’s overly theatrical performance was undoubtedly faked.

With a grin, the bolder golden elleth stood and queried, “And what is this toll?” Her companion stood as well, while Erestor splashed a bit of water upon his face to cool it and then wiped away the excess as he walked to the vacated bench and sat down.

Ecthelion sat down beside Erestor with a wide grin on his face. The Lord of the Fountain then patted his knee. “Have a seat,” he instructed the brave young elleth, “and I shall tell you.”
As she giggled and did so, Glorfindel cleared his throat loudly.

“Are you still here?” questioned Ecthelion as the second elleth sat back down next to him and leaned against him with a smile.

“Your sword needs a name,” said Glorfindel blandly, folding his arms over his chest.

“Call it... Megil,” suggested Ecthelion, whispering his words seductively into the ear of the elleth on his lap. His idea was laughed at by all but Glorfindel.

“I cannot tell them you wish your sword to be called ‘sword’.” Glorfindel narrowed his eyes as Ecthelion’s hands ran down the length of the elleth’s thighs and reached her knees, massaging them. One hand strayed to touch the other young elleth.

“Erestor! Name my sword, and you can collect the toll from one of these beauties. You may even choose which of these lovely fragile flowers to collect it from.”

“There is no toll,” spoke Glorfindel suddenly as the golden elleth slid herself onto Erestor's lap, and the darker one took her place on Ecthelion's. “He just says that to be a flirt.” When no reaction save for giggling came from the pair, Glorfindel narrowed his eyes. “How old are you? Or you?” he demanded, pointing to the other elleth. “Barely past your majority, either of you, if that. Go home to your mothers and stay put until you learn to be ladies,” instructed Glorfindel sternly.

Bowing their heads and shamefully looking about to be sure no others saw them, the pair hastily left, gathering the baskets that they had when first Ecthelion came upon them. As soon as the ellith were out of earshot, Ecthelion snorted and said, “You are no fun.”

“Name your sword,” demanded the golden elf.

“Findelamarth.”

“Theltorog it is,” answered Glorfindel almost immediately.

Erestor snickered before he was able to contain himself, and Ecthelion turned to the scribe now. “Erestor, name my sword,” the fountain’s captain insisted, “before he has them inscribe ‘sparkly snuggly fluffywoofypoof’ on the blade.”

Placing his gloves over his leg, Erestor stared into the spouting sparkling water of the fountain. “Orchrist,” he finally said.

“There you are,” Ecthelion told Glorfindel as he stood up. “Now, where did those girls run off to?” he wondered aloud as he left the courtyard.

Glorfindel shook his head in disbelief at Ecthelion’s reaction. “He seems to appreciate nothing I have done these last few weeks to prepare both of our houses for this event,” said Glorfindel in reference to the official celebration for the completion of the city. “I apologize for cancellation our riding lesson today, but I had so much work.”

“I can understand that,” said Erestor. “We have been so busy duplicating documents so that each house has them to sign, I fear my hands may fall off.”

It was then that Glorfindel noticed the riding gloves, the mud, and the fact that Erestor had come from the direction of the stables and not of the council building. “Were you at the stables?” asked Glorfindel as he sat down beside Erestor. He was given a proud nod. “By yourself, then?”
“Yes. In the stables, on a horse, down to the river, and back.” Erestor’s smug look told Glorfindel how well the adventure had gone.

“That is wonderful!” Without a thought, Glorfindel leaned over and embraced Erestor in a fierce hug. Realizing after a moment what he had done, the blond warrior straightened himself up and gave Erestor a hearty slap on the shoulder. “I mean, good job, man,” he said in a deeper than usual voice in order to reassert his masculinity.

Erestor chuckled and patted Glorfindel’s back in return. “Thanks to you. Making me get on the horses time after time, no matter how many mud puddles I fell into has been very helpful. Walking to each of the plots of land I am caring for was taking too much time from my day. So, does Gondolin’s star riding instructor get a new blade for the ceremony, too?”

“Yes and no,” answered Glorfindel. “I just get to stand off to the side and look pretty. Er, handsome,” he corrected with a smirk. “Since I have nothing to DO exactly, I have something more ceremonial, like you said. Just something Turgon will present to me when he names the twelve houses.”

“A secret then?” winked Erestor.

“Oh, I have seen it already. They need only inscribe it.” Pushing back his cloak, Glorfindel said, “Here. You will be proud of this.” Handing a sheet of paper to Erestor, he continued, “This is what will be on the blade. I wrote it myself; every word. Even the long ones,” he grinned. “What do you think?”

“The words are beautiful. I am sure the sword is as well,” smiled Erestor.

A little light laughter followed. “It will not be a sword, not like the ones Turgon and Ecthelion are getting. Mine is simply a long knife – sharp though. The blade has quite a sting to it.”
“I seem to have landed myself in quite the predicament.” The young elf looked to Erestor and shrugged. “I was wondering if you might do me a favor and contact my grandfather. My mind is not very strong over such great distances, but I know that yours is.”

With a sigh, Erestor nodded his head. “I am sure King Turgon will not keep you here forever, Laiqalasse. In fact, we shall go to my friend Ecthelion and ask if he might speak to the king.”

“The gate captain?” Laiqalasse shook his head, blond braids gently swinging. “First, he did not believe a place called Green Wood existed, and second, when I told them I was the Prince’s son, he laughed. He insulted my father as well- he said to me ‘Little Thranduil, the philosopher’s son? That amateur shipbuilder would never have known how to become a prince’. Among other discomplimentary things.”

“Discomplimentary?” Erestor chuckled. “Still making up words, then, I see.”

“Someone needs to make new ones up, else we would bore of the old ones,” grinned the young warrior.

“Laiqalasse, forgive me, I should have introduced you. Glorfindel, this is Laiqalasse, the younger son of Thranduil, Prince of Green Wood as I understand it now. Last I saw him, he was barely to my knee and was a constant audience for my fiddling. Laiqalasse, may I present Captain Glorfindel, chief of the House of the Golden Flower.” Erestor politely motioned that Laiqalasse should join them at their table in the garden where they were having tea.

After offering to pour a cup for the newcomer, Glorfindel gave Erestor a smirk. “I never knew you were a musician.”

“I dabbled a bit,” answered Erestor.

“Dabbled a bit? He writes his own songs,” blurted out Laiqalasse. “He sang me to sleep more times than I can count, and Luthien employed him as her minstrel for a time.”

Greatly interested, Glorfindel pressed for more information. “Erestor hardly speaks of his life before coming here. I have a feeling your stories will be fascinating.”
Laiqalasse bit his lip, and glanced at Erestor, who was staring off at a tree in the distance. “Perhaps it best that Erestor tell you those stories, in his own time.”

“My apologies,” said Glorfindel, with a slight bow of his head. “I should not have assumed.”

“Actually, I am myself curious of what young Laiqalasse remembers of Doriath. There is no need to keep the things you recall from anyone- Glorfindel is a good friend, and there is nothing I would hide from him.” Erestor picked up a biscuit from the tray, and Glorfindel practically beamed at the comment. “I was simply in thought.”

“What about?” asked Laiqalasse curiously.

“Well, I do believe that you have kin here, Laiqalasse,” explained Erestor. “If I am correct, your father is related to the folk of the tree through his mother. If that is the case, you might appeal to Galdor. He is the Lord of the House of the Tree here in Gondolin. Perhaps his word will be good for the king. If nothing else, he will surely see that you are given good lodgings here.”

“I shall go to see him immediately,” decided Laiqalasse, but Erestor raised a hand.

With a curious smile, the dark ellon asked, “You have my interest. What do you recall of Doriath when I was there?”

“I remember when you left. I refused to eat for weeks after that, and I threw a fit. Thingol limped for awhile from the bite I gave to his leg,” snickered the youth. When he sobered, he added, “I tried to follow you, but I could barely walk. I thought at first you were leaving because of me, because I was always crawling about instead of walking. It took a few years for me to understand it was because of all of the trouble you had with Thingol.”

“You were in trouble with the king?” interrupted Glorfindel.

“We had a... battle of words, one might say,” Erestor stated. “I began something of a small rebellion over the speaking of Quenya. It is forbidden there.”

Laiqalasse’s grin spread across his face. “That is why I began to use this version of my name.”

“We used to call him Legolas,” added Erestor to clear up any confusion Glorfindel may have had in following the conversation.

“So, you started a rebellion. Is that what you were in jail for in Doriath?” guessed Glorfindel. Before Erestor could do more than nod, a messenger approached the table, bowing low.

“Good lords, your pardon. Lord Glorfindel, you are needed at the front gate. No one can find Lord Ecthelion, and we have a party of visitors.” The runner took a deep breath, obviously having raced about in an attempt to find someone who could greet those entering the city. “They have been waiting for some time now, but we have yet to allow them entry.”

“I shall go to the gate at once,” replied Glorfindel. The messenger nodded and ran off again. “Laiqalasse, perhaps we might have another chance to speak again soon. It was a pleasure to meet you,” he said.

“And you,” came the answer.

“Laiqalasse, perhaps we should go to see Galdor,” Erestor reminded him as Glorfindel stood up. “Fin, will you be in the hall for supper?” Glorfindel nodded. “I hope we shall see you then.”
As Glorfindel lingered to watch Erestor and Laiqalasse leave, something seemed to twist at his insides. A pang of jealously, he realized. Although it had not been said, Laiqalasse was something like family to Erestor – like a nephew or something of the sort. For so long years now as the city grew and thrived, Glorfindel had felt a companionship with Erestor, born mostly from the fact that neither had anyone else, and so, they had each other, and had taken to the comfortable familiarity of nearly constant companionship. This newest development left him with an ache in his heart as he covered the distance from the courtyard to the main gate.

Upon arrival, he found a party of three riders, one of whom had dismounted and was looking particularly bored. “Welcome to the Gates of Gondolin,” announced Glorfindel loudly as a soldier handed him a scroll. He unrolled it carefully, but he was well aware of what was written upon it.

“Before you enter, I have but a few rules to tell you. First and foremost, you may not turn back now. Once you have entered the city, you will be required to stay here forevermore. No one who finds Gondolin may leave Gondolin. Anyone who seeks to escape will be punished by death. Second,” he began, and this was always the hardest for him to decree, “no unclean behavior will be tolerated. The penalty for such an act is death. Third, no one shall steal, murder, rape, torture, or maim. The full sentence for such an act is to be determined by the king, but the ultimate outcome is always death. Do you have any questions?”

“What is the penalty for tax evasion?” asked the elf who was standing, leaning against his horse.

“Oh... we... uhm... what are taxes?” mumbled Glorfindel to the nearest guard, who shrugged.

“Oh, beautiful!” The ellon took hold of his horse’s reigns and began to lead her to the gate. “I like this city already. However, I regret to inform you, I plan not to follow all of your rules, and I plan not to be killed on account of it.”

The full company of guards, including Glorfindel, stood silent and in shock. The pair still mounted began to laugh lightly as their leader further approached. “My name is Gildor Inglorion, and though that may mean little to you, it will mean quite a lot to your king. I am a messenger of the realm of King Elu Thingol, long live the king and may his reign be prosperous and filled with glory, and of Nargothrond with tidings from King Finrod Felagund, the wise and just.”

“So... so which rules did you plan to break, then?” asked Glorfindel, fairly confused.

“For one, I do indeed plan to leave. I have been assigned to travel between all three great kingdoms, with messages and the occasional token or treat.” Gildor took a moment to gaze up at the tall towers and nodded commendingly. “Wonderful design.”

“And... the other?” Glorfindel truly wished Ecthelion had been at the gate instead of him, until the answer was given to his question.

With a wicked smile, Gildor looked over his shoulder and crooked his finger at one of the mounted travelers. As the dark elf who traveled with him dismounted, the other rider grinned, his shoulders shaking in laughter. Very calmly, the brunet strolled to the leader of the party, and paused only when he was standing very close beside Gildor.

The bold silver-blond elf smiled as he licked his lips. Moments later, nearly the entire company was gasping, and two of the guards had fainted. Glorfindel’s eyes were extremely wide as he took in the sight of two male elves kissing. It was something he could not seem to look away from, and an image that he would never forget.

“We are citizens of Doriath and Nargothrond,” stated Gildor as a few of the soldiers began to warily
draw their weapons. “Free peoples of Middle-earth. Your king knew of us before we came, and he has given us clearance. If you do not believe me, then ask him yourself.”

At a loss for words, Glorfindel motioned to the nearest pair of guards. “Please, escort Lord Gildor and his party to King Turgon.” The warriors nodded and walked to join their guests. Glorfindel snapped his fingers, and a stable hand came to take the reigns of the horses.

As Gildor passed by, he stopped before Glorfindel. “Thank you for greeting us. It is a pleasure to meet you-?”

“Glorfindel. I am Glorfindel, of the House of the Golden Flower,” he managed to say without stuttering.

“Glorfindel. Aye.” Gildor locked his eyes with those of the captain, and after a few seconds, his lips curved in an almost obscene fashion. “Glorfindel. I shall remember your name.” The elf then, it seemed, winked at Glorfindel, causing the Gondolin elf’s cheeks to flush, and then he was gone, entering the city with the escort.

It was then that Glorfindel realized he had practically stopped breathing. He filled his lungs with air and excused himself quickly, then escaped to the stables. For the first time, he felt as if he had been standing before the company of soldiers naked, with his thoughts and soul bared to all who stood there.

Hiding himself in an empty stall, Glorfindel could not clear from his mind the events that had just occurred. Especially prominent was the kiss he had witnessed. His fingers had already loosened his belt, and his hand was hidden down the front of his pants. Closing his eyes and hoping that no one would hear him, Glorfindel began to pleasure himself. The scene replayed, over and over. After a while, Glorfindel knew not when, the elves he had seen with his eyes changed in his mind.

Hastily, he rose upon his knees and shoved his leggings down, stroking furiously as he watched the erotic imagery again. No longer did he see Gildor and his companion. It was him, standing so confidently at the front gate, and in his arms, a beautiful, dark creature. Tall and lithe, proud and mysterious. Glorfindel clenched his teeth as he imagined himself kissing Erestor, holding Erestor, touching Erestor, fucking Erestor.

“Ugghn!” Swallowing the sound as soon as it came forth, Glorfindel panted quietly as he watched through hooded eyes as his seed spilled into the straw. Wiping his hand upon the ground, he sat back to calm himself once more.

Things were going to be more difficult from now on.
“You lost her.”

Ecthelion took a deep breath and nodded affirmatively. “Yes, sire.”

“You lost her,” the king repeated, rising from his throne.

“Yes, your highness.” Ecthelion did not shy away from the gaze of the king as Glorfindel did. The third elf of the party stepped up before Ecthelion.

“I take full responsibility, m’lord.” Egalmoth glanced to his right, where Salgant and Duilin stood looking on at the host that had returned without the white lady of the realm. “It was my turn for watch. She said she wished a private moment by the river, and I fell asleep without regard-“

“You lost her?!” Turgon’s rage was full-blown, and he shook with fury as he stomped down the trio of steps before the throne. His hand was at Egalmoth’s throat in an instant. “I should have you killed for an act so traitorous!”

“Mercy, m’lord, we are all at fault,” spoke Ecthelion, drawing a short blade from his arsenal. Positioning it to point at his heart, he removed the king’s hand from the other lord’s throat and placed it upon the blade. “If you kill him, it is only deserving I die as well. I was the leader of the party; it was my responsibility to see her safely to Doriath and back.”

"Doriath? For what reason was she there?!” demanded the king. ”Why did you take her there?” The blade pressed only slightly forward, close enough for discomfort but not close enough to pierce cloth or draw blood.

"It was her will and her want," explained Ecthelion. "She would not be dissuaded, and we could not simply leave her to wander."

"And yet wander she does; if she is not yet dead." Turgon withdrew the blade, holding it with the hilt facing Ecthelion. “I have no time to kill anyone. We must make haste to find my sister. I am going to make myself abundantly clear- this is not to leave this room. You will say nothing of this to anyone. Those present will be sent to search for her in small groups. You will not return until all leads have been exhausted!”
Upon hearing the decree that no word was to leave the chamber, Erestor set down his quill and stopped recording what was being said. The scribe took up a brush of ink and blurred the words on the page before setting it aside to be destroyed later.

“M’lord,” spoke Salgant from the edge of the room where he stood, “what of your decree that no one who enters is given leave to go?”

Contemplating this for only a moment, Turgon said, “I have no time to worry about that. I will not have Aredhel in the wilds alone!”

“Your highness,” spoke one of the two elves in the room who was not a lord nor a scribe, “I know I am an outsider, but I am willing to do whatever I may to aid you at this time.”

“As am I.” Laiqalasse stood up, having been seated behind Galdor, who had taken him into his house some years earlier when he had arrived. “You have my aid as well.”

“Gildor Inglorion, Laiqalasse Thranduilion, I thank you both for your offers. Salgant, you and Duilin will need to find suitable gear for Laiqalasse, and quickly, so that he can go with you to search the south. Egalmoth, you, Ecthelion, and Galdor will go east. Glorfindel, you and Erestor will travel with Gildor to the west.”

Although Glorfindel had feared facing the king, his shiver now was due to something entirely different.
Four weeks after leaving Gondolin they ran out of supplies, with no sign of the lady they were trying to find. They rested for longer periods of time, and though none of them said it, they all were beginning to feel that their quest was hopeless. It was decided that they would stop to hunt, spend another two weeks searching, and then return to Gondolin.

Originally, Erestor had argued vehemently in favor of remaining in the wilds until they found some sign of her, ill or fair. Gildor pointed out that it would be unlikely after the time that had passed that they would find a trail of any sort, and wanted to return to the city. Glorfindel had the final vote in the matter, and struck the two week compromise between them. He hated to return to King Turgon without any hope, but at the same time, it was harder and harder for the Lord of the Golden Flower to believe that they might find Aredhel.

Erestor had appeared forlorn and defeated, but simply nodded at the logic. Gildor seemed smugly pleased at Glorfindel’s decision, and their hunt continued. Game was scarce, but eventually the trio managed to track a wandering boar. It was killed swiftly, and the three rested as the meat was cooked over their campfire, saying little to one another.

For the duration of their journey, Glorfindel had been unable to keep his eyes off of the elf-lord of Doriath. Gildor was unique. Despite the fact he was allegedly nothing more than a messenger, he carried himself with the air of a prince. Whenever in Gondolin, Gildor broke the rules without so much as a flinch, and always he said the things no one else dared say to the king.

Then there was Erestor, the one Glorfindel truly wished to watch. The one he really wanted, the one who would never consider the blond in the same way he did. Glorfindel knew not why fate would play so cruel a trick upon him.

"You are watching him again," whispered Erestor once Gildor had gone off into the trees to relieve himself. Glorfindel blushed as he turned to look at his scholarly friend. "You know he is no longer with that blacksmith that came with him when he first entered the city."

With a frown, Glorfindel replied, "I believed they were bound."

"No, and that was the problem," answered Erestor. "His companion had been hoping for more than just a friendly fling." There was a pause before Erestor asked, "Are you attracted to him?"

"Why, are you jealous?"

Erestor stiffened a little at the comment, which came not from Glorfindel, but from Gildor. "Merely... concerned." Standing up, Erestor took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I am going for a walk. Perhaps I can find some wild fruit for dessert." With a nod to each of the elves, Erestor picked up his
quiver and bow and then disappeared into the woods.

Gildor settled himself upon the ground close to where Glorfindel was, picked up a piece of wood, and tossed it into the fire. "You never answered his question, sweetling."

His cheeks flushed, Glorfindel turned away. No one had ever addressed him with such familiarity. His eyes scanned the foliage in the direction that Erestor had gone, but he saw no trail. A firm hand grasped his chin and turned it so that he was facing Gildor. "I ask you the same question. I know you are attracted to me," he growled, lowering his gaze and making Glorfindel feel positively dirty, "but... are you attracted to him?"

"To... him?" squeaked the captain, scooting away from Gildor's touch. He immediately backed up into a tree, and was pursued.

"To... him," Gildor repeated, his eyes shifting to the place where Erestor had gone. "To the dark shadow of Doriath; to the wiry mouse of Turgon's council."

"I... I..." Glorfindel squirmed to get away, but his legs were trapped by Gildor, who was knelt upon them.

"Glorfindel," said Gildor abruptly, "you do know he is not one of us, do you not?"

"One... one of us?"

Gildor smirked and leaned down so that his nose nearly touched Glorfindel's. "Yes, darling, one of... us..." His tongue flicked Glorfindel's lips, moistening them and making the blond open them in surprise. Gildor immediately demanded entrance, his mouth sealed over Glorfindel's. For a few seconds, Gildor's tongue danced about within the cavern of Glorfindel's mouth, with the warrior unable to do a thing but fist the grass and try to keep from passing out. "Did you enjoy that?" questioned Gildor once he slid out.

Swallowing the knot in his throat, Glorfindel nodded shakily.

"Good," purred the messenger, and narrowing his eyes seductively, he added, "Stick out your tongue."

Hesitantly, Glorfindel did as he had been asked. Gildor moved forward once more, but this time he took what Glorfindel offered between his lips and began to suck. Pulling Glorfindel deeper and deeper into his own mouth, Gildor only relented when the blond gave a little whimper. Sitting back on his haunches, Gildor smiled greedily at the panting ellon before him.

"You wish I was him," said Gildor in a husky voice. Glorfindel's breath hitched as he realized that he had been found out. "I can accept that," purred the older ellon. "It does not bother me that you will call his name as I bring pleasure to you."

The sounds of someone returning caused Gildor to stand up, regal as ever. Glorfindel was more of a mess, finding that his leggings were bulged inappropriately and his hair a bit tousled from the tree. "I... I must... go and relieve myself," he stammered, disappearing quickly in the opposite direction of where Erestor was approaching from. He caught Gildor's self-satisfied nod as he headed off, finding a place some distance away.

Glorfindel grabbed hold of a branch for support, closing his eyes. It was so hard not to take what he was being offered, but harder still to admit he could not take what he wanted.
"Glorfindel, there is something I must say."

It was nearing the end of the fifth week spent in the wilderness, and they were tracking all possible leads to find Aredhel. Twice, Erestor had farspoken with Ecthelion, letting him know that they were not lost or captured. The other parties had long since returned to Gondolin, but the persistence of these three hunters far outlasted that of their peers. No stone was left unturned in their attempt to find the King’s sister.

The first few days had been awkward, but now things were surprisingly easy for the trio. During spare moments, Gildor stole kisses from Glorfindel, touching the young ellon in ways he had never been touched before and had never dreamed to ever be touched. Soft, gentle caresses turned in a matter of days to nipping and biting, groping and grabbing, awakening desires Glorfindel hardly knew he had, with the constant throaty laughter from the elf of Doriath. Erestor either did not care or pretended not to notice, for he was quiet, kept his head down most of the time, and busied himself with their appointed task.

Gildor convinced Erestor to hunt for the game alone one night, and while the elder elf was away, Glorfindel was taken to even greater heights of pleasure. As soon as the dark elf was gone, Gildor had him pinned against a tree. Between deep kisses and the occasional pulling of his hair back so that the messenger could gain total access to his throat, Glorfindel realized his belt was being loosened, and his pants pushed down to his knees.

Gildor dropped down before him, and looked up with a smile. "I wonder how you taste," he drawled before lapping at the head of Glorfindel's erection.

Clawing his nails into the bark of the tree, Glorfindel thrust forward as Gildor used his mouth on him, and very soon his essence spurted from the tip. Gildor ran his tongue through the milky substance, cleaning it all away before dressing the panting ellon again. "Delicious," he breathed into Glorfindel's ear before biting his lobe and then swiftly turning to tend to the fire.

They managed for a few days more to hide their actions from Erestor. Then, the inevitable happened. Erestor returned earlier than expected from a hunt. Both of his companions were in states of undress, with Glorfindel nearly naked and sprawled on the ground, panting and groaning wildly. His eyes were closed, and he did not hear Erestor’s return, did not see him or sense him. There was no way for him to, for he was overcome with the sensations he was feeling. On a few other occasions now, Gildor had caused Glorfindel to climax using his mouth. This time was different, for Gildor merely glanced up for a moment to see the dark elf with the darker look before he removed his fingers from his mouth and plunged two of them deep inside of the blond.

It was the first time anything had breached Glorfindel's passage, and he cried out and wailed at first
and wished it to stop but could not find the words. Then as Gildor began to suck his length, the
blond warrior resumed panting and gasping for air as Gildor twisted his wrist one way and the other,
and finally understood how such a thing could bring pleasure. Glorfindel came with a loud roar, and
Gildor made a show of letting the silvery strands hang from his mouth as he rose up and gave
Glorfindel a few final parting thrusts with his hand, which made the blond grunt and sigh.

It had been some sort of silliness for Gildor. When Glorfindel was sated and his ecstasy ebbed away,
he was aghast to see Erestor hunched before the fire, skinning their meal. Gildor merely laughed. He
often laughed. After that point, their activities were no longer hidden- in fact, as they began to eat,
Gildor pulled Glorfindel onto his lap and halfway through dinner, slid his tongue along his ear and
nipped it. Glorfindel’s face flushed, and he looked to Erestor, but the only reaction the dark elf had
was to concentrate more on his supper.

Now, returning back to Gondolin after so long, Erestor sat with Glorfindel near a stream. Gildor had
decided to bathe, and beneath the waterfall could not hear their words. The blond warrior looked to
his friend, expecting disapproval. What he was told gave him a bit of a shock.

“I am happy for you, my friend, but I must warn you of something.”

“Erestor,” began Glorfindel, “I know what will happen if he and I do anything in public. Do not
worry; we have discussed such things and will be discrete.”

“I do not doubt that,” said Erestor. “That is not my concern.”

Furrowing his brow, Glorfindel questioned, “What is your concern, then?”

“You must understand, I knew Gildor from the time he was first born. And, he is trouble. He is a
wanderer, and fickle when it comes to love. Take care with your heart, Glorfindel.”

Tightening his lips together, Glorfindel simply looked away and nodded. He had the greatest desire
to take hold of the dark ellon’s hand, to proclaim his love to him, how it was not Gildor who held his
heart, but Erestor. How he wanted Erestor to be the one looking up with him, knelt in the dirt,
stroking him, eyes so full of lust. How he desired to be breached again and again, not by Gildor's
fingers, but by Erestor. How he wanted to be on his hands and knees, and writhe and howl as
Erestor claimed him for eternity. Instead, he nodded again.

“You should know something else, my friend.” Erestor waited until Glorfindel looked back to him.
“I know Gildor’s father.”

“Inglor,” nodded Glorfindel. “Was he a good ellon?”

This time Erestor looked away. “Glorfindel, Inglor is the mother-name of an ellon named Finrod.”
Glorfindel blinked. “I have an uncle named Finrod.”

“Yes,” said Erestor softly.

Inhaling sharply, Glorfindel mumbled, “Bloody fucking Morgoth, he is my cousin.”

Erestor said nothing more, for Gildor had stepped upon shore.

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“I will be leading another patrol out in a week’s time. Turgon is furious, and I cannot blame him. He
did say that your search was to be commended,” Ecthelion informed the three elves he sat with. They
were on Erestor’s private balcony, drinking wine and going over any possible clues they had found while outside of Gondolin.

“We did what we could,” said Gildor humbly.

Erestor drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “Perhaps it is rude of me to say, but why does he not try to contact her with his mind?”

“Not all siblings have a good connection to one another,” explained Glorfindel, then he bit his lip. “Or, so I have heard,” he finished.

Ecthelion nodded in agreement. “I remember that Artanis used to say that she could speak with Orodreth and Finrod, but that Aegnor and Angrod had their own special bond, and would only farspeak with each other. Sometimes cousins can farspeak as well, though. I have heard it said that King Turgon is able to speak with Finrod.” He frowned, and turned to Glorfindel. “Are you alright? You look suddenly... ill.”

“Just a... a bit too much wine perhaps,” Glorfindel managed to say as he put the glass aside. “I think I shall retire for the night,” he said quickly as he stood.

“I should go as well.” Gildor hastily got to his feet and gave a little bow. “Please, I hope you enjoy your evening,” he said as he and Glorfindel left. “I know I will,” he added slyly, winking at Erestor.

Once the door was shut, Ecthelion turned his strange look from it and onto Erestor. “What was that about?”

“What was what?” Erestor refilled their goblets as Ecthelion sighed.

“You know what I mean.”

Erestor looked his friend dead in the eye and replied, “I have no idea what you are talking about.”
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“These are nice, but do you have anything a little less plain?” asked Glorfindel as he set down a large tomato he had been examining.

“Just these and the little ones, your lordship.” The vendor waved his hand down the aisle. “You may want to try the gentleman down there at the end,” he suggested.

Glorfindel nodded and paid for a bunch of turnips before he strolled in the direction he had been advised to go. Gildor was to arrive within the week, and Glorfindel planned to have a few of his lover’s favorite things on hand for when he did. Adults and children alike parted before him to give him a wide path to travel. The House of the Golden Flower had risen in the ranks quite quickly, and Glorfindel’s prosperity was due in part to his investments in Erestor’s land. He himself no longer aided his friend in tending the fields; Glorfindel’s counsel was sought often by Turgon, and so he spent much of his time at the tower.

Indeed, there was an interesting variety of tomatoes ahead, and Glorfindel smiled as he caught sight of a crate labeled ‘midnight tomatoes’. The vendor was chatting with someone on the other side of his cart, and so his back was to Glorfindel, who selected a ripe tomato and casually said, “Pardon, but what is your price on these? I have an interest in a few, but my time is short.”

The vendor excused himself from the lady he was speaking to and turned around. There was a momentary pause, and then came the reply: “Take whatever you like, m’lord. No charge.”

“Erestor.” Glorfindel set the produce back into the crate. “What are you doing here?”

Already, Erestor had chosen two of the best tomatoes from the crate of purples ones and was searching for a third. “These have a very bright flavor. Great for slicing or eating whole.”

Glorfindel caught hold of Erestor’s wrist as the tomatoes were placed in his basket. “Why are you here?”

“I am always here for the midweek market,” said Erestor. “I would be here the entire week, but I need to weed and harvest and plant some days.”

“Why are you here and not in the library?”

Erestor looked around the market. It was the busy hour - the time between work and supper, and the walkways were filled with prospective buyers. He relaxed his hand and managed to slip from Glorfindel’s grasp. With his gaze still upon Glorfindel, he looked at the vendor next to him. Unlike most who sold food and consumable goods, this man had a variety of fine crafts, and not many pausing to look. “Mir, could you watch things for me?” asked Erestor.
“Sure thing.” The vendor, who had been sitting on a box with his feet propped up on another box while whittling a piece of wood, turned his head. Upon seeing one of the high lords standing nearby, he scrambled to his feet and brushed the shavings from his pants. “I should be here another hour or two if you need some time.”

Erestor nodded his thanks and ducked under one of the wooden tables to get to the other side. “This way, please, your lordship.”

Glorfindel bit his lip and walked beside Erestor down a path his friend had chosen. When they were away from the paths where citizens traversed, Erestor picked one of the posts by the side of the road that was used to display the market banner and leaned his back against it. “I was dismissed.”

“What? Why?” Glorfindel’s eyes were sympathetic and he frowned. “Did they finish all of the translations?”

Erestor shook his head. “Lord Duilin has a fair amount of pull in the library. In all of the libraries, in fact. I tried to find something elsewhere, but my reputation - or whatever he told them about me - has made that impossible.”

“Maybe I can--”

“No.” Erestor shook his head. “No thank you, Lord Glorfindel. I have been doing well enough at the market to get by.”

Glorfindel looked down at the ground. That was when he noticed that Erestor’s feet were bare. It was not unheard of for people to walk about without shoes or boots, but from Erestor’s appearance, it had been happening for some time. Glorfindel looked back up again. “I have not seen you at Turgon’s council for some time.”

“He dismissed me, too.” Erestor cleared his throat. “You should probably not be seen with me in public, your lordship. Is there anything more you require from the stall? I have some very nice carrots this week.”

“Why do you keep addressing me as if we are not friends?” insisted Glorfindel.

Erestor tried to maintain his stoic expression, but he faltered when he swallowed hard. “You stopped coming to dinner,” he said softly.

“The council days changed,” said Glorfindel. “I thought you… knew that.” Erestor was shaking his head. “Turgon never said you were dismissed. I guess I just--”

“Never noticed I was gone,” finished Erestor bitterly. “Then there was the day in the market when you and your friends laughed at my misfortune, and I--”

“I never laughed at you,” blurted out Glorfindel a little louder than he wanted to. There was obvious hurt in Erestor’s eyes now. “You, Salgant, and Egalmoth were passing by. I was trying to carry three crates back to the cart. I was tired and rushing. There was a stick in the road and I rolled my foot on it and twisted my ankle. There were cucumbers rolling down the path, and tomatoes everywhere - and I do mean everywhere, because they were on me, too. All the three of you did was laugh about farmers and their lack of grace.”

Glorfindel paled considerably. “That was you.”

Erestor looked back to the market, as if checking on his stall despite it being too far away to see. “I
should get back to it. I need to make sure I can make quota.”

Glorfindel reached out and grasped Erestor’s shoulder as he began to walk away. “What quota?”

“The one your assistant set.” Erestor did not shrug off Glorfindel’s hand. “The one detailed in the contract.”

“What contract?” Certain that Erestor would not yet storm off, Glorfindel let go and set down his basket. “Erestor, I have no idea what you are talking about - and I apologize for my behavior in the market. This whole high lord thing got to my head,” he realized. “I have been no better than those I once despised.”

Erestor sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. “You have an assistant named Tavorel?”

“Yyyyes,” Glorfindel hesitated to answer. “Salgant thought it would be a good idea if I had someone see to my financial interests.”

“So Salgant counsels you now.”

Glorfindel licked his lips. “I am sorry. I really have…”

“Changed.” Erestor closed his eyes. “As should be expected. You are a high lord, and you should act as such. Not much time to fraternize with peasants.”

“What is this contract you speak of?” pressed Glorfindel.

“The one Tavorel presented me. You secure one hundred percent of the sales up to three gold per week, and twenty percent after that. It might not seem harsh, but there is a difference between sales and profit. There was an infestation about seven years ago that devastated the squashes and weakened several other crops. Tavorel argued that I was trying to avoid paying out your share by skipping market some weeks and only bringing things every other week, so I paid him from savings to keep him from stalking me all the time. He is very insistent; I hope you are paying him well.”

Glorfindel returned to looking at Erestor’s bare feet. “He is paid on commission depending on what he manages to collect. I did not think he was doing that to you - we are friends.”

“And business partners,” reminded Erestor. “I am sorry. I can tell this is upsetting you, but I really must return to that stall. This is the best day to sell, and I am short for the week at the moment, and I need to get back before dark to do weeding so that the beans are not choking.”

“Keep the money, Erestor. I am tearing up that contract as soon as I find it. Tavorel overstepped his bounds,” said Glorfindel. “And I… I have no excuse for my behavior,” he said. “I know you need to get back to the market now, but are you free this evening? Can we have dinner and talk?”

Erestor did not look interested, but he slowly nodded. “I need to finish up here. I suppose I can delay weeding until the morning.”

“My quarters or yours?” asked Glorfindel. “I will return to the tower now and order food.” He looked about to ask one thing, but another question was posed, “Do you still live in the same place?”

“I do,” said Erestor. “I guess I would prefer we meet there so that I am closer to my own bed when we finish. Do you still have the key?”

Glorfindel nodded. “I am going to set it all up right now. Sunset?”
“That would be fine.” Erestor looked down at the basket. “Did you want more tomatoes?”

Glorfindel shifted his gaze to the basket. “You should take these and try to sell them.”

“Keep them. I gave them to you,” Erestor reminded him. “I will see you at sunset,” he said as he walked back down the path to the market.

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“Tavorel, I need you to find one of the contracts for me.”

At a desk in the corner of Glorfindel’s office space, a fairly young ellon with bright blue eyes looked up from what he was writing. “Which one, sir?” He was already opening a drawer filled with official-looking paperwork.

“The contract with Erestor.”

“Erestor… Erestor… is he one of the horse trainers who uses your land for riding?” asked Tavorel.

“Why are we charging-- nevermind. No. Erestor is a farmer.”

“Oh.” Tavorel shut the wooden door abruptly and pulled out a second smaller drawer that was lower down. “Farmers. Let me see… ah. Yes, here it is.” He held it out as Glorfindel came closer. “I was going to ask about renegotiating that one. It has been over twenty years, and I think we should raise the--” Tavorel gasped suddenly as the sound of ripping paper tore through the air. “Sir! What are you doing?”

“Tearing up the contract.”

“But sir!” Tavorel picked up a stack of loose paper and used it to fan himself as Glorfindel tore the sheets in the opposite direction. “You should have some compensation for the rent! Is he buying the land from you?”

“What land, Tavorel?”

“The land he farms on, of course!”

“He owns the land.”

“Oh. Oh! You never explained that,” replied Tavorel, seeming a bit relieved. “What were you demanding payment for, then?”

“I never had any intention of demanding payment for anything,” said Glorfindel. “I helped him get started. I raised some of the seedlings and bought some of the tools, but it was just a hobby for me. He owes me nothing.”

Tavorel rubbed his face. “That is most unfortunate. I thought he was just being difficult. I have been collecting from him monthly.”

“Yes, I know. I need you to do two things before you leave today,” said Glorfindel. “First, I need you to calculate how much you collected from him for the duration of this contract. I know that he will not take the money if offered, but I want you to find out what the most desirable crops are right now, and invest in seeds for them. I also want you to go out to his fields tomorrow and look at the state of his equipment. Make sure whatever he has is safe and efficient, and whatever he needs from tools to trellises, have it delivered directly as a gift. He will not refuse it that way.” Glorfindel waited
for Tavorel to write all of this down before he asked, “Where do you get your clothes?”

“A tailor not far from here. He has a small shop, but he does excellent work.”

“Is it on your way home?”

Tavorel nodded.

“Go there and start a line of credit for Erestor under my name. Make sure he knows I will cover everything. When you stop at his fields in the morning, tell him he should go there and pick up whatever he needs. Is there a cobbler nearby?”

“Just down the street from the tailor. I assume you wish me to do the same there?” asked Tavorel.

Glorfindel nodded. “Farming boots, at least two pairs, riding boots, and shoes for the house - and anything else he wants or needs.”

Tavorel finished writing all of this down. “And the second item?”

“I want you to calculate what you have been averaging each month from your share of the collections. As of tomorrow, I am employing you with a salary. You should not need to worry if you can manage your bills based on the collections from others.”

Tavorel stopped writing. “Are you sure about that? When I worked for Lord Salgant, he taught me that I had to put forth the effort to earn my due.”

“We are going to stop taking all of Lord Salgant’s advice,” said Glorfindel, and Tavorel smiled at this. “I think you have proved your worth. Tomorrow we will discuss your continued employment, as well as the contracts. I want to make sure we are not trying to cheat anyone else.”

“Yes, sir. I will get started right away,” promised Tavorel.

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“You Majesty!”

After placing the basket of tomatoes and radishes in his room, Glorfindel went to the kitchens to request a meal for two be delivered at sunset to Erestor’s quarters. He had plans to let himself into Erestor’s room after picking some flowers, but first his mind was on more official matters. King Turgon turned around, but continued to walk slowly backwards and to his destination. There was a white bird nested on the top of his head. “Lord Glorfindel. Good evening. You must excuse my haste; I have an engagement to attend. As in, an actual engagement,” he clarified.

“It will only take a moment,” insisted Glorfindel, who hurried to catch up. He had been up and down the tower twice, and was slightly winded from all of the steps he had to contend with.

“Perhaps we could discuss before the council meeting tomorrow?” suggested Turgon.

Glorfindel continued his pursuit. “It is, in fact, about the council,” he said. This seemed to interest Turgon enough to stop. “King Turgon, I wish to ask, why did you dismiss Erestor from the council?”

Turgon’s brow furrowed. “You suggested it,” he said.

Glorfindel mirrored the confused expression. “I did?”
“He kept missing the meetings, and you said that he was very busy with some sort of agricultural project. I did not want him to feel obligated, so I offered dismissal to him,” said Turgon. The little white bird peered down to look judgmentally at Glorfindel. “I take it that was not your intention.”

“I just… I guess I meant for that month, he was busy.” Glorfindel sighed and shook his head. “My fault again,” he muttered. He stood up straight again, still far shorter than Turgon, and asked, “Would you consider reinstating him?”

“Erudite Erestor is forever welcome as part of my council, even when I do not agree with his opinions,” said Turgon. “Now, I must excuse myself, else I will be late.” The king turned to leave.

“And he will be paid for that?” Glorfindel cringed at how his voice echoed down the hallway and cause Turgon to turn around, the bird ruffling his feathers. “I mean, for attending councils?”

Turgon clasped his hands together. “I would not dream to force anyone to listen to me at a meeting without some sort of compensation. It will be as before,” said Turgon. He awaited a response, but when Glorfindel bowed in thanks, Turgon nodded and continued on his way.

Another sigh escaped from Glorfindel and he leaned against the nearest wall. While he tried to organize his thoughts, he heard the bells of the hour ring. It would be an hour until the sun set. Glorfindel wiped sweat from his brow and decided to freshen up before going to Erestor’s room to wait for him.

He walked slowly to his own quarters and tried to decide if he had enough time to fetch a good bottle of wine or take his chances with what was put on the food cart for them. As he slid the key into his lock, he picked up noise on the other side of the door. He withdrew the key quickly and pressed his ear to the wood. At first, he thought it had been in his head, but then he definitely hear the creak of a floorboard near the door, and he stepped back and placed a hand on the hilt of his sword as the door opened.

“At ease, soldier, at ease.”

Glorfindel’s hand slipped away. “You worried me.”

“Obviously.” Gildor placed a hand on the doorway and laughed. “Is it so bad here that you need to draw a sword when entering your own home?”

“I expected you later in the week.” Glorfindel pointed to the basket on the nightstand. “I found radishes for you.”

“I saw that.” Gildor glanced out into the hallway before he gave Glorfindel a welcoming kiss. “It is a very lovely gesture, but I do not come to Gondolin for the radishes,” he said as he pulled the blushing elf-lord into the room and closed the door.

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Glorfindel typically slept through the shouts of the crier, for the walls of the tower were thick, but he had left the window open. In fact, it had been Gildor to leave the window open. Glorfindel blinked in the hazy darkness of the room. The basket was on the surface nearby; radish greens peeking out lazily from the top. He wiped the sleep from his eyes, and Gildor edged closer to him, arm tightening around his cheek. The crier called out again.

“One in the morn; all’s well!”

“Shit.” Glorfindel rubbed at his left eye, for some particle or eyelash had gotten into it and was
irritating him.

“Hmm?” Gildor nosed at Glorfindel’s shoulder. “Something wrong?”

Gently, Glorfindel eased Gildor from him and pushed the sheet from his own body. “I forgot something,” he said softly, mindful that the window was open and the crier near enough if Glorfindel had heard him.

“Sun up soon. Can you wait?” Gildor was already pulling the covers closer as a breeze rushed into the room.

Glorfindel shivered. “No. I will be back.” he said, and he leaned down to kiss Gildor’s cheek before he stood up and squinted, searching for his pants. They were on the floor near the window, and Glorfindel closed it after he retrieved the clothing. He found a shirt, and as an afterthought, found the key on a string in his desk and placed it into his pocket.

Few were in the hallways of the tower at this hour, and in fact, he encountered no one on his way to his destination. As he rounded the hall to the familiar room, he saw the silver trolley beside the door. He slowed and looked it over. The lids were all still over the plates. He lifted one, and guiltily saw that the food was untouched, droplets clinging to the inside of the lid that now slid down and hit the white linen on the cart. He placed the lid back again before he lifted the other from the large plate. The one, too, had condensation built up, but the food was not placed in pristine condition on the plate. It took a moment for Glorfindel to realize the mutilation must be from someone slamming their fist down into the mashed potatoes and whatever else the meal had once been.

Glorfindel set the lid back in place and almost chose to leave, but he took a deep breath and knocked on the door. He waited a moment before he knocked again, and then placed his ear to the door.

He heard nothing. It was possible that Erestor had gone into town and found one of the dark little pubs to drown his sorrows. Then again, if he was not wearing shoes regularly, there was little chance he had funds to frequent his usual watering holes. Glorfindel slid the key from his pocket and fit it into the lock. There was a sound on the other side of the door, but before he could consider whether what he was doing was a bad idea or a terrible idea, he opened the door.

Erestor’s room was close to one of the street lamps, so it was easier to see what was inside as Glorfindel closed the door behind him. There was not much to see. Older crates once used for produce now served as a makeshift stool and table, and once again Erestor was sleeping on a straw mat, but it was on the floor this time. One item looked out of place in the room, and that was the empty wine bottle on the windowsill.

“I take it Gildor had a safe journey here?”

Glorfindel cringed at the tone. He had heard Erestor speak this way before, but never to him. “I am sorry,” was all he said.

Erestor turned onto his other side, for he had initially had his back to Glorfindel. “I had numerous visitors tonight,” he continued. “Each knock on the door gave me hope that you had only been momentarily delayed. Turgon sent a messenger to let me know that council is tomorrow at noon sharp. I was given a list of current topics to read through, so at least I had a way to occupy myself this evening.”

Glorfindel had enough sense to look appropriately ashamed.

Erestor sat up and drew his knees closer. “Tavorel visited as well. While I appreciate your offer to void our contract, I want to make it clear that I am not a charity case. I have no intention of going to
some tailor and getting all dressed up in order to clear your conscience. If he shows up on my land tomorrow or any other day, I will remove him myself if I have to. I have what I need, and if I need something, I will get it myself. I will get by. I do not want your pity or your handouts.”

“There never should have been a contract,” said Glorfindel. “I have been a horrible friend, and I am trying to make it up to you. I swear, I had no intention for any of this to happen. It is not charity, Erestor, it is… it is just the right thing for me to do!”

“The right thing for you to do would have been to send someone to let me know you were not coming tonight.” Erestor finally looked at Glorfindel. “I am tired of being made a fool. Tomorrow is a new day. I am going to walk into council and start fresh. That is after I get up early to do the weeding I intended to do tonight. That said, I will kindly ask you to take your leave. I wasted a lot of time waiting for you arrive, and I need to make up for it in the morning.”

“I can help,” offered Glorfindel. “I can--”

Erestor held up his hand. “I do not want your broken promises. I would like to rebuild our friendship, but just like council tomorrow, we need to start over again. There is no way I can pick up where we left off now.” He looked across the room and said, “You can leave the key on the table thing over there before you go. If you want yours back, it is in the top crate over there.”

Glorfindel slowly removed the key from his pocket and placed it where Erestor requested, but did not retrieve his own. “I am so sorry,” he added on his way back to the door.

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“If there are no new matters of business to attend to, I think we can adjourn until next week. I believe everyone owes Erestor their thanks for his ability to clear our entire list of lingering old business,” said Turgon as everyone began to gather their things and leave the chambers.

“I hope this is not a special guest appearance,” piped up Galdor.

Erestor, who was gathering his own things, paused to call across the room to Galdor, “You can look forward to many years of arguing with me over curfew times.”

“Only if I get to listen to you school Salgant on the necessity of defined borders,” answered Galdor to the laughter of others.

With the meeting at a close, Glorfindel picked up a small book of notes and made his way to the door. He was stopped by Ecthelion, who invited him to lunch. After a brief discussion and a yawn he declined.

By now, just about everyone was gone from the chamber, with the exception of someone who cleared his throat behind Glorfindel. “Funny thing happened on the way to my fields this morning,” said Erestor.

“Oh?” Glorfindel pretended to be surprised.

“I encountered the watchman. He was finishing for the night, but he wanted to let me know that he saw someone leave the tower at the early hour of one in the morning and go out into my fields. He followed and watched, but since it seemed they were only weeding the crops, he left them be. He thought perhaps I had hired someone to tend to the work for me, but we both know that is not the case.”

“Did he do everything you needed done?” asked Glorfindel.
Erestor tilted his head. “Now how did you know it was a man who went out there?”

“Lucky guess,” replied Glorfindel.

“It saved me a lot of time. I managed to get some additional planting done, and fixed a plow that has been sassing me all season.” Erestor sighed and looked down. “Your boots are muddy.”

Glorfindel looked down. “So they are.” He saw that Erestor had shoes on, and while they were worn, it gave him some measure of relief.

Erestor grasped Glorfindel’s wrist much in the same way Glorfindel had taken hold of his the previous day. He lifted Glorfindel’s hand and looked at the dirt under his nails. “You should really wear gloves when you go out there,” he advised. “You never know when you might encounter nettles or a wayward bee.”

“Noted.” Glorfindel lowered his arm when Erestor let go. “Gildor and I would like to invite you to dinner tonight. I know that hardly makes up for last night, but I do hope you will join us.”

“I only have enough crates in my room for two people.”

“I meant at my place,” clarified Glorfindel.

“How much longer will Gildor be here?”

Glorfindel licked his lips. “Another week or two; he has been very busy as of late.”

“Ask me again when he is gone,” said Erestor as he passed by. Glorfindel sighed and started to walk back to the council chambers to make sure he had everything he came with when he heard Erestor whistle and call out his name. Glorfindel turned back around and saw something small and shiny tossed his way. He caught it, and opened his palm to find a key on a string. “Do not make me ask for it back again,” said Erestor before he disappeared around the corner.
“It is clear to at least one of you why we are here.” Turgon’s eyes scanned the assembled lords. “Although I will not enforce upon those outside of our realm certain rules which do not hold in theirs, I expect everyone here to abide by those laws which have been written. There is one among you who has not.”

Glorfindel stiffened, his mouth dry. He fought back the urge to swallow hard as long as he was able, doing his best to keep his eyes upon the king. To his left stood Ecthelion, jaw set and shoulders solidly squared. The Lord of the Golden Flower kept the same stance. He knew that behind Ecthelion in the lower rank of lesser lords was Erestor, his features likely hardened in the same manner. Sweat glistened on his forehead and Glorfindel tried to decide whether to wipe it away or leave it in hopes it would not be seen.

For years, Glorfindel had believed his secret was safe. Only Erestor truly knew that something was going on between him and the messenger from Doriath. Everything had been done with the utmost caution. In public, they were more than formal to one another, even calling each other by ‘lord’ and ‘captain’ now and again. Erestor had advised as much, that there were spies everywhere for other lords, and each ready to take advantage over another if it might improve their standing. With the exception of Ecthelion, no one ranked higher than Glorfindel, and the target seemed to grow ever wider each year.

In private, therefore, he and Gildor were even careful. Their moments alone were rare, and these were not always spent in passionate embraces. Whenever Gildor arrived, they would now spend at least a week of not seeing each other, and the same held true when it came time for the silver-blond to depart. During the time in between, they allowed themselves only four or five couplings. These were done midday when most were working and there was little chance of anyone idly walking through the corridor where the guest rooms were. They used gags to keep from making noise, and many times Gildor even tied Glorfindel down even though it was not his desire to be restrained in such a manner so that he would not thrash about and cause someone to hear the commotion and come knocking on the door.

Everything seemed to have been thought of. Every detail covered. Even so, when Glorfindel had been told of a special hearing that was to take place that morning, he knew. Gildor had departed the night before. He knew from the way that Turgon looked around the table at the lords who had come to break their fast with the king what was to come.

“One of you has been having a relationship with another ellon. I call him kin and cousin, but for that alone I do not allow his preference to go unpunished. He is under Thingol’s rule and Finrod’s
protection, and I will not deny another king his say over his own people. You,” he said forcefully, “are my people. You will obey my laws and decrees. Among you, there is one who has not. I know full well who it is. If they have the audacity to betray me in such a manner, they will also have the courage to stand forth.”

There was a most foul taste in Glorfindel’s throat, and a terrible churning in his stomach. All around, the others buzzed. Salgant, as always, could not keep his mouth shut.

“Sire, if I am correct, is not the penalty still death for such an unclean act?” The harper was smiling wickedly as he looked around the room. “It is a curious thing, to know that you know it to be a Lord of Gondolin.”

“It is I who decides ultimately how to deal with those who break the rules,” Turgon reminded the rotund elf. “Suffice to say, I have strong evidence regarding the identity of the one I am accusing.”

“And who is this one you are accusing?” pressed Salgant.

Turgon looked to the ground. “I had hoped he had more honor than this.”

Tightening his grasp on the rail that encircled the room behind which the lords stood when addressing the king in this full council, Glorfindel knew he was fast running out of time. His feet were frozen in place, and he panicked in trying to decide what to do. Ecthelion was staring ahead, likely trying to assess the situation. Against his better judgment, Glorfindel began to turn around in hopes to receive some guidance or perhaps some extra strength from the ellon behind him. Instead, he turned in time to watch Erestor walk down the stairs past him and out to the center of the room. There were gasps, and then there was silence.

The king was not amused. “Why are you standing here?”

“You know why I am here,” came the soft answer, the deep voice unafraid.

“Yes, it is obvious!” Salgant pointed one chubby finger toward the center of the room. “There is your unlawful lord!”

With very slow, well-paced steps, Turgon circled many times around the dark Noldo. He finally came to stand in front of him. “That is where you are wrong. You know why you are here, but I do not know why you are here. You should be there,” he said, nodding toward the empty spot in the council room.

Erestor did not respond. Meanwhile, Glorfindel helplessly looked on, catching Ecthelion’s gaze for only a moment. His knees shook as the scene played out.

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“Everyone else, leave!” boomed the voice of the king. The room began to quickly empty just as he pointed out three of the chief lords. “Not the two of you... or you,” he said of Ecthelion and Glorfindel, and then Egalmoth.

Salgant turned around and gave Egalmoth a questioning look before being ushered from the room with the rest. When the doors finally closed, Turgon paced to his throne and back to Erestor. After a short time, he waved a hand at Egalmoth. “You may go.”

Extreme bewilderment was evident on the lord’s face, but Egalmoth retreated from the room none-the-less. “Erestor, why do you lie to me?” asked Turgon in a dangerously low voice. “Why do you always feel the need to lie to me?”

Again, Erestor did not answer.
“Why do you keep doing this? Why do you protect him?” Turgon shook his head. “I can speculate who ‘he’ is, but you have made it impossible for me to know for certain. He will be more careful now. He will hide deeper in the shadows. He will not give me cause to do this again.”

“I should certainly hope not,” spoke Erestor quietly.

The tone of Turgon’s voice changed. “Why must you lie to me, Erestor? You should not be the one standing here, and yet you are!” Turgon turned his head to the side, shaking it sadly. “Ecthelion.” The king walked back to his throne.

He hesitated, but Ecthelion stepped forward. It was now that Glorfindel’s eyes widened upon seeing the rope in the other elf’s hands. There was no way for Glorfindel to hear the dialogue being exchanged between the two, but he saw Erestor nod and remove his vest, followed by his shirt. Before he could call out an objection, he was called to the throne.

With heavy steps, Glorfindel walked to the king, shaking slightly as he passed Ecthelion and Erestor, who was continuing to undress. “Your Majesty.” Glorfindel bowed.

“This time,” began Turgon, lifting up a whip he had coiled beside his throne, “make him bleed.”

Glorfindel stared at the weapon. “Sire, I have something to say to you about-“

“No. It is too late for talk, Glorfindel.” Turgon threw the whip at Glorfindel’s feet. “Pick it up. Now.”

Closing his eyes, Glorfindel lowered himself to the ground and took hold of the handle. As he rose up, the braided leather followed like a cobra. Blinking the tears from his eyes, Glorfindel turned around. His gaze fell to the floor as he swallowed back a whimper. Between two columns of the room, Erestor was stretched, with his arms out to either side and tied in place. His feet had been bound together so that he was unable to brace himself against the blows this time.

Beyond this, Erestor was naked, save for a loin cloth that was wrapped loosely around his waist. His eyes were open, and his head was held up high as he endured whatever was to come with utter calm. Glorfindel had never been as envious as he was now of the bravery the other elf possessed. Holding his tongue, realized Glorfindel, had made him no better than a coward.

“Begin,” instructed Turgon.

Ten minutes later, Glorfindel was still standing and staring, the whip loose at his side.

“I told you to start,” growled Turgon, drumming his fingers on the arm of the throne.

‘Fin. Do what he wants.’

Glorfindel began to shake his head at the words Erestor conveyed directly into his mind.

‘Glorfindel. If you do not, then he will. He is angry with me, with you, and over so many other things. I do not even think he suspects you right now. If he comes over here, I could die. And then, when he finishes with me, he will come after you and what I have done will be for naught.’

As Turgon let a breath out his nose and began to stand, Glorfindel drew back and laid the first stroke across Erestor’s back. The dark elf did not flinch. After four strokes, Glorfindel threw the whip to the floor. A long, red stripe snaked across the marble tiles. Stepping down from his throne, Turgon approached the whip and kicked it back to Glorfindel. “You know damn well that is not good enough,” he growled. “Finish it.”
“No.”

“What?!”

Glorfindel swallowed. He opened his mouth. No sound escaped.

‘Do it.’ The words came once again into his mind from Erestor.

Defeat written across his face, Glorfindel clutched the whip and returned to his task. As he fell into a rhythm and slowed his strokes in hopes of buying Erestor a few less, his mind slipped back to a time when he knew the sting of the leather that flew across the dark elf’s skin.

Memories of his father’s cruelty entered into his head. He remembered the first time, when he cried at something his father had shot. It was a deer, and not yet dead as it was dragged back to the house by its back legs. Fighting for her life, the doe’s front legs flailed and blood leaked from her nose.

“Ada! You are hurting it!” shouted the elfling from his tree house sanctuary, clutching the rope that led to the ground in his little hands. “Please stop hurting her!”

“This is dinner, Findel!” shouted Angrod as he reached a tree that was used to hang the kills. The elf lord wound a rope around the hooves and looped it between, securing the deer before he walked around the tree and hoisted up the rope, tying the other end to the ground when the doe was dangling from the tree. Angrod pulled a knife from his boot with the intention of slashing the deer’s throat, but was stopped by his young son.

Pulling on his father’s elbow with all his might, Glorfindel wept as he implored his father to stop. “No, Ada, no! Do not kill her!”

“She is already dead, Findel! Stop it!” Angrod sheathed the knife and shoved the youngster aside. “You see this arrow? It is in her vitals – she will not survive. I am doing her a favor by killing her quickly.”

“No! No!” Glorfindel screeched and screamed as his father went for the knife again.

Rushing onto the porch, Eldalote cradled her baby daughter in her arms. “Glorfindel, what is the matter, baby? Sweetheart, what is wrong?”

“You stay there!” Angrod warned, pointing at his wife. “You coddle him too much; that is why he is like he is!” Grabbing hold of Glorfindel’s arm, he forced the knife into the elfling’s hand and curled the unwilling fingers around it. “Time for you to grow up, son. Stop being such a baby and start acting like a young ellon.”

By now, the deer was drained of most of her energy and only panted with her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth. She had not given up her fight, but she lacked the ability to continue. Glorfindel tried to wriggle away, but Angrod held his son fast and forced the knife to the deer’s throat. Slashing it once, the head fell back unnaturally and the blood began to flow like a red river from the doe, who gave one final gagging noise before dying.

Glorfindel’s shrieks began again, and Angrod released the hand that held the knife, grabbing hold of his son’s shoulder instead.

“Angrod, let him go! Please, he is scaring the baby,” begged Eldalote, attempting to come down the steps again.

“Damn you! Get back in the house!” roared Angrod, dragging Glorfindel back to the tree with his
little house built in it. “You made him soft, I am going to toughen him back up again. He wants something to cry about, I will give it to him! I take care of our son, you take care of our daughter. Got it?”

Eldalote still appeared about to come down, but the screams from Glorfindel were agitating her other child. Cutting her losses, the elleth disappeared inside.

Shoving Glorfindel toward the tree, Angrod began to remove his belt. “Put your hands up on there, now. Higher!” he barked as Glorfindel sniffled and whined but did as told. The belt snapped as leather cracked against leather. The reaction of the elfling was to cover his backside, and Angrod angrily threw the belt into the grass.

“You are going to take this, and not like a girl. No son of mine is going to be a wimp.” Angrod took hold of Glorfindel’s shirt and lifted it roughly over the youth’s head. “Not about to ruin this. Good money paid for these,” he grumbled, and then used the sleeves of the shirt and the rope from the tree house to tie Glorfindel’s arms above his head.

The elfling whimpered as he wriggled in an attempt to get free. His leggings were pulled down behind him. “There. Now you can take your punishment without me ruining your clothes.” Picking up the belt from the grass, Angrod folded the strap in half and cracked it again, making Glorfindel jump. “You hate that sound, do you? Wait until you hear it against your skin, son. We will make an ellon of you yet, even if it kills us both.”

“Enough!”

Glorfindel drew back, but dropped his arm. The ache in his shoulder was a sudden reminder of where he was. Blood covered his arms as it had that day long ago, but it was no slaughtered deer hanging before him.
Drops of dried blood covered Glorfindel’s arms by the time Turgon gave him the signal to hold. Terrible trails where the whip left its mark marred Erestor’s once smooth, tanned flesh. His long braid was draped over his shoulder, caked with blood. Sweat glistened on his skin, mingling with the rivers of red, but now as he panted heavily, he realized he had endured it all. Though worse than the last time, he had managed to keep his senses and not pass out. His eyes sought out Turgon with a defiant gaze. "You can break my body, but my spirit can never be broken."

Turgon stepped down from his throne and stood before the Noldo now, shaking his head. “I sincerely hope in some way that this was worth it.” He did not look at Glorfindel as he passed by, but paused when he reached Ecthelion. “Leave him hang there, for three days. Glorfindel is a healer; he may tend to Erestor’s wounds. Lock the doors when you go.”

Ecthelion bowed as Turgon continued to the exit. In a panic, Glorfindel started after the king, but he was stopped by Ecthelion. The dark-haired ellon waited until the door had closed before he spoke. “What did I tell you about your actions, Glorfindel? Did I not say this is not the time nor the place to explore your personal feelings? Someone found out, and you have put yourself and your station at risk. Now look at what you have done!”

“You told him,” ground out Glorfindel, and Ecthelion made a sort of snorting sound in the back of his throat.

“You think I told him? You have so little trust in me that you think I would have told him? How long have I known? How long?” Ecthelion’s words rose up and echoed off of the high walls. “Damn you, Glorfindel. I treat you like my son, and you accuse me of such a thing.”

The blond had bowed his head shamefully, small sobs beginning to come from him. “I- am sorry- I do not know who else might have discovered it- Thel, I-“

“Do not tell me you are sorry.” Ecthelion roughly grabbed hold of the younger elf’s arm, half-leading, half-dragging him to where Erestor was still strung up. “Tell him you are sorry,” he demanded, shoving Glorfindel down at Erestor’s feet.
“Erestor...” Glorfindel looked up into the tired brown eyes whose gaze was upon him. At once, he was brought to tears and clung to his feet, where blood still dripped from his toes into the pool beneath him. “Erestor, I am so sorry, so very, very sorry,” he choked.

“I forgive you, Glorfindel, but you have no need to apologize. What I did I did freely,” responded Erestor between long drawn breaths of air.

“Tell him what it felt like, Erestor. Tell him what the whip he wielded did to you.” Ecthelion was still staring down at Glorfindel unsympathetically.

After a few pants and a gasp for air, Erestor lolled his head from side to side. “No, Thel. I am tired. Not now.”

“Tell him,” growled Ecthelion. “Tell him what you felt each time the lash kissed your flesh.”

Again, it seemed as if Erestor was not about to respond. As if sensing this to be the only way to make Ecthelion leave, he answered slowly, “It was... hot, like... when you touch an iron in the forge... that has not been cooled. A sudden heat, and then... then you pull away, but still... it burns. Please, Ecthelion... do not make me continue,” begged Erestor, looking up from the whimpering elf on the ground at his feet to the warrior standing before him.

“Glorfindel.” When Ecthelion addressed him, the young elf looked up. “I have been instructed to lock the doors for three days. For three days, he is to hang here on the order of the king. If you cut the ropes or untie them, you will be punished publicly and he will be thrown from the Echoriath. Is that clear?”

Saying nothing, Glorfindel managed to nod as he shuddered, thinking how horrible it would be for one to fall to their death. Giving Glorfindel one final look of disgust, Ecthelion left the council chambers. A loud click sounded as the doors were locked.

At once, Glorfindel began to look frantically around the room from his position on the floor. "How could they do that? Leave us here with no water, no food, nothing to heal your wounds?"

“Now Glorfindel,” began Erestor in a tired voice, “keep your head. You need to calm yourself, or else you will go mad. Go to the window.”

He wanted to ask why, but he dared not question Erestor, not after what he had done. “You saved my life,” he said as he stood. “You took the blame, the pain, the shame of my actions- and... and I have done nothing to deserve that from you.”

Erestor reached out a hand to touch the younger elf’s shoulder or the top of his head perhaps, but the rope prevented that. "You think yourself a grown warrior, brave and mature, and while this may be true, you are still just a boy who was forced to grow up much too fast. You are still a young ellon upon whom such a burden should not be laid. Ecthelion has in your years in Gondolin been like a father to you, but what you also have needed is a dear friend, not a part-time business partner and mentor. You should not have to live in fear of being beaten or whipped; no one should have done such things to you,” continued Erestor. He paused when Glorfindel bowed his head. “You are upset. That I think of you as a child.”

“No; only disappointed,” he answered.

“If it is of any consolation- I find I like children much better than I like adults.” Erestor shifted his position, finding nothing was very comfortable and his back was throbbing. “The window, if you would, please.”
Glorfindel hastily went to the window and opened it. He stood by and looked back to Erestor, awaiting further instructions.

“Do you know how to whistle, Glorfindel?”

“Not very well,” admitted the golden elf.

“I need you not to whistle a song; I need you to call for someone.” Erestor licked his lips and said, “Can you do this?” He gave a short, high-pitched whistle that sounded like a chirp.

“I will try.” Glorfindel leaned his head out of the window, ignoring the happenings in the streets below. He began to mimic the sound that Erestor had been making.

“Up, Glorfindel, to the sky, not to the ground,” called out Erestor.

Glorfindel tried again, and this time he thought he heard the call returned. He was sure of it when a black and yellow bird with a tuft of red feather on the back of his head landed on the windowsill.

“Erestor, I think it worked.” Glorfindel lowered one hand to the level of the sill, and the woodpecker hopped into his palm.

“Hello, little friend,” greeted Erestor, smiling wearily at the bird. “I am in quite a predicament and Glorfindel is not allowed to aid me. Will you help?”

The little creature ruffled his feathers once and then took off from his perch and landed on Erestor’s outstretched arm, hopping until he reached the elf’s hand. He tilted his head to and fro as he examined the rope, and then began to peck at the braided material. Very soon, frayed ends were visible, and the woodpecker worked on with determination.

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Water streaked down the pane of glass like the tears that fell down Glorfindel’s face- each perfect droplet another reminder. Soon after the little bird had released Erestor from his bonds, a cool rain began to fall. It was a blessed opportunity that Glorfindel would not miss, and he spent the first part of the storm holding bowls and buckets and whatever else he could find out the window to gather water.

Erestor was resting, though hardly comfortable. He had curled himself on the side that was less torn and bloody and laid his head upon his arms. Glorfindel had offered to set up a better spot for him in the corner, using the seat cushions from the chairs in the room, but Erestor declined. "If I get blood on the cushions, I will never hear the end of it," he had told Glorfindel sleepily.

Now, Glorfindel sat beside the window as he listened to Erestor’s deep, uneven breathing. He would look now and again to the ellon on the floor to be sure he was still sleeping, and more importantly, still alive. The wounds he had inflicted had been cleaned with rainwater and whatever was in the flask Rog kept in his desk at the council; it was the best Glorfindel could manage for the time being.

Night came, and day followed. Erestor awoke sometime around noon, finding Glorfindel sitting on the floor by a window with a low sill, leaning his head upon his hands and looking out over the midday scenes of the city. “How long have I been out?”

The words startled Glorfindel, in that he had not expected to hear anything but the thoughts in his own head for some time. “Barely a day. How... how are you...” With a frown, Glorfindel realized it wasn’t the best question to ask, so he amended his words and instead queried, “Are you hungry?”
“A little,” replied Erestor softly.

Glorfindel stood up and made his way across the room, retrieving a bowl with nuts and dried fruits in it. “Salgant has quite a stash in his desk; I doubt any will be missed,” explained the blond as he sat down in front of Erestor. “There is water, too, if you are thirsty.”

“Thank you.” Erestor struggled to sit up, but hissed and bit back a wince of pain. “Maybe later,” he said quickly, lowering himself back down.

“Here, I can help.” Glorfindel lifted up a slice of dried apple and offered it to Erestor.

“I am not going to be a burden-“

“Eat,” Glorfindel said in a stern, pleading voice.

Erestor nodded and allowed Glorfindel to feed him his lunch without further protest. When he noticed that the aquamarine eyes kept straying to the healing marks on his body, Erestor told him as reassuringly as he could, “You did not do that.”

“Yes, I did,” confirmed Glorfindel solemnly, looking away. “And it was not even the first time. My stupidity has hurt you more times than I care to think about, and yet, it is all I think about sometimes. I have had time to think on your words,” continued Glorfindel despite Erestor’s efforts to interrupt. “You are right – I am a child. Spoiled, and pampered, and allowed to do as I pleased even when it was not what I should be doing. When I next see Gildor, I am going to tell him things must end between us.”

“I never meant it in that way,” Erestor finally managed to say. “I meant, it is more that I feel a need to protect you – and please, do not take that the wrong way, either.”

“I know what you mean,” Glorfindel said with a sad smile. “That is why I must do this. He is a dangerous distraction to me, and I would rather send him away than have further harm come to you.”

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As Erestor healed, the pair became bored. There was a limit to the number of topics they could find to talk about, and they both found themselves in a melancholy mood. That changed when Erestor went to his area of the council room and brought back paper, quills, and ink.

“You want me to write poetry? I can not rhyme a thing!” protested Glorfindel when Erestor made the suggestion.

“Each of us has their own rhythm. Please, try it for me. Just once, and if you truly despise it, I will not make you do it again.” Erestor held out the writing implements once more, and Glorfindel took them with a sigh.

“It will be terrible,” he warned Erestor as the scribe grinned and found a comfortable spot on one of the steps to do his own writing. It was the eve of their third day of captivity, and they had each begun to privately wonder if they had been forgotten by the rest of the city, which appeared eerily quiet from their vantage point whenever they looked out the window. There was food and water enough for a few days more, so if all else failed, someone would find them when the weekly meeting occurred once more. “You are going to hate it,” added Glorfindel as a final warning.

Erestor dipped the tip of his quill into the ink and tested the flow on the page. “I will be the judge of that.”
After a few hours of scribbling and scratching, Glorfindel finally called out, “Are we done yet?”

“If you like,” Erestor gathered his things and brought them back to where Glorfindel was as the warrior mumbled something about liking very much not doing this at all. “What do you have?”

“Oh...” Glorfindel, suddenly shy, moved the papers so that Erestor could not see what was written upon them. His eyes wandered over a few lines that he wrote about a beautiful elf who reminded him of the starlit night and shuffled that page to the back. “Ah... what did you write?”

“After you,” insisted Erestor. “Come now, I am sure it is not as bad as you think it is.”

Glorfindel cleared his throat and looked at the next page. It was safe, so he read, “There is something sacred about silence, for it is what was here before anything else, and will exist long after. It mingle with sound and without it such beauty would be only noise.” When he looked up and saw no emotion on Erestor’s face, he sighed and began to crumble up the sheets. “This is stupid.”

“No!” Erestor fought to free the paper before it was ruined. “It is not stupid. It is... quite profound, actually.” He smoothed out the stack, and to Glorfindel’s relief, did not see the page that was hidden from him. “It makes mine seem rather dull.”

“What do you have?” prodded Glorfindel, trying to peer over to see.

Erestor shrugged and read:

Poetry delights him
The Great King who sits on high
Mightiest of the Aratar
Though compassion is his style

The wind and weather are Manwe’s passion
And Varda is his love
He thinks evil can be overcome
That forgiveness is enough

Ai, Elbereth! Gilthoniel!
The Star Queen, up above
Silivren penna miriel
Sparkling diamonds in the rough

Heroes look into the heavens
Hoping she will hear their silent plea
While Varda’s light gives them courage

“And... then it sort of falls apart,” admitted Erestor, flipped through the rest of what he had. He looked over to Glorfindel for his opinion.

“I like it,” said Glorfindel. He nodded and added, “I wish I had met the Valar like you did.”

“Someday, you will,” Erestor assured him. “You will walk upon the white sands, meet the great horse-lord Orome and tell him you taught his son to ride a horse,” said Erestor, to which Glorfindel smiled, “and then you shall come with me to the forests and we shall dance alongside the Maiar and the Lady Nessa, for you remind me of my aunt, and she will take a liking to you I am sure.”

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“Can I... ask you a personal question?”

“Of course,” answered Erestor almost immediately.

Day four had come and gone, and even with the windows open the council room was humid and deemed much too warm for resting with clothes on. Each of them had created their own nest and was staring at the vaulted ceiling and the designs painted upon it. Glorfindel sat up and stretched his arms above his head, wishing that a breeze would come through the open windows, but none came. “Why... is... your...” The younger elf blushed, finding that the words were easier to say in his head than out loud.

“Why is my what what?” Erestor snickered at the words he had just said. “Oh, this must be one of those really personal ones,” he laughed.

With a sigh, Glorfindel began again. “Why is your... thing different?”

Erestor was laughing even harder now. “So, not only is it a question, but a riddle as well! Just what ‘thing’ are you referring to, my friend?”

“Oh, balrogs' wings, you know what I am talking about.”

Erestor at once became very quiet. “Balrogs are not a thing to joke about, or call upon without cause.”

“I- sorry, I did not mean-“

“No, no, I am sorry,” apologized Erestor at once. “There it is; me treating you as I would a child again. I did not mean it that way. I- have you ever seen a balrog?”

“No,” answered Glorfindel quite uneasily. “Have you?”

“Yes. And I have seen what they were before they were balrogs.” Erestor sat up as well, his knees bent as he rested his arms on them. “They are horrendous. They are your worst nightmare made real and a thousand times worse. They know what you fear; they can get into your mind. And they enjoy death; they enjoy the killing. The darkness, the shadows; the fire and the flames. But for me what is worse than all of this is that I knew them all once, as spirits of light and goodness. They were among the ones who greeted my kin and I upon Valinor’s shores so long ago. They were the ones to guide us; the ones to offer us their knowledge and their love. To see them turned to such wicked creatures sickens me.”

Glorfindel sat in silence for a little while. “No more balrogs,” he promised.

“Sorry... you had a question you wanted to ask me,” Erestor said, abruptly changing the subject back.

“Oh, nothing important.” Glorfindel shook his head and settled back down to rest.

The sounds from outside of hooting owls and an occasional howl of a wolf were the only thing Glorfindel heard until Erestor started to speak again. “By my ‘thing’,” he said ruefully, “Am I to assume you are referring to my penis?”

“Uhm...” Glorfindel turned beet red, but in the dim light, Erestor would not see this. “Maybe?”

“Mine looks the way they look when we are born. You are circumcised. Yours is tidied up, as one might put it. It was not practice to circumcise a newborn ellon until the first was born in Valinor. You
can thank Finwë for your lack of a foreskin.”

“Uh... why is that?” questioned Glorfindel, sitting back up again. He found Erestor, still sitting up, staring at the wall.

Glancing over at Glorfindel for a moment, Erestor said, “When Feanor was born, his mother more or less abandoned him. Finwë was left to care for his son by himself. He found it was a daunting task to do all that he was expected, and to ease this burden somewhat, he decided that removing his son’s foreskin would prevent having to worry about meticulously cleaning up after him – this after he had heard all of the ellith relating horrible stories of what can happen if baby ellyn are not kept clean. The worst of the tales tells how it will fall off completely – obvious exaggeration, but it scared Finwë nonetheless to have his first and possibly only heir unable to have children. Consequently, his idea worked so well, and Feanor went on to father seven children, so everyone else circumcised their newborn ellyn to prevent the same sort of thing and with the hopes of large families.”

“Is it going to matter that I do not have one?” asked Glorfindel.

“No,” Erestor said carefully, “but I have been told by others, there are good and bad things about it. You would not last half as long as you do when you are with Gildor if you still had one, however, despite the pleasure lasting longer, it is not as intense as if you still had your foreskin. Now, these are just things others have told me; you either have one or you do not, and there is no way to know how things are both ways. At least, none of us who still have ours are willing to try such an experiment.”

“And, understandably so,” agreed Glorfindel. “Well, at least that explains these scars I have,” he said.

“Scars? What scars?” questioned Erestor with alarm as he sat up.

Glorfindel immediately drew his legs tight together. “Just... never-mind. Just a few scars that I have is all. Nana would never tell me where they were from and I never would have asked Adar.” Glorfindel curled up on his side, with his back to Erestor. “Thank you for answering my question,” he said before offering his goodnights.

If there was ever a curious elf, it would have to be Erestor. He read every book he could find and constantly asked ‘why’ through his childhood – a childhood that he himself did not realize he was still in, for as one whose spirit was part Vala, he would never quite be considered an adult in Eru’s eyes. So he waited until he was certain that Glorfindel was in reverie before creeping around the room and lifting the curtain up from the nearest window to shed moonlight into the room.

He stood for sometime by the window, looking at the ellon resting on the floor. Glorfindel was a modest elf, so Erestor had never chanced to see the scars before. Something told him they were not exclusively due to a badly performed circumcision, but when his imagination began to fill his head with horrible imagery of tales he heard in Valinor of parents whose children were born with indeterminate gender and how such matters were resolved, he let the curtain down with a shiver and returned to his own spot for the night.
Of all the inhabitants of the hidden city, there was one ellon in particular whom you would always want to have on your side in a fight. Any fight, no matter what, for you certainly did not wish to be opposed by him. He was a cheerful fellow most of the time, and rather large for an elf. Although Erestor might have been able to make a claim he was a hair or two taller, his thighs were likely not even as thick as Rog’s biceps.

The Lord of the House of the Hammer was one of the fiercest protectors of the city. His loyalty to Turgon was unquestionable; those of his house were among the bravest in the realm. Rog was well-liked by many, not only due to his size, but due to the size of his heart. Besides making swords and maces and other such weapons, he was known to make tiny toy soldiers and horses from scraps of metal in his shop and to give them to the many children of his house’s people.

When he stepped into the council chamber, it was a great relief to both Erestor and Glorfindel. It was night of the fifth day of their captivity, and both food and water were dwindling. “Praise Aule, you are both well,” he said, his low voice like the rumble of a storm. “I must take you to Turgon immediately; he is in a fit of rage and terror, and nearly forgot he left you here until Ecthelion questioned him.”

Too stunned to speak, Glorfindel began to feel the worry gnaw at his stomach as he retrieved his boots and pulled them on. As for Erestor, he was not moving with quite as much haste as he did what he could to make his hair, which had remained unbrushed and unwashed for nearly a week, look presentable. Rog spent the time walking slowly around the room, taking in the items here and there, the severed ropes, and the stains of blood on the floor that Glorfindel had been too angry to clean up. “I need to have a talk with Turgon,” rumbled the blacksmith, his bulky arms crossed over his chest. He looked even more formidable than usual, his expression dark, and his shaved head making him appear as some great, dark beast and not an Elf of Eru.

His words did not scare Glorfindel; instead, they brought relief. When Rog talked to Turgon, it seemed he had some unknown power to sway the king. It was sometimes balked at that the smith held such a high position in the council, but those who heard him speak knew why. Not a single misplaced word left his lips, and he said only what he deemed needed to be. He disliked debate and arguments with the same passion that Erestor thrived upon them; it was sometimes said that he had one word for every thousand of Erestor’s, and yet, when all was said, they would have said the same thing.

“What happened?” Erestor was ready before Glorfindel, choosing to leave his back and the ugly marks upon it exposed. Glorfindel hurried to join them at the door.

“Aredhel returned,” explained Rog. “But she is dead now.”
“I hold Ulmo’s favor, but I swear, you must be in Eru’s.”

Turgon was knelt beside a slab normally used to bring offerings in the Temple of the Valar. Upon the cold stone was his sister, pale as ever, dark hair shining and meticulously arranged with tiny white flowers adorning it. Erestor stepped past Glorfindel and Rog and lowered himself to his knees beside the king. “Eru did not do this,” said Erestor, whose fingers trembled as he took hold of one of Aredhel's cold hands.

Turgon bowed his head, concentrating on the floor. “Every time you have done something to vex me, the retribution for my rulings against you has been worse and worse.”

“Mere coincidences.” Erestor did not take his eyes from the body of Lady Aredhel even after Glorfindel and Rog joined them.

“My sister is dead.” Turgon choked on the words. “My only close kin not seperated from me by miles, save for my daughter. The best friend I have ever had is now gone. She married; she had a child. I will never hear her speak to me of any of it. So many years of her life lost to me, and so many more lost to both of us now. She will never tell me of these things.”

“I am here, uncle. I can tell you of her life in the past years.”

From the shadows stepped forth a young ellon who, though of obvious Noldorin heritage, was something a little more wild than the nobles of this land. Turgon held out his hand to the youth, who wordlessly came forward and took it, bringing himself down to his knees beside his self-proclaimed uncle. “We had a few hours together before the tragedy that befell her at the hand of her own husband – an elf I was ready to take into my own house, had he not betrayed me with such an action,” spoke Turgon with more than a little anger. “In her stead, my sweet sister Aredhel hath left her son; this is Maeglin.”

Erestor gave a nod, as did Glorfindel. Rog had no doubt met the king’s nephew previously. Their introductions were kept brief, for Turgon once more was staring at the corpse of his beautiful sister, and Erestor remained at her side clasping her hand.

“She was so insistent to be free now and again. I should have listened to your counsel, Erestor,” admitted Turgon.

With a sad look, Erestor said, “It was not counsel so much for you as it was for me.”

“Even so,” replied the king, “I should have considered your request to court her more seriously than I did. You should have been my brother, and instead, you are my enemy.”

“Nay, there are no enemies here,” corrected Erestor. “Only stubborn old fools who need to do what they can to save their friendship.”

“Your forgiveness comes so swift and easily, Erestor, one would question whether you are mad or insincere.”

“It must be madness, then, for there is nothing false about my words.” Erestor reached out and placed his other hand upon Turgon’s shoulder. “All is forgiven, your highness. You did what you believe you needed to do. I hope some day you might forgive me for what I needed to do.”

Turgon turned to his nephew and said, “Perhaps you would give us a few moments alone with your mother. Erestor and Glorfindel were good friends to her. I know this is not the best of times, but Rog
could show the crafting houses to you, and you could see the work our smiths have done.”

“I would enjoy seeing your forges, uncle,” answered Maeglin. Glorfindel thought he caught Erestor narrowing his eyes at the way the youth answered, rather casually, as if his mother was not dead before him (and his father at the bottom of a crevice, neck broken and dying in the pit, calling out profanities at his son). Rog stood and led the way out.

“So,” said Turgon as soon as the three were alone. “I am in Ulmo’s favor, and you are in Eru’s favor, and Glorfindel is in your favor.” At the mention of his name, Glorfindel looked up with a start. “Though I know not why, but that is how it is.”

“It appears so, and I expect it shall continue.”

“Anyone else in that chamber would never have questioned me about you. Some of them would have flogged you to death.”

“Only if you allowed it.” Erestor let go of Aredhel’s hand and folded his in contemplation and gave a sideways glance at Turgon. “You asked why I was there. I was there because I am not as important as the others. You need them to keep Gondolin together. You do not need me.”

Turgon shook his head, but did not opine on the subject.

“I am unsure of the identity of the person in that chamber. I would even hazard a guess that there was more than one person there who fit your description. The identity of the agitator is clear. I told you that Gildor would spark trouble. If you take away his ability to cause it—”

“I would rather remove him than remove the law.” Turgon shook his head. “Can you imagine what will happen if I do that?” he hissed.

Glorfindel squirmed uneasily, trying not to show his unrest. Erestor tried to give him a reassuring look, but it was lost in the younger elf’s nervousness. “Your highness, all I can think will happen is a few ellyn and ellith whom no one knew were interested in each other would suddenly be known about. Not that they are all too difficult to spot now – but at least they would be less ill at ease.”

“And what of the ones hiding it so well, they took wife or husband? What sort of chaos would you have here? There will be calls for divorce, which I will not see, and a decline in births. A realm does not survive without constant population growth. Erestor, the ramifications of what you suggest could destroy the order we have. What next after allowing such acts within the city? Pornography? Bigamy? Bestiality?”

“Ellon and elleth will still marry, still procreate,” debated Erestor. “You will still have your order, you will still have your realm, and your people. What I suggest is so very little, so very, very little of a change.”

“This is not the time for such discussion.” Turgon’s voice suddenly turned solemn as he looked away from Erestor. “I cannot change the rules, not at this time at least. I am sorry.” He looked up, not at Erestor, but at Glorfindel. “I will give you some time alone to grieve. I need to take myself away from this place for a time. Tomorrow is the... the burial,” he managed to say. “Ecthelion has been making the arrangements; I must go speak with him now.”

When Turgon left, he took with him the torch which had lighted the part of the room they were in. Now, with only a few candles flickering, Glorfindel felt uncomfortable in the dim room full of eerie shadows. He had never been so close to a dead body for so long, especially not one that had been carefully made to look so alive, as if only sleeping, and he was unnerved by it. “Did you really ask
Turgon for permission to court Aredhel?” asked Glorfindel.

Erestor confirmed this with a nod. “After I believed I had learned to fight well enough to properly protect myself and others if I had to, and to hunt if the need arose. Something a good friend of mine told his son when the youth had found an elleth he wished to be his wife was that he needed to learn to use a sword and a bow, for he needed to be able to protect his family. I had the same stupid notion after that, I suppose.”

“I had no idea you were in love with her,” Glorfindel said, trying not to appear crestfallen. He hoped his sadness would be taken for grief due to the white lady’s death.

“That, even I do not know. I loved her, I thought she was beautiful, but I am not sure if I was in love or not. It was what I was attempting to find out.” Erestor’s eyes flitted up from Aredhel’s body to meet Glorfindel’s gaze, then back down. Quietly, he said, “I was in love with her cousin. Very much.” Again, he dared look at Glorfindel, but only briefly. “Ecthelion has likely mentioned that to you.”

“He told me once that you were deeply in love with an elleth who caused you great sorrow; that was all,” admitted Glorfindel. "You spoke to me once about someone who broke your heart. I think, if I am right, that they are one in the same.”

Erestor nodded. “You should know; it was a lady who is kin to you, Glorfindel. Your father’s sister and I were to be married in Valinor, but things do not always work out as one intends them to. It took me a long time to put that in my past and move on with my life.” Erestor shook his head and leaned his elbows on the edge of the slab. Closing his eyes, he drew the tips of his fingers across them to catch any straying tears. “I nearly died when Artanis left me. And now…” He sniffled and continued, “I kept hoping Aredhel would find her way home. Unlike Artanis, Aredhel was free in spirit and mind, and strangely felt like the right fit. To see her son... to know she married, and it was not me... I just do not know how many times I can survive a broken heart.”

Glorfindel was about to scramble over to approach Erestor, but the elder elf shook his head. “I think I would like to be alone here for a while, if you do not mind.”

“Are you sure?” asked the blond.

“Positive,” said Erestor as a teardrop escaped and rolled down his cheek.

Standing up, Glorfindel fought the urge to drop back down beside the grief-stricken ellon and offer him comfort. “Will you be alright?” Erestor nodded, dismissing him with a pleading wave of his hand.

Glorfindel went to the door, turning around for a moment. “If you had married my father’s sister,” he said suddenly, “then you would have been my uncle.”

“Yes,” realized Erestor, not wishing to turn around and be seen in the state he was in.

“I... would have liked that,” Glorfindel said before leaving. “It... would have been nice to have had you in my family.”
409 First Age

In very little time, Maeglin began to make a name for himself in Gondolin, learning the crafts of those who lived there and adding his own knowledge to the vast library of the hidden city. He voiced his desire to do more, to be more. The pride of his uncle was immeasurable, and though the king had lost a dear sister, he gained a nephew who was to him as a son. No doubt, he told everyone, that the youth was destined for something great.

Meanwhile, changes were taking place in the political structure. While Erestor had not traveled far bearing the marks of the trial he had endured, few rumors spread as quickly as those that speculated why he had been so brutally punished. Doubts crept into the minds of many, and rumors spread questioning his character and motives. Slowly, the members of his house found ways to join other less dubious clans, swelling the numbers in the House of the Fountain and the House of the Heavenly Arch and leaving the House of the Silver Stars at a staggering population of one.

As the followers of Erestor dwindled in numbers, Egalmoth brought forth rewritten laws and policies to be discussed and enacted. No one argued against these more fiercely than Erestor, save for Glorfindel. In the end, Turgon sided with the majority, and Egalmoth seemed pleased with his victory. It would be less than a month before the changes were tested.

“I am sorry, Ecthelion. The rules are clear in this matter.” Turgon averted his eyes away from Erestor, concentrating on the captain instead. “You must find a house with people in it – he cannot represent only himself. There are a lot of houses you would do well to align yourself with – the House of the Mole, for example.”

Ecthelion frowned. “I thought that Enerdhil would have taken your nephew under his wing.”

“Oh, and he has,” confirmed Turgon. “But Enerdhil’s numbers will never be high enough to justify a second vote on the council. You need to find a different affiliate. Erestor’s house no longer counts – well, is it even a house any longer?”

“Look, I am right here,” announced the dark ellon. “If you want to speak thusly about me, kindly do so behind my back.” A number of other lords and captains in the council room laughed at this remark.

“Erestor, it is not that we wish to lose you from the council, but you represent no one. Once upon a time, it would have been allowed, but now it is just not proper. Perhaps one day when your house has regained its former strength,” offered Turgon, “you might rejoin our ranks.”
Crossing his arms over his chest, Erestor stared down at the ground. “So, what you are saying—"

“What I am saying,” spoke Turgon firmly, “is that I need to follow the rules.”

Glaring at the floor, Erestor spat out, “You have some rather stupid rules. Not the first time, either. Are you really a king, or just a facilitator?”

Turgon finally looked to Erestor. “That comment I will let slide, for you still think yourself a lord with the ability to question my commands. From this moment forward, I see you as nothing more than a wealthy and arrogant landholder. Now go. This is a private council for the lords of Gondolin.”

Closing his eyes and holding back his response, Erestor swallowed hard and walked down the steps from the spot he had been at for many years behind Ecthelion. Glorfindel wanted to reach out to him, but he dared not. “About time someone took out the trash,” Salgant said to Duilin.

Upon hearing this, Erestor turned on his heel and stared right into Salgant’s eyes. “I will be back,” he promised before pushing the doors open and disappearing into the hallway.

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“Do you know what your problem is?” asked Rog.

Erestor, who was sitting on a bench across from the fountain with his face in his hands, looked up and sighed. He rubbed his fingertips up over his cheekbones, and then circled them at his temples. “What is my problem?”

“You are wild and untamed. Turgon is right about your arrogance, I think. I have heard rumors about what you did to Salgant,” he continued as Glorfindel came from the same direction and joined Erestor on the bench. “I would like to have the chance to punch him, too. But have I? No. You need to learn to control your temper.”

Erestor burst out laughing. “Yes, well, thank you for that observation.”

“I can teach you how,” offered Rog. “You should come to my house. Join the recruits there in two weeks. It is no picnic, but I can help you restrain that wild beast within you. I have had recruits who are worse than you – a little difficult to imagine, but true,” he smiled. “No matter, they all became fine soldiers.”

“He has already been trained as a soldier. By me,” interrupted Glorfindel.

Rog studied Glorfindel and nodded. “You have trained him as a warrior – I will not deny you that. He is one of the better archers in the city, and though he is not the best at swordship, I would trust him to fight with me in a battle. His skills with a horse – improving every year. But a soldier,” said Rog, turning back to Erestor, “you are not.”

“But if I were, then I would not be such a troublemaker. Is that what you are saying?” asked Erestor. He did not give Rog the time to answer as he said, “I am too old for such things. Too old to take commands and be told what to do and when and how.”

“No, you are too stubborn. Too arrogant. Not too old,” argued Rog calmly. “You are already getting angry at me, and all we are doing is having a conversation.”

Erestor was about to dispute this, but closed his mouth and looked away.

“Ah! You see? You know I am right.” Rog took a seat on the other side of Erestor. “Right now, you
are like red-hot mithril in the forge. You are strong, you have potential, but you are angry and you burn, and no one can get near you. You need to be molded, tempered, and cooled off. I can help you do this.”

Erestor appeared to be contemplating the offer, and Glorfindel spoke suddenly. “I could help.”

Rog smiled and stood up, patting Glorfindel on the shoulder as he made to leave. “You have a good heart – but it is different when you have such a strong friendship. When he is facedown in the mud, will you hold out your hand for him, or will you push him down further so that he must struggle harder to pick himself up?” When Glorfindel did not reply, Rog said, “You will not be as strict – and how can you? You are his good friend. But I am merely offering what I offer to anyone in the city who wishes to become a great soldier – not a good soldier, not simply a guard at a gate, but one of the best in this city.”

“Think about my offer, Erestor,” said Rog as he walked backwards away from them. “You could be something great. If you keep things up the way you have been, though,” warned the smith, “your fire will consume you in anger, and leave nothing but ash behind. And I can do nothing with ashes.”

When they were alone at the fountain, Glorfindel turned to Erestor and asked, “What you are going to do?”

“I do not know,” replied the scribe, staring at the crystal waters as they rose up and plummeted back into the pool below.
“Do me a favor?”

Ecthelion looked down at Erestor, who had come over to the bleachers to see him. In the arena, the jousters were getting their horses ready for their part of the day’s competition. Leaning closer to the railing, Ecthelion gave Erestor a questioning look.

“Keep Fin busy for me.”

Ecthelion nodded. “Why, if I might ask?”

“I need to go do something, and I do not need him trying to seek me out.” Erestor looked to the field. “Who qualified for the boxing matches?”

“I came too late,” admitted Ecthelion. “I do know that Egalmoth is in. I am sure Rog is in as well. Archery, the only one I knew was Duilin. There are a lot of new faces for the tournament this year. What do you want me to tell Glorfindel if he asks where you are?”

“Just tell him I am busy and will be by for the finals.” Erestor wiped the sweat from his palms on his pants and walked away.

Not more than a few minutes later, Glorfindel came into the area for the audience and headed up the stairs, pardoning himself until he reached Ecthelion. “Have you seen Erestor?”

“Hmm? Oh, he said he would be by for the finals.” Ecthelion kept a keen eye on the preliminary joust, cursing when his house’s rider fell from his mount. “Damn, I wish he was still riding for me.”

“I came too late,” admitted Ecthelion. “I do know that Egalmoth is in. I am sure Rog is in as well. Archery, the only one I knew was Duilin. There are a lot of new faces for the tournament this year. What do you want me to tell Glorfindel if he asks where you are?”

“Sorry.” Glorfindel knew better than to bring up the sore subject of Erestor not being linked to Ecthelion’s house, consequently not being able to compete for the house in these yearly midsummer tournaments. “I heard that Salgant did not do as well as expected last night.”

“He is a better minstrel than I,” admitted Ecthelion. “The first competition only weeds out the exceptionally poor. It is the finals I worry about – I have a feeling my house will not take the cup this year.”

“Maeglin seemed to do well for you in the fencing trials. He may surprise everyone and take the ribbon on that,” suggested Glorfindel.

Ecthelion shrugged. “Perhaps. But look at the state of my jousters! I am surprised either of them knows which end is the back end of the horse!”

Glorfindel decided to stay silent for the rest of the qualifying races and matches, only smiling sadly
each time his friend’s house did worse and worse. The only redeeming item was that at least Ecthelion had competitors from his house or Maeglin’s in each event – the Golden Flower’s chances of winning the cup were very slim, as they only qualified in three events.

As Glorfindel tried to cheer up Ecthelion with this idea while they ate lunch of chunks of potato fried in oil and breaded fried fish, a hand reached over and stole a potato from the paper cone Glorfindel’s lunch was in. “You never know. If your competitors win all three of their events, and no one else can do better than two, you could still take the cup.”

“Erestor, possible as it may be, the probability of-“ Glorfindel stopped abruptly as he turned his head, and his grin drooped immediately. “What... what did you do?”

“Do not worry, I eat very little and when the line gets shorter I will get another and let you have some,” promised the dark elf as he pushed on Glorfindel’s arm. “Scoot over so I can sit down.”

“I meant-“ Glorfindel was pulled over a little by Ecthelion, who had moved to make more room. Erestor sat down, snagging another piece of potato from Glorfindel’s lunch. “I meant, what did you do to your hair?”

“Oh, I had it trimmed,” answered Erestor, wiping the grease from his fingers off on the side of the paper cone Glorfindel was still holding.

Ecthelion peered around Glorfindel’s back and now, his eyes widened, too. “If that is a trim, remind me not to seek out your barber!”

Glorfindel’s frown deepened as he looked Erestor over. “You are the last one I would expect to chop off their hair.”

“I had to. Rog would not let me join the army otherwise,” stated Erestor as if this was just common knowledge.

“You what? You joined his army? Erestor... why?” Glorfindel ignored the fact that his house’s representative in the boxing matches was being introduced in the third of the three rings of competition of the arena.

“Because a lot of what he said the other day made sense to me. I keep spiraling downward, and one of these days, I will not be able to pick myself back up again. I do not want that. I made enough mistakes in Doriath. I am not about to repeat all of those here.” Erestor ran his hands through his cropped black hair, shorter now than Ecthelion’s shoulder-length curls. “Just so weird. My head feels so light. And, I am sure it looks hideous.”

“Trust me, you will appreciate it from the very start of the training,” ensured Ecthelion. “Plus, the best thing in a battle is short hair – I keep telling the kid here that, but he will not listen to me,” added the fountain lord, elbowing Glorfindel.

Glorfindel rubbed his arm and shot Ecthelion a disbelieving look. “Battles go so fast, no one has time to think of whether or not they will yank someone down from their mount by their hair. Besides, helmets keep it from being an issue.”

“I do not think I have a helmet for the initial training,” guessed Erestor. “Which begins in three days. Which brings me to something else.” He took a stall key from his pocket and held it out. “Which of you lucky lords wants the privilege of looking after my horses while I am off playing war?”

Snorting, Ecthelion took hold of the key first. “I will assign someone to it. I still feel terrible that you are off of the council.”
“Not your fault. Like I told Salgant, I will be back.” Erestor turned his head to the field as cheering
erupted from a group across the field. “Pity that. Your house was just eliminated from boxing,” he
told Glorfindel as one of the members of Rog’s house pumped his fist in the air victoriously.

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The next chance Glorfindel had to converse with Erestor was almost three months later. He just
happened to decide to stroll around the long way back to the palace instead of taking the way that
would lead him past the barracks shared by Ecthelion and Maeglin for their soldiers when the blond
spied his tall friend hurrying toward one of the side doors to the palace with a basket heaped with
clothing. Glorfindel hastened his step to reach Erestor before the door closed. “Long time, no see,”
he began, and Erestor seemed to be startled at first, but then nodded his head in the direction of a
flight of stairs leading to one of the cellars.

“I am going this way, if you care to follow.” Erestor disappeared down the dimly lit stairway, and
Glorfindel followed him. “I only have a little time.”

“What are you doing?” asked Glorfindel as Erestor placed the basket down on a clean table and
opened the shutters of the windows in the underground room.

“Some officer’s laundry.” He dumped the contents of the basket onto the table and began to sort the
items into piles. “One of the benefits of being a trainee with no rank – you are presented with so
many opportunities to perform menial labor.”

“Do you want me to help?” offered Glorfindel, but Erestor held up his hand.

“Stay right there, please,” instructed the dark elf. “The last thing I need is to be accused of having
someone else do the work for me. Besides, you are a captain – I really should have saluted you when
you came upon me in the corridor.”

“Your hands were full so I think we can let it slide.” Glorfindel dusted off a chair and sat down.
“Why are you hiding down here? I would think it would be easier to fold it as it came off of the
line.”

Erestor paused for a moment and leaned back against a support beam. “One would think that.
Unfortunately, it means that one is open for attack – that is, another officer might happen over with
his laundry, and just as you have finished one load, you are again starting another. This way, I have
at least a few minutes of peace. And do I need it,” he moaned, closing his eyes and shaking his head.
“Every inch of me aches, even in places I did not know could hurt.”

Giving his friend a sympathetic look, Glorfindel said, “You are at least halfway done, right? Five
months of training total, and this has to be the tenth or eleventh week.”

“Well...” Erestor opened his eyes and stepped to the table again, picking up a pair of pants and
folding it. “I met this girl-”

“Oh, no,” chuckled Glorfindel. “A girl who happens to like an elf in uniform, no doubt?”

“How did you guess?” grinned Erestor. “Actually, did you know that Rog has a daughter?”

Glorfindel’s eyebrows shot up. “You plan to court Rog’s daughter? Are you insane?”

“Probably – I joined the army,” Erestor reminded him. “I met her, briefly, at a party a few weeks
ago.”
“It cannot be all bad if you still have time for parties,” said Glorfindel.

Leaning forward with his arms crossed on the basket, Erestor rolled his eyes. “Some time ago, Rog ‘invited’ us to a party. We were told that the guests would arrive at sundown. He said we had to be there, not an option to skip it. Something seemed odd, so, being me, I went to investigate a few hours ahead of time.

“I snuck my way into the bustling kitchens of his house, and spoke to one of the maids. Sure enough, the plan was that the trainees would arrive in fancy attire, but then be shuffled to the kitchens to help with the serving of the food and the cleaning of the dishes and other such things. Not about to be a total fool, I simply let myself back out, came around the side way, and knocked on the door. When the butler answered, I explained myself, and he led me in to the dining hall where I ended up assisting another who had figured things out as well in setting the long tables. We finished just as the first guests, and unfortunate trainees, began to arrive. Rog came in about then, saw the two of us and smirked and dismissed us. I think some of the other trainees are a little upset with us, but what was I to do? If I had gone around telling the others, it would have taken too much time. And I doubt any of them would have been looking out for me.”

“How did you meet his daughter?” asked Glorfindel.

“Oh! Right, she was the hostess – his wife apparently hates parties. She came into the dining hall to see that things were coming along before the party began. We chatted for a few moments. I have seen her a few times since then and we had a conversation regarding... something or other, I forget.”

Erestor placed the shirt he had just folded into the basket and lifted up another. “I spent most of the time paying attention to her breasts.”

Blinking, Glorfindel frowned. “I see.”

“I know, does nothing for you, but trust me. An elleth with an endowment like those...” Erestor cupped his hands, spaced out as if he was holding those of some imaginary female before him. “Just trust me.”

“I suppose I shall have to.” Glorfindel shifted uncomfortably.

“She has a great ass, too,” added Erestor. “Firm, and, damn, I just want to sink my teeth into it. I just want to, you know, bite it.”

Glorfindel burst out laughing. “That I can at least understand a bit.”

Erestor grinned. “Sorry, I will stop. This is the first conversation I have had in weeks that did not consist of ‘yes sir, no sir, how far sir, thank you sir’. Forgive me.”

“How are things going?” Glorfindel tried not to sound too concerned, but he could not help it.

With a shrug, Erestor said, “Fairly well. The first week was the worst. Up before dawn, and we had to run the entire way around all six gates, one way, and then the other. I am not much of a runner, at least, not until now. Then I got used to that. But there was also the total lack of freedom.”

Smoothing all of the wrinkles from a tunic, Erestor paused in his work. “We all wake, dress, and eat, all at the same time. No one talks, no one has any choice over any of it. Then we run, then we train, then we eat again sometimes as we are running, then we have ‘free time’, like right now, only there is no freedom. If an officer sees us and has something for us to do, we do it. No matter what. First time it happened to me, I just went along and did it. I ended up mucking out the stalls of one of the captains that first day. I found out later that night that the ones who refused ended up spending the
time doing extremely rigorous exercise – for example, one of them was dragged to a wagon and hitched to it, made to haul a load meant for two horses.”

“How do I miss all of these things happening?” wondered Glorfindel.

“Then we train until dusk. We eat, we shower – which is all of us, five minutes, in a pond by the barracks. And then, you would think we would have some time to rest – no. By candlelight, we have tactical studies, and weapons studies, and things I will never use again except to pass the weekly examinations.” Erestor tilted his head thoughtfully. “At least with that I am excelling.”

“Then do you get to sleep?” questioned Glorfindel.

“Then we drop from exhaustion until it begins again. At least I am used to it now. I have to tell you, as ugly as it looks, I am so glad I hacked my hair off before I started this,” said Erestor ruefully. “It stays fairly clean, I do not sweat like the ones who kept their hair a little longer, and best of all, it is too short for anyone to grab hold of it.”

“Do they really do that?” Glorfindel worried.

Grimacing, Erestor replied, “One of the younger recruits, from Rog’s house, he refused to cut his any shorter than halfway down his back. He kept it braided up, so for a few days I was silently cursing what I had done. Then, one morning he must have forgotten or run out of time. Anyhow, we were out fighting with blunt knives, just going through routines. Rog came over – usually, he leaves all of the training to his lieutenants and captains. He picked up a pair of knives and challenged this boy.” Realizing the time, Erestor went back to his task. “The two of them seemed well-matched. Then Rog threw one knife to the ground, got around him, and took hold of his loose hair. When it was all over, the youth was on the ground screaming, and Rog was holding a fist full of bloodied hair that I think he must have yanked off of his head. Before Rog let the healers over, he pinned the boy down and cut the rest off while lecturing the rest of us as to why it was one of the requirements he had for his soldiers. If you think this is short,” he said, pointing to his own head, “you should see him. He practically scraped it all off.”

“Ow.” Glorfindel instinctively rubbed the back of his scalp. “I still think it is rare one would ever encounter that sort of thing in battle.”

As Erestor stacked the rest of the items in the basket, he sighed. “I had best get this to its owner. It was good to see you.”

“You, too.” Glorfindel made it to the stairs before Erestor, blocking his path. “Erestor, I know you are trying to... prove something, or... well, honestly, I am still trying to figure out what you are doing. But, has it been worth it? At all? I hate to think you are only still doing this because you think that Rog has a pretty daughter.”

Erestor rested the basket against one hip. “There is something that Rog attends to personally, and that is to give us ‘individual pep talks’, as I like to call them. He knows why each and every one of us is there, and he reminds us daily. Usually during the training in the evening you will have a chance to spar with him at some point. The whole time, he insults you.”

“What does he say to you?” asked Glorfindel cautiously.

“The first day, he made me so angry,” recalled Erestor. “He called me a number of uncomplimentary things, and pointed out my shortcomings. We were engaged in hand-to-hand combat, and one of the things he said was ‘if you like to hit house lords so much, why are you having such trouble hitting me?’ At that point I stopped using all of the theory and practice I had and just tried to hit him. I
landed flat on my back with the wind knocked out of me. He put his foot on my chest and leaned down, squeezing the air out of my lungs, and he said, ‘When we are done, you will be a soldier, but you will also cease to be such a rude, disrespectful ass. Do you understand me?’”

Glorfindel fidgeted, wishing not for the first time in their conversation that Erestor had not decided upon this path. “How did you answer?”

“The only way I could. ‘Sir, yes, sir!’ Do you know how much I am coming to hate that phrase?”

“I can only imagine.” Glorfindel hung his head. “I am sorry I failed you as a teacher.”

“Glorfindel, you did not. You did everything you could – but how were you to rid me of the anger within? Rog said it himself. You and I are good friends. There is no way you would be able to say the things he says. The truthful things he says.”

Shocked, Glorfindel asked, “You agree with him?”

“Every word. You probably still think that I never deserved to be whipped – but, you are wrong. I deserved that, and more,” said Erestor.

Glorfindel shook his head. “No. No one deserved that – for what you did? For hitting Salgant twice, and for lying to Turgon that one time?”

Erestor turned away. “Fin, those were only the things you saw happen. I did a lot of other things over the years, some worse than that.”

“Like... what?”

“Glorfindel, I need to get this back,” Erestor insisted, but the blond did not budge. Sighing, Erestor said, “A lot of things. Things I am starting to regret.”

“What? What did you do?” Glorfindel placed a hand on Erestor’s shoulder, shaking him slightly. “Erestor, tell me. Do not force me to order you.”

Flinching, Erestor cleared his throat. “Well, captain,” he said curtly in a cold voice that Glorfindel so hated, “there was a day when Salgant was gouging himself on pastries and wine, joking that there may be none left when others arrived. I wandered myself to a healing room, picked up a few things, and added something to his wine. From what I heard, he could not stop defecating for almost a week- and it began while he was sitting atop his horse the next day.”

“That was you?!” Glorfindel gasped. “Sweet Eru, we all thought he was dying the way he was wailing about his arse being on fire.”

For a brief moment, Erestor smirked. “I never heard that part recounted.”

“Remind me not to cross you,” mumbled Glorfindel, coming to the conclusion he did not wish to hear any more. He stood aside to allow Erestor to pass.

“With any luck,” said Erestor as he headed up the stairs, “Rog will be sure to beat that out of me before the end of the training.”

Shuddering at the thought, Glorfindel said, “I am going to be so glad when this is all over.”

Looking over his shoulder, Erestor agreed. “So will I.”
Rog spoke again. “I cannot believe how pathetic all of you turned out. This is the worst lot of recruits I have ever trained. Obviously, my direction has not been flawed, and the instruction of the officers has been superb, so it must be all of you who are the problem. Since I am not about to be embarrassed by presenting an appalling group of dimwitted soldiers to the King tomorrow, we have no choice but to throw all of you off the Echoriath.” A few gasps could be heard, but Rog ignored this, continuing with, “If any of you like, you can at least redeem yourselves in some small way by jumping off on your own instead of being forced over, kicking and screaming like the girls you are.”

Erestor was happy that his blindfold kept everyone from seeing him roll his eyes. With the vast amount of initiation trials that the recruits had been put through, he was surprised that there were still some who thought Rog was telling them the truth. Where they were, he could not tell, but they were most definitely not on the edge of a cliff of the Echoriath. The wind was too calm, and there was grass beneath their feet instead of the rough, rocky soil that refused to grow a thing unless painstakingly cared for.

Earlier that evening, while sitting in the barracks for their final night before being inducted as real soldiers in the army, one of the captains surprised them with a barrel of good wine. Only Erestor was wary. Since wine was something they had been weaned off of months earlier, the others were only too happy to begin drinking.

As his fellow companions began to slump in their chairs or lazily took to curling up on the floor, the captain approached the lone elf sitting in the corner reading ‘Art and Practice of War’, the only book in the entire barracks. “You should have some of the wine before it goes sour,” said the captain sternly to Erestor, holding out a goblet.

Keeping his finger at the page for a marker, Erestor said quietly, “I will not fight whatever it is you have in store for us.”

“Still,” said the captain, holding the goblet closer, “you should drink the wine.”

“Is that an order, sir?” Erestor swallowed hard, knowing he was walking a fine line at the moment by continuing to disobey. The captain only lifted one brow slightly.

“If that is what it takes for you to drink, then yes, soldier, that is an order.”

Placing the book on the chair as he stood up, Erestor took the wine and went to the bed that was his for the duration of the training. “I do not suppose you would care to share a toast, would you, sir?” Erestor turned away to hide his smirk after receiving a glare from the captain.

As the rest of the recruits dozed, Erestor drank the glass of wine he had been given, then went to the barrel and refilled his cup. He drank the second and began to get an aftertaste in his mouth that was familiar but not one he could place. The fourth he began to drink when it hit him. The drug used in the wine was the same he had tried to poison himself with in Valinor hundreds of years earlier. In moderation, it was simply a heavy and fast acting sedative. Sickness rose in his stomach as he realized that the wine would not affect him.

It was only moments before the doors of the barracks burst open. A group of five officers, along with Rog, marched in. They all stopped when they saw Erestor, still standing. “I thought I told you to drink that wine!” shouted the captain who had brought the poisoned drink.
“I did! I mean, I did, sir, I tried, it has no affect on me, sir,” apologized Erestor, beginning to sweat and stutter. “Sir, I assure you, I have had four glasses of it already!”

Rog walked briskly to Erestor, taking hold of the dark elf’s wrist. “Always the troublemaker,” he said under his breath for only Erestor to hear. “His pulse is slowing,” he confirmed for the others. “Drink another cupful; and stay out of the way.”

“Yes, sir.” Erestor refilled the goblet, keeping his eyes down to try to ignore the officers as they proceeded to enter the room. Each recruit had his wrists bound behind his back, was blindfolded, and then a cloth sack was placed over his head and loosely tied. Nervously fidgeting as he watched, but tried not to, Erestor drank the fifth glass to no avail. He was sitting on the edge of his bed with his hands folded and his head down when the officers approached him.

“What should we do about him, sir?” questioned a lieutenant. He and the others looked past Erestor to Rog, who was standing unseen behind Erestor.

“This is why we always have a backup plan.” Before Erestor could turn around, he felt one of Rog’s powerful arms wrap around his chest, pinning his arms to the sides of his body. Erestor’s head was against the house lord’s shoulder as Rog’s other hand came up and covered the dark ellon’s mouth and nose with a wadded up cloth.

His first reaction was to struggle, but Erestor fought against his own panic. “Just breathe and do not fight. It is faster that way,” promised Rog. Uncontrollably, he shook, but Erestor closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. “Very good. Again.” He repeated this six or seven times until he felt his muscles going limp and his vision became hazy. “There. He will fall asleep soon,” promised Rog as he let Erestor slip from his grasp and collapse on the bed.

Vaguely, Erestor felt the rope being expertly tied around his wrists as his arms were drawn behind his back. The blindfold brushed against his ears, and then the sack plunged him into total darkness as he slipped into a deep but uneasy reverie.

Now, he stood awake on this ridge, with another ellon on either side. From what he could tell, they had been lined up on the edge of something, but he sincerely doubted it was more than the final test they were to be put through. Behind them, there were a number of more experienced soldiers and officers, and Erestor had no doubt that one way or another they were about to be pushed into whatever was before them.

“So, are any of you brave enough to go first?” Rog repeated the question a second time, then made an unhappy tisking noise. “I had hoped there was still some amount of courage amongst you. Go ahead, boys,” he shouted now to the assembled who were not at the mercy of their fellows.

“What do you say? Pitch him in or shove him?” questioned someone directly behind Erestor.

“We have to shove him in. Unless you grab his feet and I grab his arms...”

Erestor, for his part, was having none of that. He was already feeling his way forward with one foot as he heard the rest around him fighting and shouting and generally making asses of themselves. Then, he heard something, nearby but not too nearby, and smiled. It was the waterfall, and now it all made sense. They were on the cliff above a little lake with a waterfall that came down from a stream. The drop was not too high and elflings came here often in the summertime, but it was not a jump that appealed to Erestor, especially not in these cooler months.

All the same, it appealed to him even less to be flung over a cliff into a pond while blindfolded with his hands tied behind his back, so he stood on the edge, took a deep breath, and stepped right off.
The cold of the water did not shock him so much as breaking the surface did. He relaxed and kicked his legs until he bobbed back up out of the water. The blindfold had come loose in the water and floated a few feet away, so Erestor worked on bringing his arms under his legs and to the front where he could reach the rope with his teeth to untie it. In the water, this proved to be easier than it might have been on land. Around him, he heard splashes as others came tumbling off the cliff, or jumping on their own once they deemed it safe.

As the first to free himself, Erestor set about to helping others who were having difficulties and getting the ones who were coughing and sputtering to shore. Periodically, he dove beneath the surface to see if anyone had been swept under – a good thing, for he did pull out a young ellon who had twisted his ankle before making it off the ridge and was struggling to keep his head above the water.

“So the rumors are true.”

Erestor turned and saw a small group who was wading near to the shore looking at him. At that point, he finally realized that they had all been stripped naked, and that the scars from the whip that had yet to fade were visible to everyone. During their group bathing, everyone had so little time that they all concentrated on getting as clean as possible in the short time they were given. At every practice, they wore the same uniform of a simple white shirt and black leggings with red markings to denote Rog’s house and army. For the last nine years, Erestor had kept his back covered, though someone had sparked the idea into the heads of others that the dark elf was nothing but a rogue scoundrel (which was ridiculous) who had been jailed in Doriath (which was true) for heinous crimes (which was not really true) against the crown (which was mostly true) and now in Gondolin had been punished by Turgon (which was absolutely true) numerous times (which was a stretch to say the least).

If Erestor had only told the real story, which was that he was a political nuisance to Doriath, the rumors might not have circulated as widely or as often as to his mischief in Gondolin. However, his continued silence had lost him his house and tarnished his reputation. Now, whatever little respect anyone might have had for Erestor seemed to ebb away as the others backed away from him in either disgust or confusion. Even those he had helped averted their gaze and left him alone.

Stepping onto the shore with a sigh, a towel was thrust at him. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, sir.” Erestor wrapped the towel around his body, making sure his back was not exposed in any way.

Rog smirked. “Do you have any idea why I am congratulating you?”

“I assume for not making an ass of my self up on the ridge, sir?” guessed Erestor.

“For your new rank, sergeant.”


“You jumped first,” Rog said simply. “Ironic that it was you, but you did jump first.”

“Yes, sir, I did jump first, sir.” Erestor’s eyes widened suddenly. “You mean... you want to promote me? Rog—I-I-I m-mean, sir,” he corrected himself immediately, face turning red. Rog grinned in amusement. “Sir, no offense, sir, but you know I did not come here to make a career of this, sir.”

“I know, but I am not one to break my own rules. You jumped first, you are offered the commission. You can of course refuse it, but I will tell you this- if you think making it through five months of
training is rough, try earning a higher rank through hard work and years of service. It is not one of those things that just happens overnight,” Rog assured him.

“Sir, I am honored, but-“

“-you will think it over and give me your decision tomorrow,” finished Rog for Erestor.
“Dismissed.”

“I-“ Erestor stopped and looked around, noting that the others were in various celebratory modes, and all leaving. “Dismissed, sir?”

“You are finished with your training. You have learned the basics. Now, if you wish to continue, I will see you in the morning. If not, feel free to collect that book you like to read, but you are dismissed for now,” explained Rog, in a somewhat bored voice. Noticing a blindfold floating near the shore, he stepped around Erestor to pluck it from the water.

Erestor turned to watch him, and said a bit timidly, “I was really hoping I would be able to grow my hair back out after this.”

“Officers can keep it longer if they want,” said Rog, pulling a length of rope from the water as well. “Some of them even keep it past their shoulders, though I discourage it.”

“Yes, but... but mine was past my waist,” Erestor said, his fingers playing with the edge of the towel.

With a sigh, Rog said, “Well, I suppose you will have to choose whether you favor personal vanity or public perception. Is it more important for you to look good, or to feel good?”

Frowning, Erestor nodded and pulled the towel tighter around himself. Slowly he began to walk away.

“By the way, Erestor,” said Rog, and Erestor turned around to see him, “good job. Few stay in the water to help their comrades. You did remarkably well.”

Unable to stop himself, Erestor grinned at the praise. “Thank you. Thank you, sir.”
“Of course, we are cutting our meeting short for a very special occasion that only happens twice a year. You are all invited, I believe.” Turgon looked to Rog for confirmation of this.

“Yes. You are all welcome to attend,” said Rog. “I found the recruits this time to be a bit of a challenge, but they all have proved themselves more than worthy of their ranks - even the most difficult of them.”

“More than ten words in a sentence,” whispered Egalmoth to Duilin. “That must be a record.”

“Do you mind?” questioned Duilin tersely. “I am trying to pay attention.”

Egalmoth let the smile slip from his face and folded his arms over his chest. Where once there had been camaraderie between the two warriors, there was now mostly silence. Since the day that Egalmoth had been held back in council, neither Duilin nor Salgant had wanted anything to do with the powerful house lord, though he had many times ensured them that he had done nothing dishonorable…

~ ~ ~ 3 years earlier ~ ~ ~

“If you are not the one who is unclean, then who is it?” pressed Salgant, poking a fat finger into Egalmoth’s chest. “Surely it is not Erestor; he took the place of the cowardly scoundrel! I care not if you are, but I have dined with you and drunk from your glass; I am not about to be called out as one of your kind!”

“It is not me! The king said nothing to me!” swore Egalmoth in a panic. “It must be Ectehlion or Glorfindel! Or perhaps someone else who he sent away! You have been deceived, my friend-”

“You are not my friend, you deceitful liar! The king had his reason for keeping you back, and I will not listen to any more lies.” Salgant spat upon Egalmoth’s boots and turned away. “Never speak to me again,” he sneered, and waved his hand behind him. “Take your filth outside of my house.”

“Salgant, please, I beg you listen to me!” Egalmoth fell upon his knees, crawling around to face Salgant, who backed up and looked away in disgust.

“Out!” roared Salgant. “Out, and never return!”

Egalmoth looked to Duilin pleadingly. “My old friend, do you turn me away as well? Do you not recall our time as younglings, growing up together? Duilin, please, please, believe me.”

It seemed as if Duilin had wanted to believe Egalmoth, but he exchanged looks with Salgant and then shook his head. “You had better leave before he calls for his guards,” said Duilin softly.

~ ~ ~

Those had been the last civil words the archer had said to him. Since that time, Duilin had aligned himself more and more with Salgant and the House of the Harp. With a sigh, Egalmoth turned his attention back to the king. There was suspicion now- for although he was never close to Erestor, some wondered if they were secretly friends, and if Erestor was covering for the Lord of the Arch. On some level, this theory of conspiracy worked: Both of their lines came from the houses of Elbereth, those linked to the stars. Even Egalmoth’s wife distrusted his fidelity after Salgant had paid her a visit, and their relationship had become strained in the past years.
He had a growing desire to discover who had cost him his friends, his reputation, and the love of his wife. It was no mere coincidence, he later decided, when he was approached by the Lord of the Fountain as the meeting ended.

“Glorfindel and I are going to the ceremony after lunch. I thought perhaps you might like to dine with us beforehand; I know you like to attend Rog’s presentations.”

In the past, Egalmoth would have refused, perhaps with laughter. Today, however, he glanced over his shoulder to see Salgant and Duilin exiting the room, cheerfully discussing their plans for the revitalization of their shared stables - stables that Egalmoth’s horses once lived in as well. Looking back to the captain, Egalmoth nodded. “Sure,” he said, and he could tell that Ecthelion was as surprised as he was.

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Through the main doors of the Hall of Light marched the most recent graduating group of recruits from Rog’s program. Although he always had a small number in each unit, these were soldiers whom everyone was in awe of. Their armor was black and brilliant red, and from the tops of their helmets thick plumes of scarlet and sable feathers marked them as the House of the Hammer of Wrath.

Around the edges of the room, the commonfolk who wished to see the presentation of the new troops gathered. Some had small children up on their shoulders, while others crouched down beside their elflings and pointed to the warriors as they came to a halt. There were twenty-two of them, lead by another whose height made his feathers rise above the others, and whose cloak signified him as the leader of this platoon.

With all of them in the same uniform, accompanied by sabers at their hips and bows carried with dignity, it was difficult to tell who anyone was. Only the lead ellon’s weapons were different than the others, for he carried no sword and had at his side only a trumpet which he would use to rally his soldiers.

After most of the ritual words were spoken from Turgon, who stood at the balcony with his council members, he motioned forward one of his own honor guards. They bowed to him, and brought forth a sword of shining steel. Walking down the stairs to the ground, the king stood beside Rog and asked, “Who shall lead these soldiers, in battle and in training, in times of peace and in times of war?”

“I will.” The elf at the lead, whose deep voice was heard by everyone watching, now removed his helmet. The reaction from those remaining upon the balcony was varied as the officer pledged his loyalty to Gondolin.

“Thel, look! Can you believe it?” Glorfindel was grinning madly. “An officer! I remember when he could not mount a horse or hold a sword!”

Chuckling, Ecthelion said, “I thought that might surprise you. Rog told me this morning of Erestor’s decision.”

“Erestor? That cannot be Erestor.” Salgant leaned a little further over the balcony, squinting to see better. “That elf? Erestor?”

“Imagine him with less muscle and more hair,” whispered Galdor. To this, both Penlodh and Laiqalasse snickered.
Idril sighed and shook her head. “What a shame,” she murmured, and walked past the lords and captains standing at the railing to leave through a door that would take her back into the palace.

Those present stopped their conversation and looked to Maeglin, who had been standing beside her for the duration. “My cousin... must be ill. I will see to her.” The young ellon hurried after Idril as applause traveled up from the crowds below.

“We must go congratulate Erestor,” insisted Glorfindel as the council members either left the balcony or joined the throng on the ground. Ecthelion nodded, and motioned to the stairs.

Beside the Lord of the Fountain stood the Lord of the Arch, and both had been in deep conversation many times during and after lunch. “I will join you in a moment. Ask him if he wants to dine with us at my house tonight,” added Ecthelion as Glorfindel headed down the steps.

Glorfindel jumped down the last few and easily found his target. “This is probably sounding redundant, but congratulations!”

“Thank you.” Erestor had his helmet tucked under one arm and craned his neck a little. “I need to get outside for a bit – much too stuffy in here.”

“I shall split a path through the crowd,” offered Glorfindel. In minutes, they were well away from the hall, and rounding the corner to a series of ponds and statues in a secluded part of the courtyard. “I am simply in awe,” Glorfindel finally said. “You look terrific. You... well, you must be awfully proud of yourself.”

“I guess.” Erestor fluffed the plumes of his helmet before setting it on a bench. “Would you like to see my sword?”

“I would love to,” replied Glorfindel, but the joke was lost on Erestor, who nodded and removed the polished weapon from its scabbard. Handing it to Glorfindel, the Lord of the Golden Flower gave a low whistle. “Nice,” he said, examining the blade. “Going to go slay something with that now, are you?”

Erestor paled. “I hope I never have to. I mean, combat is not the reason I stayed in this. I just feel I am not quite ready to leave yet.”

“I understand,” said Glorfindel, handing the sword back.

“No, I mean...” Erestor looked at the shining sword, a bit of a smile curving his lips, before he slid it back into the folds of leather. “I mean, I feel safe doing this. I have been on my own having to make decisions- very difficult and complex decisions sometimes- for most of my life. When you have someone telling you what to do instead, there is a certain amount of security there. I guess I could say I am taking the easy path right now.”

“Interesting,” mused Glorfindel. “I prefer this lifestyle because I think that the sort of work you were doing as a scribe, no offense, was rather boring overall.”

“Funny how we perceive things differently sometimes,” answered Erestor.

“Ecthelion wanted me to ask you about coming to dinner at-- Oh! I nearly forgot.” Glorfindel looked around, making sure no one was within hearing range. “Egalmöth had lunch with Ecthelion and I today.”

“Oh?”
“He started to question us as to who... who you stood up for a decade ago.” Glorfindel met Erestor’s gaze, and they stared at one another until Glorfindel looked away and said, “Ecthelion told him we did not really know the identity of that elf, and that if he was so inclined he should be inquiring with Turgon.” Again, Glorfindel looked at Erestor, and this time, Erestor looked away first.

‘You should not be here,’ said Erestor in Glorfindel’s mind. ‘He is watching us right now. He hoped that by telling you, he would flush the one I was protecting out in the open for him to catch.’

While Erestor seemed deep in thought at the moment, a look of dawning crossed Glorfindel’s face. He opened his mouth to answer, but Erestor spoke first.

“Glorfindel, I do not care that he wishes to know,” said Erestor sternly in a loud voice. He placed his hands on the blond’s shoulders, clamping his fingers so tightly that Glorfindel squirmed a little. “You tell him that if he wants to know something, he should come and talk to me directly.” Erestor’s voice was a bit louder now, and some who might not have quite been able to hear the conversation were turning their heads. “Go! Tell him that!” Erestor let go of Glorfindel and turned his back on him, giving a statue of a winged nymph with birds encircling her a dark look.

“But-“

“Go,” growled Erestor.

Swallowing and stumbling a few steps, Glorfindel walked away, looking over his shoulder once to see Erestor still staring at the statue.

A moment later Glorfindel heard a voice in his head say, ‘I am sorry I scared you, but it had to be done. I have learned from Rog that sometimes, one must be cruel to be kind. I will see you and Ecthelion tonight at dinner.’ Then, the connection in his mind between himself and Erestor closed.
“That was the stupidest thing you have ever done – second only to sleeping with that whore from Doriath,” spat out Ecthelion later that night.

Dinner sat on the tray near the door as Glorfindel sat on a chair meekly nodding now and then. He arrived to find Erestor and Ecthelion already drinking, and was immediately told to close the door and sit down. The tone was familiar, from Glorfindel’s earliest days in Gondolin, but had not been heard in many years. He listened and agreed with most of the points that Ecthelion made, while Erestor walked idly about and watched without interrupting. This gave Ecthelion continued momentum, and he brought up every detail of each transgression he thought committed by Glorfindel. When the subject of Gildor was broached, Glorfindel’s head snapped up and there was fire in his eyes.

“He is not a whore,” ground out the blond warrior, narrowing his eyes. “It is not his profession and he does not sleep with everyone. He is a noble prince and a guest of this realm.”

“Fine, maybe not a whore, but he is a slut. He beds anything male that will spread his legs for him, and gives his body to whomever catches him first. He fucks and is fucked like the coneys penned on the farms. Wise up, Fin, he does not love you.” Ecthelion’s harsh words made Glorfindel’s anger boil up from within, and he looked to Erestor for help and guidance.

Sprawled out on the sofa now, the dark ellon frowned and said apologetically, “He is telling you the truth, Glorfindel. I have heard rumors about your lover and his other conquests, even within our own realm.”

“How can you believe rumors?” questioned Glorfindel. “You as well as anyone should know how untruthful gossip can be!”

"Perception can be as strong as reality," commented Erestor.

"Have you seen him with anyone else?" Glorfindel demanded.

Erestor frowned and shook his head.

"Exactly. There is no proof. My perception of you right now is that you are uninformed and paranoid! I have been careful - so has he! All that exists are rumors, and the king will not act upon rumors."

The force of Ecthelion’s hand connecting with Glorfindel’s cheek sent the stunned blond back further in his seat. “What the fuck do you think put him into the position he is in in the first place?!” demanded Ecthelion as he pointed at Erestor. "He has been covering for your ass for years because of these damned rumors! He took beatings for you, administered by you, because of rumors! Rumors which never would have started had you not slept with that whore!” Ecthelion kicked the leg of a table as Glorfindel sat crying and cradling his cheek, toppling the doomed piece of furniture and successfully breaking off the remaining three legs. This sent a pile of books and a candle holder to the ground. Erestor swung his leg over the side of the couch and snuffed out the tiny flames with his big toe before any damage could be done. "Has he seen your scars, Erestor?" pressed Ecthelion. When Erestor looked away, Ecthelion leaned down with hands on either arm of the chair, and spoke with deep ire, spittle hitting Glorfindel's face. "He has gouges in his skin that are never going to fully heal. Flesh that healed jaggedly and places that are always going to hurt. You get to walk away, and he carries your shame
for life. And what have you done for him? You just called him an idiot because you cannot keep your cock out of a hole it should not be in!"

"Thel, maybe we should go for a walk before dinner," Erestor suggested, standing up. As he put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, it was shrugged off.

"I am no longer hungry." Ecthelion went to the door and set his icy glare upon Glorfindel. "And if you want to press charges against me, I dare you to go to Turgon and tell him I struck you. I will gladly take the whip after I tell him of your cowardice all these years and how you disobeyed him. You disobeyed me." Ecthelion yanked the door open, giving one last disapproving look to Glorfindel before he left.

Sighing at the door, Erestor came to Glorfindel and crouched down beside the chair. “Let me have a look at that,” he insisted, moving Glorfindel’s hand gently away. “At least he did not punch you – you would have had a shiner for sure.”

Glorfindel’s sobbing subsided as Erestor brought him a cloth that had been submerged in cold water. “Keep this on there a bit. It will help.”

Watching Erestor sit back down on the couch, Glorfindel asked in a very small voice, “Are you mad at me, too?”

The new sergeant rubbed his eyes, looking very tired. His gaze drifted to the food at the door longingly for a moment as he said, “No. And Ecthelion is mad, but he is not mad at you. He is worried about you. We both are.”

“Do you agree with everything he said?” questioned Glorfindel. The light in the room was fading as the sun set. The only remaining candles were the ones on the table that had been set for dinner, and they were burning low.

The dark elf lounged with his back against an arm of the couch and one leg up over the other arm, dangling off. “I have no love of Gildor. I think you are quite aware of that. He is clever and cunning, and does all for himself. When he last left, did he come to say goodbye to you?”

“He never does,” defended Glorfindel. “We are trying to be discrete.”

“If I were your lover- wait, let me rephrase that,” Erestor said quickly as Glorfindel looked upon him with a shocked expression. “If I had a lover, even if they be forbidden to me, I would make every attempt to say one last farewell to them each time I left. Also, I recall that sometimes you have mentioned that he makes plans to meet you and that these plans fail.”

“He is busy,” Glorfindel reminded Erestor.

Closing his eyes and resting his head on the cushion, Erestor said, “He, who is here free to roam, he who has no duties, is busier than the Guardian of the Fifth Gate of Gondolin? Busier than the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower?”

Slumping his shoulders in partial defeat, Glorfindel made one last attempt. “But... I love him.”

“I have never argued with you on that point. What I will question is, does he really love you? Or are you just his lover while he is here, and does he have others he lays with when he is not with you?” Erestor looked over and saw the unsure expression on Glorfindel’s face. “You have your doubts.”

“Sometimes he...” Glorfindel shook his head. “On rare occasion, he has called me by another name when...” His cheeks became red, and he turned away so that he could continue. “He calls me
something else, but he says it is his pet name for me. I thought at first it was, but then I heard
someone ask him once about someone by that name, so I am not so sure.”

“Fin.” Erestor sat up, moving to the edge of the couch. “Think about something, alright? If he does
have other lovers, and he is mixing the names sometimes, who is to say he does not reveal your name
when with them?” Glorfindel’s eyes became incredibly large. “Yes! Imagine if he says it to the
wrong person, someone who wants to... I do not know, seek revenge or something? Think if that
person were to go to the king. Glorfindel, I do not want to scare you, but I have run out of other
ways to convince you to change your ways!”

His tears were flowing again, and Glorfindel used the wet cloth to wipe them away. “Then I should
stop seeing him.” He broke down upon saying this, and Erestor was at his side in an instant.

“Ecthelion has been right all along. The picture you paint is one that could make anyone wonder.
With Egalmoth on the prowl now, you must take care!” Erestor took away the damp cloth and
replaced it with his handkerchief, and began to rub circles on Glorfindel’s back. “You have not
married; you show no interest in the fairer members of our race what-so-ever. You do not engage in
the same humor most ellyn do regarding ellith, and you certainly do not laugh whenever others make
such jokes. Your house is the ‘golden flower’- now, I know that means the sun, not a yellow rose,
but the two have become synonymous and most everyone thinks it truly is a flower. You must realize
how fey that sounds. Everyone else in the city has powerful symbols, and you are linked to yellow
roses and green fields and doves- all of which are very nice things, but they tend to make others
wonder.”

“What am I going to do?” panicked Glorfindel, looking pleadingly at Erestor.

“I am working that out in my head right now,” admitted the dark-haired ellon. “As soon as I have
something, you will be the first to know.”

Dinner was a one-sided affair, with Erestor eating quickly and Glorfindel apologizing for not feeling
like eating. When Erestor finished, he offered to take the cart back to the kitchen, while Glorfindel
decided to stay in Ecthelion’s room so that he could apologize to the other captain when he returned.
He did not mean to, but he had drifted into reverie while sitting on the chair, and only when the door
opened and closed did Glorfindel shake himself from his visions and quickly rise. “Thel, I-

“Why are you still here?” The question was not demanding, but confused. Ecthelion looked down at
the untouched tray of food that was saved for him and shook his head. Walking to the windows,
Ecthelion stared outside and said, “You should go home, Glorfindel. Get some rest. You need to be
up early tomorrow.”

“Thel, please hear me out.” Glorfindel came to stand beside his mentor. He had thought through in
his mind all he wanted to say, but it gushed forth all at once. “Everything you said, you were
absolutely right. I have been careless and stupid, and Gildor has not made the attempt to protect me-
only you and Erestor have, and that is not fair to either of you. I should have stopped seeing him long
ago, but again, I have been an idiot. I will not see him any longer, you are right, you are always right,
I should have just listened to you from the beginning.”

As he was crying again, Glorfindel walked away and picked up the handkerchief Erestor had left
with him. “I will go now,” he said quietly. “I am sorry.”

“Shit,” muttered Ecthelion, putting his palm against the window and resting his forehead upon the
cool glass. Glorfindel slowly retreated, but he was stopped halfway. “I never wanted to have to say
those things to you, but do you know how close to death you are right now? If Egalmoth manages to solve this puzzle, I do not know how Erestor and I will protect you. Do you understand that, Glorfindel? Do you?"

Bowing his head again, Glorfindel nodded obediently. “I know. I know. I do not know what to do either,” he said fearfully. “And then...” Fighting back his emotions to keep himself from crying again, the blond warrior said, “Then you hit me... and...” Tears ran down his cheeks despite his attempt to keep them at bay, and he drew in his breath, sniffing with sorrow and disgrace. “And that is how it started with my father. Before he started beating me and whipping me, it started when he slapped me one day. Just like you did.”

Looking down at his hands, Ecthelion balled them into fists, angered at himself. “I am sorry about earlier, Fin, but do you realize—” Ecthelion’s voice cracked and he took a moment to compose himself. “I was just so frustrated; I would do anything to make you understand even if I have to hurt you to help you! I feel like a monster for doing it. Do you know how much I care about you? You are like kin to me. It would kill me inside if anything ever happened to you.

“There is such danger in my job, I cannot marry, I cannot have a family. It would be unfair of me to put anyone in that position of my never returning home one day. I will never have a son – but I have you. You are all I have. Do you understand that?”

For the only time Glorfindel could ever remember, he watched Ecthelion turn away from him and blow his nose, wiping the back of his hand across his face now that his handkerchief was dirty. He tried to swallow his sobs as Glorfindel circled around him. “I am the one who is sorry, Thel. I- I have caused both you and Erestor so much pain. I never wanted to shame you like this.”

“Fin...” Ecthelion grasped for the words as he pinched the bridge of his nose and wiped away the rest of his tears quickly. “We all make mistakes. Some greater than others. But when we make them, we should learn from them instead of repeating them over and over. Like Erestor, for example. He knew he needed help with his anger, so he joined the army. It has done wonders for him.”

“You... you think I should join Rog’s army?” questioned Glorfindel nervously.

“Good heavens, no!” Ecthelion shook his head. “Do not dare – in fact, swear to me you will not.”


“You would not make it through the training. Not that I think you would not last the physical part – you would excel at that. You could stand to trim down that lion’s mane, too,” added the Noldo, tugging on a golden braid that was immediately pulled back from his grasp. “They create situations which would reveal you to them, and that is the last thing you want to do.”

“Like what?” asked Glorfindel.

“You can ask Erestor about it some time. They all bathe together at the same time every day,” began Ecthelion, and simply this small piece of information caused Glorfindel’s mind to run wild with fantasies. “Then the officers do all sorts of things to harass the recruits, some of which, well, you might happen to enjoy. Ask Erestor,” he repeated. “He can tell you more about it if you really want to know. Back to the situation at hand- I passed Erestor in the gardens while I was outside. He said something that led me to believe you were going to stop being with Gildor, and I think you just confirmed it when I came in.”

Nodding, Glorfindel bowed his head. “I want to be with him, but I never should have allowed things to go this far.”
“Or to have happened at all,” added Ecthelion.

Again, Glorfindel nodded, deciding to leave out the fact that Erestor had been present when he and Gildor had their first experiences together. He had managed not to take responsibility for years and was not going to shirk it off on Erestor after all the dark elf had done for him. “I need to stop seeing him. Both of you are right. I have no idea how I am going to tell him, though—especially without making him mad.”

“Does he get mad often?” questioned Ecthelion with concern.

Shrugging, Glorfindel admitted, “Sometimes.”

“Has he ever harmed you?” Ecthelion studied Glorfindel carefully as he answered to be sure the fairer ellon was not lying.

“No. He just says things that are mean, or he...” Embarrassed, Glorfindel shook his head and his gaze wandered up to the ceiling. “Or, he takes his pleasure and gives me none and says if I am better the next time I might, or he ties me to the bed and leaves me there while he goes out and does not tell me where he goes.”

“Glorfindel.” Ecthelion’s stern voice cut the younger elf off. “Belittling you and... whatever games he is playing with your relationship, that is abuse. He is hurting you—physically, but it is a hurt all the same.”

As he wrung his hands together, Glorfindel shifted his feet. “He... he does not mean it... and... and usually it is because I am late or I--”

“Fin, when will he be here next?” sighed Ecthelion.

“In a week or so, before the paths become icy. Then he plans to stay the winter,” explained Glorfindel.

“Not this winter,” declared Ecthelion coldly.
“Erestor. It is time.”

After he gave Rog a curt nod, the sergeant tossed his practice staff to one of the soldiers he was training. Erestor retrieved his sword and joined the pair of elves who were making their way to the main gate. He ran his fingers through his hair quickly to remove any twigs, grass, or leaves which might have gotten into it during the practice session.

“Captains at the gate!” bellowed a voice as the trio approached, and Erestor held back a few paces, letting those of the higher rank reach the gate first. Once through, he stepped beside them again. A party coming from the other direction was waiting before them, and the head of the leader was tilted slightly.

“What an honor. Normally I just ride right in, but these fellows insisted I wait to be greeted.” Gildor dismounted and patted his horse’s flank before striding over and coming to stand before the trio blocking the path. “Please, do not look so happy on my account.” He stepped forward as if to pass them, but Rog moved to block his way. “So that is how it is then. Alright, you have my ears,” he said, cocking his head to the other side and looking to Ecthelion in a rather bored manner.

“I assume you are bringing news from Doriath, and letters from your king to ours,” said Ecthelion. “We will not keep you; you can give them to Erestor and he will be sure that they are delivered. Any other packages and correspondence can be left in care of the gatekeeper and they will be delivered shortly. You will find all of the outgoing items already packed and ready for you to take when you depart.”

“Erestor?” Gildor glanced around behind Ecthelion, looking for the scribe. “Where is—he...” Gildor’s eyes fell upon the tall, muscular soldier to Ecthelion’s right. “Oh, I see.” Gildor’s eyes lingered on Erestor, whose arms folded over his chest mirrored Rog on Ecthelion’s left. "You certainly paint a pretty picture." He licked his lips and grinned. "Be honest. Have I been replaced?"

"You are being expelled," replied Erestor.

"Harsh words, friend." Gildor gave a theatrical double clap of his hands. “’Rul, bring me the messages for this fine figure of manhood displayed before me. I do want to see him flex those marvelous muscles as he carries them back to the king.”

A silver-haired ellon swung his leg over the side of his horse and leaped down from it. He opened a bag on the side of the saddle and brought forth a stack of letters and a news scroll that was contained in a leather case. These he gave to Gildor before he returned to his mount.

Before he handed them to Erestor, however, Gildor stepped closer to the group and said in a low voice, “We have permission to stay here for the winter.”

“I will tell our king how very sorry you are to have had to turn down that invitation due to your busy workload,” Ecthelion said calmly.

“We need supplies enough to return to Doriath,” added Gildor as he relinquished the package to Erestor. Erestor whistled a page over, and handed it to the lad with instructions to take the items to the king. As the youth ran off, Gildor argued, “You must at least allow us in to rest our horses.”
"You may make camp here for one night. Supplies will be provided, and you will be escorted to the outskirts at dawn," Rog said.

"This is not acceptable!" Gildor narrowed his eyes. "I demand to speak with the king!"

Ecthelion looked at Gildor for a minute or so, then turned his head to the right. "Erestor? I think you can explain it better than I can. You have a better way with words."

"You are unwelcome here," said Erestor simply. "Unwelcome and unwanted. My suggestion is that you get back on your horses right now so that you can make it back to Doriath before the snows come. Winter sometimes comes early, and it would be more unpleasant to spend it right here on the pass."

"This is ridiculous – this is Turgon’s kingdom, not yours!" Gildor paced a few steps forth and back as if looking for a weakness in their line. "You cannot keep me from entering the city!"

"If you really want to enter," said Erestor as he stepped aside, "by all means. But if you want to leave, I would advise you to go now."

Cocking his eyebrows high, Gildor demanded to know, "Is that a threat?" He drew out his sword, at which time all three of the elf-lords before him took a step away from each other so that they could draw their weapons as well. "Would you really kill me on your own doorstep? The repercussions would be severe."

Ecthelion stepped forward, considered his sword, and sheathed it. Erestor lowered his only slightly, while Rog kept tapping the head of his mace into his open palm, making a heavy slapping sound as it hit his large, thick hand. As Ecthelion approached, Gildor lowered his weapon as well – soon finding this to be a mistake.

As he grabbed hold of the front of Gildor’s collar, Ecthelion twisted his wrist so that the material choked Gildor at the neck, and the silver-blond dropped his sword. As it clattered to the ground, Ecthelion spoke to him in a very calm, low voice. "You do not fear me, Gildor, but you should. Look into my eyes. I have seen death and dealt it. I am a kinslayer, and there is nothing to cleanse that from me. What is one more mark upon my soul now?" He shoved Gildor down upon the ground. "I wanted to be civil about this, but that is out of the question. Now, would you like to leave quietly on your horse, or do you wish for us to have to send your body back to Doriath with these fine fellows," he said, nodding to the rest of the small party Gildor traveled with, "along with a note apologizing for the grave tragedy of your death from mysteriously unknown circumstances?"

Gildor scrambled up from the ground, sheathing his sword. He gave Ecthelion a disgusted look and then smirked. "Fine. I will go. I have just one thing to tell you before I leave," he announced, his voice getting louder and reaching the soldiers stationed at the towers. "It pertains to a particular Lord of--"

Cold metal rested upon Gildor’s skin, and Erestor held his sword a breath away from the younger elf’s neck. "Say his name," growled the sergeant, "and it will be the last word upon your lips."

Standing completely still, Gildor looked up the blade and into Erestor’s dark intense gaze. "Why do you care so much for him?" sneered the messenger. "Is it that you secretly desire what I have had? What is he to you?"

"He is my friend, which is more than you will ever be to him," answered Erestor, keeping the sword steady.
Gildor laughed darkly. “Of course. What else? But you sound to me not a friend, but as a scorned lover. It makes one wonder, Erestor, it makes one wonder.” He tilted his head to the side, causing the edge of the sword to break the skin just slightly. A line of blood welled up and lingered, but Erestor did not move away. “I think you hope I say his name.”

“Please do,” Erestor said, his muscles still remaining motionless.

“I am thinking about it. What power I have right now,” he mused. “A single name, and my life ends. But yours will to – I know your greatest desire is to sail back to Valinor, and I would take joy in the Halls of Waiting knowing that I had kept you from your dream.” Gildor stepped back. “Not today, I think.” He turned abruptly and went to his mount, leaping upon the steed’s back.

“Give my regards to King Thingol,” called out Erestor as the party readied for departure.

Smiling in a sickeningly sweet manner, Gildor replied, “I would, but I once told him you were dead to cheer him up. As you can imagine, he was overcome with joy about that. So was I.” He paused. “I can always hope.” He signaled the party to ride, and they galloped back through the fifth gate and away from the hidden city.

Off to the side, Rog let out a low whistle. “And I thought you had issues with Salgant,” he said to Erestor as the trio walked back into Gondolin.
“What do you have there?” demanded Salgant.

Erestor stopped abruptly, and scrutinized the sealed envelope held in his hands. For some reason, he found it necessary to cut straight through the dining room, very slowly and just as Salgant was coincidentally finishing his second breakfast. “My entries for the summer games; what else?” he asked in a loud, clear voice. He walked on, with Salgant now on his heels. “They are due in today and I must make haste with what little time I have for a break in my duties.”

“Yes, I know they are due and I know what those envelopes are for,” answered the rotund elf with mild exasperation. “But you,” he said, snatching the envelope away as soon as he was close enough to do so, “are not allowed to participate!”

Placing his hands on his hips and staring down at Salgant for a moment, Erestor then grabbed the envelope back, smoothing out a crease. “And why not?”

“You know as well as anyone that those with a criminal background are not allowed to compete.” Salgant sniffed with disdain. “Your record from Doriath is against you, sergeant.”

“It was, yes, that is true,” nodded Erestor. “However,” he said, continuing on his way through the palace with Salgant furiously trying to keep pace every time Erestor walked a little faster, “things have changed. You see, I have learned that that Thingol declared me dead.”

“So?” panted Salgant as they went up two flights of stairs.

“So,” said Erestor, “according to the rules of Doriath, my record has been wiped clean – in anticipation of my ‘rebirth’ of course. Oh, look- here I am!” Erestor stopped at the end of the short line of hopeful artists and athletes with plans to compete in the games that were half a year away. “Did you remember to turn your entries in?”

“My entry has been given to them, thank you,” wheezed Salgant. “What of King Turgon? Surely he has not pardoned you for-”

“Ah ah ah.” Erestor effectively silenced Salgant (and easily, for the other elf was gasping for air as it was). He lowered his voice and lifted the envelope to mask others from reading his lips as he spoke softly to Salgant. “All of the ‘devious’ things I was charged with were never put on record – all closed councils, all absolutely, how shall I put it – nonexistent.”

“Next!” called the ellon standing at the counter. Erestor stepped forward and handed his envelope to him. Salgant tried to get a peek at the papers as they were removed and checked over for verification. “Everything is in order. You will receive further instruction in four months. Good luck.”

“Thank you.” Erestor bowed to the Master of the Games and then turned to leave. “Oh! I thought you had gone,” he said to Salgant as he passed him by.

“So which events are you participating in?” questioned Salgant, blocking Erestor’s path.

Looking for a way around, Erestor crossed his arms over his chest. “I need tell that to no one.”

“I will find out the day of the competition,” Salgant reminded him.

“And so shall everyone else. Good day!” Erestor managed to pass around Salgant, grinning
mischievously as he walked briskly away.

Salgant continued to brood for a few minutes until he saw Rog approaching with his entries. “Here now, I see the boxing champion plans to retain his title,” Salgant said in greeting.

Taking his envelope directly to the counter, for the line had dissolved now, Rog shook his head. “No, no boxing this year for me. The last batch of recruits has me tired.”

“How, am I not surprised,” smirked Salgant.

Rog waited as his papers were checked over, and when Salgant approached, he stepped aside so that his entries were visible. “A weight lift, no surprise in that. Swordcrafting. They both make sense.”

“I have wanted to compete against Enerdhil in that event for some time. I finally decided that there is no reason I need to always win the boxing event. There is less thrill if you know from the onset that you will win. I barely need to try anymore.” Nodding to the game master when he was told everything was well with his applications, Rog strolled down the hallway with Salgant. “Which events have you chosen?”

“Just the historical minstrel competition,” Salgant said. “The same as every year.”

“You should consider boxing again. Especially now that I am no longer competing – that is why you stopped, is it not?” pressed Rog.

Stopping at a window to look outside at the snow-covered ground, Salgant admitted, “I knew you would always best me. I do not appreciate being made a fool of. But six months is little time for me to train again,” he said as they began to make their way down the hall.

“I could have you ready for competition in four. You do not believe me;” said Rog as Salgant began to laugh. “Let me give it a try. You can always pull out of the event up to two weeks prior to the games if you decide you are not ready.”

“Four months.” Salgant looked down at his belly and shook his head. “It would take a miracle.”

“I did not say I would have you in perfect condition; you can still be overweight and be able to fight without falling flat on your ass,” remarked Rog. “Then again, look at Erestor. Maybe I do work miracles. Your choice. I just thought you might want the chance to hit him back.” Rog began walking down the hallway again.

Salgant furrowed his brow, and then widened his eyes. “So that is what he is competing in! Tell me, which other event is your newest sergeant signed up for?”

“That I do not know – I only sign off on the sporting events for my soldiers,” said Rog. He slowed his step as Salgant hurried to catch up. “But he is planning to box this year.”

“And? What chance does he have?” prodded Salgant.

Rog tilted his head from one side to the other. “He is strong, but this is newfound strength. He does not quite know what to do with it yet, whereas you are a trained warrior, with skill and knowledge of the sport. It should be obvious who will win. You may not even end up paired against him, of course,” added Rog.

Motioning that they should enter a little alcove, Salgant lowered his voice. “Who will be making out the rotations for the boxing matches?”
“I will,” said Rog very softly, for such discussion was illegal prior to the events.

“Good. Make sure we pair against one another. Not the first round- I need to see how he fights before I can compete against him. Be sure to give us easy opponents to keep us in, though, but not too easy. We cannot have anyone suspect, friend.” Smiling to himself, he said, “Earlier he told me that Doriath mistook him for being dead. When I get done with him, he will wish he was.”

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From his post at the top of the tower of the fifth gate, Glorfindel had a better view than any of the other guardians. His towers were taller than Ecthelion’s, and he could see past the first gate. Behind him, he could see back over the sixth gate and into the city. Except what the palace and some other large buildings hid, Glorfindel saw it all. What he did not see he needed only walk around the ledge of the silver walls to complete the circuit around the realm.

More and more often he had taken to walking the wall, for he took to pulling double shifts to keep his mind off of anything that could lead to mischief. He had not been told the circumstances surrounding Gildor’s abrupt departure after reaching the city two months earlier. Ecthelion had only made mention of it in council that the party from Doriath had respectfully declined the invitation.

When he questioned it, Glorfindel was given the same answer by both Ecthelion and Erestor. “Gildor decided it was in his best interest to return to Doriath as soon as possible.” It was only when he accidentally overheard Rog telling Erestor that he still had to watch his temper and that killing Gildor would not have been an ideal solution that Glorfindel realized fully what the trio had done.

Had done this to him, one of the voices in his head reasoned, but the other voice sneered that they had done this to him. Torn between love and hate for their actions, Glorfindel concerned himself more and more with his work.

Secretly he took up a partial apprenticeship with Enerdhil. It was not his intention to learn the mysteries of the taming of metals, but to learn their properties, and to learn the secrets of the chemist, of the mathematician, and the scientist. Most of the realm had a phrase for Glorfindel he assumed they thought he did not know: Cute, but not too bright. Now that he had the knowledge of the written word, he found it easy to soak up things it took others years to study.

Finding his feet had carried him to the south tower, Glorfindel paused and looked down at the training fields. It was difficult to tell who was who, but one figure was easy for him to recognize.

Erestor motioned for another pair of soldiers to attack, and defeated them both within minutes. Wiping his brow with the back of his wrist, he walked to the bucket of water and lifted up the ladle to take a drink. “That was better,” he remarked to the soldier that had managed to last longer, who nodded. As the ellon passed by, Erestor caught a glint of silver above and shielded his eyes from the winter sun, made all the brighter from the snow that covered the trees, houses, and ground. Glorfindel. Watching again.

They had barely spoken in the last few months, but Erestor had worried about Egalmoth’s ability to reason things out. He had come up with a plan within a few days, but his fear was that putting it into action too soon would alert the Lord of the Arch. Then again, waiting gave Egalmoth longer to think things over. Grabbing a rag to wipe the sweat from the back of his neck, Erestor lifted it up and waved it until he caught the blond’s attention.

Looking down from his post, Glorfindel watched Erestor make a number of discrete signals to him that were used by the guards to silently speak to each other in the midst of battles. Message-for-you-private- was what Glorfindel understood, so he swiftly walked into the tower and told the guard there to take over the watch. Without wasting time, Glorfindel took hold of the rope that lead to the ground
“Sergeant? A word with you, please,” said Glorfindel curtly, walking past and simply expecting Erestor to follow. As was protocol, Erestor pointed to his second to take over the training and fell in step with Glorfindel. They disappeared down into the little room that Erestor had used to hide in when he had been required to do the laundry of the officers. Immediately, Glorfindel’s demeanor changed. “I hate you like this,” he mumbled, shaking his head. “You cut your hair again, and you made it shorter this time.”

“I only trimmed it to keep it tidy. It was sticking up in the back, and I brushed and brushed to no avail. Besides, I am enjoying this, for now,” admitted Erestor. “All of it.”

Not wanting to argue, Glorfindel asked, “What did you want to discuss?”

“I have a solution to your troubles. Well, in part.” Erestor removed the gloves he was wearing and tucked them into his belt so that they hung over the side, then leaned against the wall. “Are you free for dinner tonight?”

“Aye,” replied Glorfindel eagerly.

“Good. Come to my rooms in the palace,” said Erestor.

Glorfindel blinked. “I thought you had to stay in the barracks now.”

“I live in the barracks. There are no rules governing where I eat at the moment,” Erestor reminded his friend. “Better make it later; I am sure I need to clean them up a bit.”

Nodding, Glorfindel asked, “Did you know that Rog is training Salgant for the games? To box?”

“I know,” answered Erestor. “I asked him to.”

Open-mouthed and confused, Glorfindel pointed at Erestor. “You? You asked him to?”

Erestor confirmed it again. “I asked him to be sure that Salgant would not simply fall on his ass the first time I hit him – like he did the last time. I want to get a few punches in before he bleeds.”

“Once again – I am glad we are both on the same side.” Glorfindel paused. “What about you? Salgant used to box back in Nevrast, and from what I am told, he was a formidable opponent.”

To this, Erestor grinned. “During the winters in Valinor, I needed something to do. We would be snowed in for months at a time – like here, only imagine, I spent my winters at an inn, with only perhaps a hundred or so others. I was employed by Oropher – not to tend the bar or to play the music, or to greet the guests or clean the hall. My job was making sure no one started a fuss. If they did, I made sure they knew not to the rest of the winter.”

“You beat up troublemakers,” said Glorfindel.

“I persuaded them not to,” Erestor stopped. “Alright, yes, I beat up troublemakers. But only if I had to. We would go for years without a problem, and then something would happen, someone would get upset, someone would have too much to drink, and I would end up shoving them out into the snow and knocking them on their drunken asses. Only if I had to.”

Glorfindel paced the tiny confines of the room, sorting this out in his head. “There are so many times that you leave out some details in what you tell me. I believe this is one of those times.”
“How so?” questioned Erestor.

“How did you learn to fistfight in the first place?” Glorfindel watched as Erestor sighed and sat down upon the table. “Not going to tell me?”

“I knew an elf with a temper worse than my own- maybe some of his fire burned me and that is where I got it from,” wondered Erestor. “Anyhow, most of the time as you know there is a large gap between siblings. Well, this poor child lost his mother and when his father remarried and had five other children in very quick order, he felt in some ways as if his father thought he was inadequate.”

“Fëanor,” guessed Glorfindel, and Erestor nodded.

Putting his gloves back on, Erestor said, “When we were children, we only somewhat got along together. As adults, we were even less compatible, but most others our age were not as tall. He came to me one day and said that he was so angry he just wanted to hit his younger brother – I do not recall which it was at the time. He just wanted to hit something; anything. I knew what he was asking- if he revealed this weakness to his friends, they would think ill of him. We began fighting; secretly, in Óromë’s forest or anywhere else secluded. No weapons, just our fists. We learned from one another how to fight.”

“Sounds like a normal coming of age sort of thing,” said Glorfindel, without mentioning that he himself had never had a desire to fight, and that when chided by his friends once he covered his face and ran to his mother with tears in his eyes.

“Except it was Valinor,” Erestor reminded Glorfindel. “We were not to fight with one another, and especially not like this. I had to come up with so many stories as to how I returned home with a bloodied nose or cuts on my face. Everyone thought I was a klutz. But do not worry; I beat him more often than he beat me. Beating Salgant will be easy. He is no Fëanor.”
“Please; come in.” Erestor motioned Glorfindel into the room and shut the door behind him. “Have you had the pleasure of meeting Aranel?”

“I do not believe I have,” replied the blond warrior, bowing to the lady who stood up and smiled at him. “M’lady.”

“M’lord. Oh dear,” she giggled, “we shall certainly need to rid ourselves of such formalities!” Aranel smiled, and gracefully held out her hand. “Glorfindel, I believe.”

“Aye.” Nervously, Glorfindel looked to Erestor, who was looking much more what he was used to holding a glass of wine in one hand and dressed in black pants and a vibrant tunic of red and blue. “I hope I did not come too late,” he apologized.

Erestor shook his head and rounded Glorfindel. “Dinner has yet to arrive. Come, let us sit by the windows and watch the snow fall.” He offered his arm to Aranel and the pair continued to the destination Erestor had chosen. Deciding to remove his boots at the door, Glorfindel heard the knock before Erestor, but moved away when he saw Erestor leap up from the couch and place his finger to his lips. Swiftly, the dark haired ellon motioned Glorfindel away and opened the door. “Ah, thank you, just in time! Good night!” Closing the door by kicking it with his foot, Erestor took everything to the table and set it down. “All part of the plan,” he said, steering Glorfindel to the sitting area.

With obvious unease, Glorfindel sat down on a chair that faced the couch. As soon as Erestor took his position beside Aranel, he was slapped across his shoulder. “You said you would tell him ahead of time!” she hissed.

“Oh, dear. Let me start at the beginning,” pleaded Erestor as Glorfindel began to stand up. “Fin, this is all part of the plan to save your skin, now, sit down!”

Glorfindel took a moment to compose himself with his back turned to them. Taking a few deep breaths, he turned on his heel and sat. “Well?” he asked tersely.

Rolling his eyes, Erestor began with, “I came up with the perfect solution on how to keep Egalmoth and everyone else off of your trail, and for you to regain the respect that Turgon had for you.”

“And somehow that includes you getting married,” interrupted Glorfindel.

“Hush! Yes, it does. Now, if you please,” huffed Erestor. “I speak, you listen. Questions later. This is Aranel,” he said, motioning to his right. The lithe, dark haired elleth waved at him.

“Yes, we have met,” snapped Glorfindel.

Clearing his throat and giving Aranel a pat on the hand he held, Erestor said, “I tend to think that Aranel is one of the most beautiful young ladies in all of Gondolin.”

“Oh, stop!” she giggled, and now Glorfindel rolled his eyes.
“I have never,” he continued, lifting her easily up onto his lap, “seen such a face, such eyes, such kissable lips. A smile so warm and radiant, and a body—well, you will simply need to believe me when I say that she curves in all the right places,” he said, tilting his head and leering at her posterior, to which he gave more than a friendly pat.

Sucking in his breath, Glorfindel asked, “And why does this matter?”

“It matters,” Erestor replied, “because her heart has already been won by another, and no matter how hard I try to woo this fair maiden,” he said, placing her back onto her own cushion of the couch, “my chance of success is zero.”

Looking between the two elves on the couch, Glorfindel finally narrowed his eyes and asked, “Why am I here?”

Waving him off with one hand, Erestor turned to Aranel and endearingly tucked a lock of dark hair that had strayed forward back behind her ear. “We will get to you in due time, Glorfindel. Aranel, I think you should tell Glorfindel about your lover.”

“Must she?” muttered Glorfindel, looking about to gag.

Happily sighing, Aranel gave Erestor a sidelong glance. He winked to her and then sat back, picking up the wine goblet he had set on a table off to the side. “Let me think. Where to begin? Well, she has the cutest little laugh, and an adorable smile. Her eyes are bluer than any sky and—“

“Wait, wait, wait, wait.” Glorfindel sat up, beginning to smirk. “She?” He snorted. “How can she be a she?”

“Because that is how she was born,” said Aranel, a little put-off.

“That is just... incredible,” answered Glorfindel.

“I thought the same.” Erestor had a grin on his face.

“Who are you to judge?” Aranel leaned forward with her folded arms resting on her knees. “You like other males.”

Immediately, Glorfindel became defensive. “Who told you?”

“No one had to,” Aranel said dryly. “You might as well sew lace onto your house banner.”

To this Erestor snickered quietly, and Glorfindel gave him a dirty look. “I offer my apologies. You are correct; who am I to judge such a thing? But are not the same rules that prevent me that personal freedom the same that would bind you not to do such a thing?”

“’Tis true. That is how Erestor came up with the plan that he did,” said Aranel.

“How do we get to the part where I am concerned?” Glorfindel was picking at some loose strings on the chair, and Erestor stood.

Walking out of the sitting area and to the table, Erestor lifted a cover from a bowl, and steam rose up. “I think we should eat while we discuss the plans, else the food will get cold. What say you to that?”

Not waiting for a response, Erestor retrieved a third plate from another room, for it was obvious the intention was for everyone to believe that two were dining that evening and not three. However, the portions were large and none of them would go hungry. “Aranel?” Erestor pulled out one of the chairs and the lady came over and sat down.
“Practicing already?” she said to him with a smile. Erestor kissed the top of her head and took his own seat before motioning Glorfindel over.

Glorfindel walked around the table and then stood behind a chair with his palms resting upon the back of it. “Perhaps you will forgive me when I say I do not think I can eat unless I know exactly what sort of scheme you have come up with.”

Placing his napkin aside, Erestor folded his hands in front of himself, his elbows resting on the table. “What is the one thing that would ‘prove’ beyond any doubts that you are not interested in males?”

Looking upon Aranel, Glorfindel said, “I think I just figured out what your plan is.”

“Good! Then we can eat,” said Erestor, passing the basket of bread to Aranel.

Still, Glorfindel did not sit down. “So I am to marry you?” he asked Aranel in a gloomy tone.

“No, I am to marry her,” Erestor corrected. “You cannot marry her; you would show absolutely no appreciation for this gorgeous creature, and that would be most unfair to her. Now, sit down. The food is getting cold.” Once Glorfindel grudgingly sat down, Erestor explained, “I am going to marry Arenel; you will marry her lover. We already spend a bit of time together now and then, and it will give the ladies a chance to see one another in private without the fear of being caught. Their parents are all very anxious to get them married, what with their hundredth birthdays fast approaching.”

“My father knows, of course,” Aranel said. “He is who has helped us to construct this plan.”

Slumping in his chair, Glorfindel shook his head while looking at Erestor. “You do know, if you keep telling others about me, there will be no one left to hide the secret from.”

“He knew about you without doubts after that meeting a decade ago,” scolded Erestor. “He knew, for as a father of a young lady whose preference was not as usual as most, he can see now such signs.”

“Huh.” Glorfindel took a closer look at Aranel, his eyes settling upon her bosom, and asked, “Is Rog your father?”

“Of course,” she replied. Looking to Erestor, she said, “You did not tell him that, either?”

“So that is what you meant about her breasts,” continued Glorfindel as Erestor gave him a good glare. “Sorry,” he said to the young lady, “he was complimenting their firmness and size when he first told me of you, but that sort of thing has never interested me.”

“I would not have expected it to,” Aranel told Glorfindel politely. “Erestor, darling, come here so I can slap you for that.”

“After the wedding,” he said quickly as she began to rise from her seat.

As she sat back down with a little huff, Glorfindel leaned closer and whispered, “Remind me later to tell you what he said regarding your backside.”

Tisking while she shook her head, Aranel portioned some potatoes for herself. “He is going to be black and blue on our wedding night.”

“Speaking of that, do we have a date set then for all of this?” asked Glorfindel. Both Aranel and Erestor gave him an odd look. “That would be a no?”
“That would be a no, of course we do not. Glorfindel, you have yet to even meet your ‘intended’,” Erestor reminded him. “All in good time. First, I shall properly court Aranel. Then, at some point, she will introduce you to her good friend, and you shall fall deeply in love, and woo her, and all will be well in the end.”

“So, I am marrying – whatever her name is so that Egalmoth and everyone else leaves me alone, and they are marrying us so that they can be together, but why are you involved with this plot?” questioned Glorfindel.

“I will not lie. I have motives of my own,” admitted Erestor. “First, to my advantage, Aranel has some love of the male elf, so I expect I shall earn myself enough kisses and heated fondling to keep me satisfied for a good long while. Second, I enjoy my rooms here very much,” he said, motioning about. “Of those in the army, only the highest officers and married ellyn are allowed quarters in the main palace. The barracks are no place for my gentle artist’s soul,” he pouted, and Aranel laughed as politely as possible to this. “Third, and most important, you are my dearest friend, Glorfindel. More and more like a brother every day. I do whatever I am able to ease your path in life.”

Glorfindel bowed his head for a moment, and nodded. “Thank you,” he finally settled on, looking up to meet Erestor’s eyes with his own. “Thank you, Erestor.”

“No thanks necessary, but you are most welcome. Now,” said the elder elf, snatching a roll from the basket, “let us eat!”
Erestor was sitting on the couch in the small antechamber connected to the barracks, completely naked when Rog found him. A folded blanket was on the couch where he sat. It was so early in the morning that the sun had yet to rise. Saluting to the superior officer, Erestor resumed his deep-in-thought position as he stared at the wall.

“Ready for today?” questioned Rog, taking a seat on the other worn piece of furniture, a larger couch that mismatched the one Erestor sat upon, choosing a spot that did not sink to the floor.

“I will be,” answered Erestor softly, not wishing to wake any of his fellow soldiers sleeping in the next room. Nearly all of them would be competing in some way or another, or at the very least helping to ready some part of the competition. It was practically mandatory, for Rog’s house was the host of the games this year.

Propping his feet up on a low table that had seen better days, Rog asked, “Do you want me to trim back your hair a bit before the preliminary fights?”

Erestor shook his head. “I really am trying to get it to grow out a little,” he said. “See, there is this girl I met, and she keeps telling me she likes it that way.”

Rog lifted a brow. “I know, but that is about the most dangerous length it can be,” he warned. “Too short to tie back; long enough to grab hold of.”

“Except, tall as I am, I expect Salgant would need a ladder to try that.” Erestor squinted as the first rays of sunlight came in through the small curtain covered windows.

Rog nodded. “Except that what you forget is you have at least two other matches today. The one before Salgant, and the one after him. Perhaps more. The further along you get, the more likely your opponent will fight rough.”

“I do not think I shall get very far,” admitted Erestor. “I have not trained as well as I might have. I have been a bit distracted.”

To this, Rog smiled. “But she is a good distraction, is she not?”

Fighting the urge to smirk was useless. Erestor nodded. “Beautiful, strong, and intelligent.”

“No need for you to flatter me with such remarks.” Rog stood up and passed by Erestor, leaning down to whisper, “Just take care of her for me, and do not fall in love.”

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“You did well, Glorfindel! Three more points than last year!” Ecthelion hit his palm against the empty spot on the wooden bench he was sitting on. The blond climbed up into the stands and dropped himself down with a huff. It was very early in the games, but Glorfindel was already through for the year. He removed his riding gloves and slapped them down into his lap. “Look at who you were competing against; you did well,” Ecthelion repeated.

“You know, I can never win these things. I do not know why I keep putting myself through this.” Glorfindel leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, forcing himself not to pout in public.

Ecthelion gave him a pat on the back. “If you would only choose something other than chariot
“You are well aware of the fact I could never make it through anything except the equine events,” grumbled Glorfindel.

Sighing, Ecthelion nodded. “I suppose you are right,” he answered, but neither elaborated. The reason, however, was known to them both. With the exception of events where horses or musical instruments were present, all of the competitors were completely naked. This served two purposes—first, no one had the ability to hide anything on themselves that might sway a competition one way or another. Secondly, it gave the eligible young ladies a full view of any strong, hearty bachelors who were available so that no mistakes could be made about them ahead of time. In fact, there was always a parade of the competitors before each event. The displays of showmanship and manliness were quite brazen, and often it was that the groups of maidens in attendance either giggled and hid blushing faces behind lace fans while whispering to one another of their favorites, or whistled and shouted their favors to the competitors. Not everyone liked this rule of the games, but the vast majority of Gondolin did attend them.

“Glorfindel? Oh, it is you!” A cheery voice called out from some ways away, and soon Glorfindel found Aranel standing on his other side in the bleachers. “You truly excelled in that race,” she complemented. “Would you mind if I sit with you?” she implored. “I have no escort, with both father and Erestor readying for the next competition.”

“Please, that would be lovely,” answered Glorfindel, motioning to the empty space. “Ecthelion, have you had the pleasure of meeting Aranel?”

“That I have,” answered Ecthelion, leaning around Glorfindel a little to give a slight bow to the lady. “Did I hear right that your father is in the next competition? I was under the impression that he was competing elsewhere.”

Aranel nodded her greeting to the Lord of the Fountain. “Oh, he is,” she said. “King Turgon insisted, however, that the boxing champion defend his title. He was not made to partake in the preliminary rounds yesterday.”

This new news did not bode well in either Glorfindel’s mind, or Ecthelion’s. The whole of the watchers turned as a trumpet sounded near to the palace entrance.

“His royal highness, King of Gondobar, Gondothlimbar; City of Stone, Gwarestrin-Gondolin; Gar Thruion the Secret Place; Lothengriol, Tower of Guard, Turgon the Great!” shouted a voice from atop one of the towers, and all stood and bowed very low in reverence as Turgon, crowned with garnets in his magnificent attire of pure white belted and adorned with gold passed with the Lady Idril between the two trees at the palace doors and held their place for a moment as the Song of Gondolin was played upon flutes and harps and the very trumpet that sounded his coming.

Once the king reached the royal box, from which he, Idril, Maeglin, and others of his fancy would watch the afternoon and evening games, he took the cone which was used to enhance the strength of one’s voice and shouted into it for his people to hear, “Bring forth, the champions!”

It was the same he would echo for each of the competitions for the rest of the day. The first, however, was always boxing, and from within the palace, one after another as their names were called from the tower, the ellyn emerged and would go either left or right, touching one of the two trees as a sign of gratitude to the Valar and Eru. One was silver, and the other gold, and it was said by some that these were trees that came from shoots of the trees destroyed in Valinor, though this rumor was highly suspect by most scholars in the realm.
Erestor was near to the beginning of the list, and when he came out he turned to the right, his hands touching upon the golden hued bark of Glingol. “Strange, I would have expected him to choose silver, for his house,” said Ecthelion to Glorfindel.

Glorfindel barely acknowledged Ecthelion’s comment. He had seen Erestor disrobed a few times in the years they had lived in Gondolin together, but never had he seen him in such fine shape. Many a wench and lady alike cheered and shouted their approval as he calmly walked beneath the archway of many hued flowers that directed competitors into the arena. “Erestor certainly looks well,” opined Glorfindel, though his mind was filled with a plethora of adjectives, from magnificent to delicious, and even a few that would have made even the rowdiest of the maids widen their eyes.

While Glorfindel watched Erestor, Aranel watched Glorfindel. “Indeed,” she agreed.

Ecthelion, who had leaned to his left to speak to someone in the row behind them, looked now to his right, frowned, and elbowed Glorfindel. Glorfindel snapped his head guiltily to the left, and Ecthelion said, “I think they shall be announcing Salgant soon.”

When Salgant appeared, he was given more applause than the others, but he was also the only competitor who was garnished with boos and hissing as well. His hands, not so chubby as they once had been, but thick and fat all the same, pressed to the silver tree, Bansil, before he proceeded to join the others in the field. Idril was still whistling for him and threw a rose down to the ground near the competitors as Salgant took his place; it was obvious that he had the royal favor as Turgon gave him a bow of his head.

“Figures,” sighed Glorfindel as he watched the exchange.

The trumpet blared again, and from on high came the call of, “Rog, Master of the Army of Gondolin, Lord of the House of the Hammer, Reigning Champion of the Mid-summer Games Boxing Tournament!” Amid renewed fanfare, Rog emerged. With his arms spread out, he managed to touch the boughs of both of the trees, and a great cheer rose from the audience.

Beside Glorfindel, Aranel stood up and was clapping and shouting down encouragements to the field. “Good luck, father! Break someone’s wrist for me!” She was blowing a kiss to him and threw over the heads of those in front of her a bunch of white flowers with a red ribbon around them while both of her companions gave her an odd look.


After a giggle, Aranel explained while she sat down, “I yelled it once when I was a little girl. My mother scolded me for three days, but father did as I asked and it was the first time he won the competition. Now he insists I continue the tradition, for luck.”

Absently rubbing one of his own wrists, Glorfindel said, “I sincerely hope he does not break one of Erestor’s wrists.”

“Oh! Good point,” she said, and standing again shouted loudly, “Not Erestor’s! I need his! Break someone else’s wrist, father!” With the excitement of the crowd dying down now, her voice easily carried over the others in the bleachers, and somewhat stopped any discussion in her area. On the field, the competitors were glancing nervously at one another, even Salgant.

In the royal box, the king stood and walked with amusement to the edge. “Rog, would you like your coach on the field with you?” Laughter rose up from the stands.

Shaking his head, Rog shook a scolding finger at his daughter, but was smiling and broke into
laughter after Erestor said something to him, which caused him to shake the same finger at the
grinning, dark-haired elf on the field.

“I wonder what he said,” mumbled Aranel as the horns sounded for the beginning of the
competition. The first match was between an elf from Duilin’s house and one from the House of the
Mole. Since none of the three knew either of them, nor the pair that would begin fighting in the
second ring, Aranel offered to retrieve some lunch for the three of them while the lords kept watch
on the games.

As the first match ended and the second began, Ecthelion said to Glorfindel, “She seems like a nice
girl. A little strange, but I suppose being raised by Rog would do that to someone. Do you think she
and Erestor will end up binding to one another?”

“Oh, I have a feeling marriage is in their future,” answered Glorfindel, avoiding the actual question
skillfully.

It was not long after that, and Aranel returned. She had with her a basket with two bottles of wine,
bread, cheese, and fruit, and also another ellon. “Look who I found wandering about on the grounds.
I told him he had to join us, and I would not take no for an answer!”

Egalmoth shook his head. “M’lady, as I said, it is quite crowded up here. I do not wish to intrude.”

“I have space on my side; just a moment.” Ecthelion resituated the light cloak he had brought to save
an extra space for Erestor, in case the matches did not go so well for the Noldo. “Sit here,” he said,
motioning to the spot. “Eat with us.”

For a moment it appeared Egalmoth would still decline, but he walked carefully around the others
and sat comfortably down on the bench. Lunch was shared and three more matches were completed
before Salgant and Erestor were announced.

“I hope he gets his ass kicked,” growled Egalmoth as the match began.

“Who?” questioned Ecthelion, but his question remained unanswered.

On the field below, clad in nothing save for a mark of paint on their upper arms to show whose
house they fought for, Erestor and Salgant began the match. In part, Rog’s assessment had been
correct – Erestor possessed a great deal of power, but the rawness of it was untamed, and he lashed
out here and there with less practice. Salgant blocked these attempts and managed to get the only
connection of the first round before a double blast of a trumpet signaled the competitors back to their
own sides.

In the second round, Erestor fared less well, and was struck eight times to the two blows he dealt to
Salgant. He returned to his side panting and sporting a bloody chin and a gash above his eye that was
already beginning to heal itself. Salgant had thus far sustained only bruises.

Rog held conference with Salgant for a minute while Erestor stood alone to the side. A sharp, shrill
whistle came from near one of the gates, and Erestor looked over, as did many, to see young
Laiqalasse standing and motioning to Erestor. Erestor shook his head, for it was banned for the
competitors to leave the field.

“What does he see?” Ecthelion leaned forward and tried to make out what the Sinda was trying to
convey to Erestor. “Something is wrong here.”

Egalmoth was shielding his eyes from the sun, observing Erestor now. “He should not be in such
bad shape, not from those few blows. Salgant does not have such power, not even after training these
past months.”

By now, the king had seen the commotion at the gate, and pointed down to Laiqalasse and said something to one of his guards. The guard disappeared back behind the royal box.

“Oh, please, do nothing stupid,” prayed Ecthelion, but for whom the prayer was for was unclear. The guard ran down along the side of the field to the gate, and spoke with the young ellon for a moment. Unlocking the gate, Laiqalasse was allowed entrance. He ran to Erestor immediately. “Good. I think our friend from Greenwood must have realized he had to claim to be Erestor’s coach to get to him. Smart boy,” he added.

Glorfindel had one arm around Aranel, who was cringing beside him, whispering a prayer for Salgant not to hurt Erestor any more. Whether an act or not, it seemed quite convincing to Glorfindel, and he held her a little tighter in hopes of relieving some amount of her grief, and his own.

On the field, Laiqalasse spoke as fast as he could, knowing they were running out of time until the next round. “In Greenwood, what we do is use hot mithril, mixed with different pigments, and then stab it under the skin while still liquid. It does burn, and removing it is more painful, but it increases the ability to harm someone if used the way I believe he has. Try to get a look at his fists; they will have raised marks on them even if he colored the metallic ink to match his skin.”

“Where did you learn of such a thing?” questioned Erestor.

“The orcs,” replied Laiqalasse in disgust. “It was one of the things that our kin were tortured with; the Silvan clans we brought with us from Laurelindórenan to Eryn Galen perfected the technique as use as a weapon.” As the signal was given for the competitors to return, Laiqalasse said quickly, “Try to dodge him for a while – he will tire as his hands are heavier with the metal in them. I know you want to beat him, but right now you are in danger if you leave yourself open to attack. Keep on the defense.” Erestor nodded and jogged back to the ring, swiping the blood away from his chin with the back of his hand.

By the end of the sixth round, the audience was getting restless. No match could exceed ten rounds, but it seemed this one would if allowed. Since the beginning of the third round, Erestor had done nothing but block and dodge, while Salgant taunted him and threw punches and even tried of few kicks- none of which connected. When, at one point, he decided to simply rush full force at Erestor in an attempt to knock him to the ground, the lithe ellon scurried out of the path. This caused some of the viewers to shout insults such as ‘coward’ at Erestor, who kept calm and focused on the advice Laiqalasse had given him.

In the interims, the Sinda would give tips on techniques to keep Salgant fighting at full force. Not wanting to wait until the final round for Erestor to rally, Laiqalasse whispered for a long while, and all the time Erestor simply nodded again and again. He patted the dark elf’s shoulder and then as Erestor headed back to the ring, Laiqalasse bowed his head and folded his hands.

“Cannot hurt at this point,” mumbled Ecthelion, who was looking more and more upset as the match went on.

“Never know,” replied Egalmoth. “Eru might grant a miracle yet.”

Whether it was Eru’s divine intervention or simply Laiqalasse’s careful instruction was debatable. The very next time Salgant threw a sluggish punch at Erestor, it was blocked. A moment later, the oversized elf found himself sitting on the ground.
“Yes! Go Erestor! Get him!” Glorfindel and Aranel were standing now, as were a number of the other spectators who had at the onset been cheering for Erestor. The dark elf crouched down immediately and swung his leg around, knocking Salgant off-balance.

With a roar of frustration, Salgant rolled back onto his feet and spread his legs to stand his ground. “A lucky shot,” he snarled, and with his head down, tried again to ram into Erestor.

This time, Erestor stood his ground, and with one foot behind him, stuck his shoulder forward and met the impact. His bare feet skidded a few inches, but as that happened, Erestor drew back the arm that was unseen by Salgant and brought it under, meeting his belly with the first hit, and colliding under his chin the second time. Salgant stumbled back a few steps, and as he made to regain his footing, Erestor offered him another uppercut. This sent Salgant to having to defend himself as Erestor landed blow after blow with expert precision. He held back his strength to maximize the number of times he would be able to hit Salgant before the elflord went down.

As the seventh round neared a close, the voice of Laiqalasse rose up over the mixed reaction of the crowd. “Finish it, Erestor!” he shouted. Beside him stood Rog, who looked somewhat pleasantly surprised at the outcome.

The final move of the round was a double roundhouse kick, which Erestor executed swiftly. He caught Salgant in the chest both times, and into the dirt the large elf fell. A cloud of dust rose up and settled back again as Salgant made no attempt to move. He blinked a few times and groaned as the judge gave a final count, then raised Erestor’s hand into the air. From the royal box, a number of roses tumbled down to the ground.

After taking the ribbon from the judge that signaled his move to the next round, Erestor crouched down beside Salgant and offered his hand to the fallen elf. It was taken, but just as they were both standing again, the bruised ellon opened his mouth and spat across Erestor’s face, into his eyes. Letting go and grabbing hold of his face, Erestor was further attacked as Salgant lowered his shoulder and bashed into Erestor. This time he fell to the ground, but Salgant’s revenge was yet complete. Just before Rog and Laiqalasse reached the brawl, Salgant stepped down with his bare foot hard, and every male elf in the arena cringed, as well as most of the ellith, as Erestor let out a scream of agony.

Rog wrapped his arms around Salgant to pull the cursing elf away from the one who was now huddled on the ground, on his side with his legs near his chest. Laiqalasse dropped to his knees and wiped the spittle from Erestor’s face with his sleeve while a girl from the sideline brought a bucket of water to clean out Erestor’s eyes.

The king was not amused.

Teeth clenched and knees shaking, Glorfindel felt Aranel cuddle closer and let out a sob. “Oh, Glorfindel! Take me down to see him! I must see my beloved! How cruel!” A quick look between them told Glorfindel that she knew more about him than he had ever intended for her to. Standing up immediately, he nodded and made his way through the crowd, most of whom were now on their feet.

When they reached the ground and managed to beg their way onto the field, they found Erestor sitting on a stool with a damp cloth in his lap. Laiqalasse was stitching the neglected wound on Erestor’s chin, which had begun to bleed again after Salgant’s attack. “Are you alright?” asked Aranel and Glorfindel at the same time.

“Ughn,” was all Erestor could muster.
At the center of the field, Turgon was now standing before Salgant, shaking a fist at him. Nearby, a guard stood fingering a long, coiled whip.

“Wha’s goin’on?” asked Erestor as he tried to peer around Laiqalasse.

“Sit still a moment,” scolded the Sinda. Nimble fingers tied off the thread before it was cut from the needle with a small knife. “King Turgon said something about ‘fair is fair’ and ‘precedent set’. I think he means to publicly whip Salgant for what he did to you. He attacked after the match was over, and you know the rule about attacking a lord.”

“I have no house any longer,” Erestor reminded Laiqalasse.

The younger elf shrugged. “Apparently, King Turgon thinks different.”

“Nay.” Rog approached them now, shaking his head. “The king has found a worse transgression. Salgant was using an illegal enhancement. When he hit you, did you feel the hard impact? He has mithril under his skin.”

Erestor hesitated and then answered, “Yes, I realized that.” Rog looked surprised, and Erestor stood up. “I have to go stop the king from doing this.”

“What?” Aranel put her hands on Erestor’s shoulders to keep him from standing up. “No! Stay here! He deserves it!” She lowered herself a bit and embraced him, kissing his cheek. “You need to save your strength for your next match later.”

“No. I need to go talk to Turgon.” Erestor took hold of one of Aranel’s hands and kissed it, then stood up. Taking the cloth and tossing it upon the stool, he bit his swollen lip as he walked gingerly to the center where Turgon was motioning to one of the posts used for the jousters and to some rope nearby.

Up in the stands, Ecthelion and Egalmoth were standing with the rest. “What in the name of Morgoth is he doing?” asked Egalmoth.

“I think he plans to save Salgant’s skin,” Ecthelion replied, and then, getting a brilliant, clever, and decidedly evil idea, he added, “again,” then feigned a look of surprise by his own words. Covering his mouth, his wide eyes met Egalmoth’s concerned look.

“What do you mean, again?” Egalmoth snorted angrily. “Erestor covered for HIM?! That bastard,” ground out Egalmoth, glaring at Salgant. “All that time, he made it seem as if it was I who he was ashamed to be seen with, and he did it all to cover his own lies! But why? Why did Erestor do such a thing? They hate one another!”

Feeling the only way to keep Glorfindel safe was to continue with the charade, Ecthelion said, “Who is to know? Erestor is odd like that – he protects anyone he thinks has a case for it. He is sympathetic toward their predicament; a romantic who thinks anyone who wants to be in love should be freely able to show that love.”

“I cannot believe this,” growled Egalmoth. “But it makes sense; Salgant always was a coward. Always had those wild parties in the baths. The thought of it now sickens me.”

Ecthelion waited to see if there would be more said before he offered his thoughts. “It would seem you have made your choice in the matter, friend. Salgant cares only for himself, and perhaps Duilin.” And now Ecthelion paused as he said the words, and a momentarily baffled look turned to one of sudden dawning on Egalmoth’s face. “Gondolin is the real reason we were appointed as lords and captains here, not our own petty wants,” Ecthelion finished quickly.
“I should have allied with you and Glorfindel sooner,” said Egalmoth. “And Erestor,” he added. “My friend, I ask forgiveness.”

“No need. Nothing to forgive. Any actions you took were done with what you believed to be the best interests of Gondolin in mind. You know now the true hearts of those involved, and better choices will be made.” Ecthelion held up one of the open bottles in a toast. “To better tomorrows.”

“Huzzah,” replied Egalmoth as he tapped the other bottle to the one Ecthelion held.

At the king’s side, Erestor made his plea. “M’lord, there is no reason for further violence. No need to sully these games.”

“They have been ruined already by the vile acts of this elf, who needs now to be punished!” Turgon grabbed the whip from the guard, holding it out to Erestor. “When they bind him to the post, twenty lashes. Wait, no. You were given fifty, were you not? Fifty, then, and if it is a few more, I shall look the other way.”

Salgant was shaking now and fought the guards who tried to drag him to the post. “Wait! I knew not that the match was over! I was on the ground and in a daze; I did not hear the count!”

“Your highness,” began Erestor again, placing his hands on the whip, but over Turgon’s so that the king could not release it. “I knew of what he did. I could have ended the match early and stopped the incident that occurred from happening. But I wanted to hurt him, I wanted to put him in so much pain that he would remember it for years. I wanted to embarrass him, and I wanted everyone to see that. That was wrong of me. I entered this competition under false pretense. If he deserves to be whipped, so do I. For making a mockery of these sacred games.”

The king and Erestor stood for a few seconds, observing each other. Finally, Turgon turned his head and signaled for the guards to let Salgant go. Erestor lifted his hands off of the whip. “Salgant, get thyself away from here. I do not wish to see you the rest of the week.”

“But... the minstrel competition this evening...” argued the ellon.

“... will be won this year by someone else,” finished Turgon. “Be glad you are leaving without feeling the kiss of the whip.” To Erestor, the king said, “I do not know what the schedules look like for the next set of matches, but I will be sure that you are not in the quarterfinals. Next year, however, I hope you compete for the right reasons.” Tossing the whip back to the guard Turgon walked away, leaving Erestor alone at the center of the field.

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“Fighting from the black corner, Rog!” Thunderous applause greeted Rog as he entered the area for the match. “Fighting from the red corner, Erestor!” Again, the audience applauded as Erestor took his place. “Bow!” instructed the referee, and the two did. “Begin!” he shouted.

While the matches had been posted that morning, there was a sudden change to the schedule immediately following Salgant’s loss. Erestor and another competitor were switched to different columns, and what resulted was a very happy boxer from the House of the Mole offering apologies to Erestor. For his part, Erestor gave no sign that he would contest the change, and Turgon seemed quite pleased from where he sat and watched.

In the bleachers, spirits were not so high. Gritting his teeth together and trying not to show his worry, Glorfindel found Aranel taking hold of his hand. “Hold me; I cannot bear to watch!” she said, and the blond was thankful for the act for his benefit.
As he wrapped his arms around her comfortingly, he blinked in surprise. “What is he doing?”

Ecthelion made a noise of disgust. “After all that, he kneels? Fuck, no one does that for these games!” Out of habit, his hand wrapped around one of the soft tomatoes that was beneath his bench, like many others were doing. Lifting it up, he turned to Glorfindel and said, “Give me one good reason not to throw this at him.”

“He did just compete only one match ago,” stated Egalmoth, but his own arm dangled down in search of some of the rotten fruit and vegetables that were always provided free of charge at these games.

It was not only the Lord of the Fountain who was irritated; Turgon made known his ire as well. “I do hope,” shouted the king from his seat at the arena, “that there is an explanation for this.”

“Peace. I mean no dishonor to these games.” Standing, Erestor addressed Turgon in a loud voice. “I came to the sudden conclusion that it would be a terrible idea for someone to hit his future father-in-law, though, I suppose he might appreciate getting a few licks in ahead of time.”

“Would you care to elaborate upon that?” prompted Turgon as the audience started to buzz with commentary.

Scratching the back of his head and giving a sideways glance toward the area that Ecthelion and Glorfindel were in, Erestor further said, “I approached Lord Rog this morn prior to the games to ask his permission for the hand of his daughter. I planned to ask her about it in particular after the fights at the celebration this evening,” he said in something of a sheepish tone, “but I think now she may know of it. I did not expect to face Rog in competition, and truth be told, while it may seem an excuse, I feel it is a very valid one.”

Glorfindel felt himself go numb despite the forewarning he had of the situation. He barely registered as Aranel let go of his arm and stood up with a theatrically practiced squeal of joy before daintily making her way through the crowded benches to the ground. She stood at the waist-high blockade of baled hay that fenced off the bleachers from the arena itself, and leaned forward, calling to Erestor.

It took the blond warrior a few extra moments to realize everyone else was standing up or cheering, until Ecthelion shook his shoulder. Of course, Ecthelion had no idea what was secretly going on, and Glorfindel swallowed his emotions, forced a smile on his face, and stood up to applaud along with his friend as Erestor ran over to the barrier and smoothly leaped over it with only one hand on a pile of the bales for balance. The dark ellon lifted Aranel up at the waist, spun her around, and kissed her before the whole of the audience and participants of the games. Aranel said something to Erestor and pointed to the tower. While he headed off to get dressed, she accepted the congratulations of those in the first rows.

Praying that no one took a good look at his awkward expression, Glorfindel fought to keep the happy look on his face despite the fact he felt as if his heart was collapsing in his chest. When Aranel rejoined them, now with Erestor as well, Glorfindel offered his congratulations, and blamed the unexpected stray tears on how happy he was for his friend. Erestor’s response was a questioning look before accepting the well wishes with dignified gratitude.

Watching the rest of the matches kept Glorfindel’s mind focused on something other than his personal thoughts, but he later had difficulty recalling specific fights or moves, other than the fact that Rog had won the competition, and managed to break the jaw of his final opponent, a cocky young archer from the House of the Swallow. Duilin looked more upset that his house had lost than he was about Rog winning, but that seemed to be the way of things. Few were as determined or as strong as Rog.
“I am still unsure if I agree that the trade is a fair one,” debated Egalmoth. “No doubt, your intended is a most charming and beautiful young lady, but do you not think perhaps dealing with her father will offset your gain?”

“Nonsense. My dealings with her father will be no more difficult than the months I spent training in his company,” Erestor assured the elf lord. He paused to drink from the tankard of beer he held in one hand, his other arm around Aranel’s waist for she was sitting on his lap due to the lack of seating available at this point of the day. “You know as well as I that Rog is a reasonable fellow. He only breaks jaws on special occasions.”

Both Egalmoth and Ecthelion laughed at this comment, while Aranel disputed this claim, yet did admit to the number of wrists that had to be mended due to her suggestions to her father. She snuggled against Erestor as much as necessary to be convincing, smiling and rolling her eyes at her future husband’s silliness when he made riddles or wisecracks. Glorfindel pretended to be uninterested as he observed the clearing of the ring and the set up for the final jousts.

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“I will need to go soon,” Erestor alerted Aranel, speaking loud enough for the others to hear. Glorfindel opened his mouth to ask why, but shut it immediately, knowing it was no longer his place to respond to the dark ellon first. The gnawing in his heart returned, and he sought out the bottle of wine.

The elleth on Erestor’s lap frowned and leaned her head on his shoulder. “What for?” she insisted to know, giving Glorfindel a reassuring wink only he saw. It made Glorfindel sigh in temporary relief after he took a long swig.

“The minstrel competition is forthcoming.” Erestor took the opportunity to sneak a pair of kisses onto Aranel’s neck.

“So?”

“So...” Pausing, Erestor rather boldly nuzzled the crook of her neck, putting on a much better show than Glorfindel would have liked to have seen, “I need to tune my fiddle.”

“Tune your... oh! Oh, you are not, surely!” Aranel pulled back to see the grin slowly emerging on Erestor’s face. “Oh, you! You are going to! Oh, I love you!” she squeeked, throwing her arms around his neck.

“You better,” he replied, his own arms pulling her closer.

“You are going to compete in the minstrel competition?” asked Glorfindel softly.

Erestor shrugged. “I was playing and singing for Aranel one night, and she made the suggestion. And how can I say no to this face?” he asked, using his finger to tilt her chin back to face him.

“I see.” Glorfindel folded his hands in his lap, each gripping the other tightly.

“Glorfindel has made the suggestion nearly each year for Erestor to enter the minstrel competition,” explained Ecthelion to Egalmoth. “Every year, Erestor has refused.”

“But not this year,” Aranel said happily as she sat back down, having given Erestor a good luck kiss before sending him off.

Egalmoth chuckled and then said around Ecthelion to Glorfindel, “Funny, how a friend can know
exactly the thing best for someone, and yet it takes an elleth to give him that final push to change his mind.”

Glorfindel did not think there was anything funny about it at all.

Without Salgant in the competition, it was quite obvious that the others who were partaking were putting forth a much better effort than they might have. It was a rare chance that one of them might take the prize this year that Salgant coveted so. By far the best was a cheeky young elf playing a harp, until Erestor strolled into the arena to present his piece.

Who sings the sweetest evening lullabies?
Whose silvery voice reaches out to the stars?
Pride of our people and lord of our bards;
Prince of the harpers and master of the musical arts.

“Who... he... is he doing what I think he is-“

“Shhh!” Ecthelion was hushed by everyone around him, not just those he was sitting with. The elf lord shut his mouth, listening with as much intensity as the rest of the audience.

It would never be argued to be a great song; indeed it was a bit raw in some places. The presentation of it, however, was quite beautiful, and the subject matter was one which both amused and confused members of the audience, as well as the judges. No one had ever chosen to sing of Salgant before, though Erestor had now proved it could not only be done, but it could be done favorably.

“I am not sure what to say to that,” admitted Ecthelion after the applause for Erestor died down.

“I doubt I could be more surprised if someone walked over and slapped me in the face,” said Glorfindel in reply, and Egalmoth gave something of a snort to what he believed was a private joke made in reference to Erestor and Salgant.

There was a lull while the top three were decided upon to return and play once more. As the group sat and chattered about whether or not Erestor would make it to the next round, a young elleth with hair that was dirty blond in color and eyes that were dark blue stepped her way up and through the bleachers. Glorfindel caught sight of her first, waving seemingly at him. He raised his hand in confusion, but the elleth shook her head and pointed discretely to Aranel beside him.

Nudging the elleth, Glorfindel nodded in the direction of the newcomer. Once again, Aranel let out her patented squeal of happiness and stood, stretching her arms out. “Tauni! Get up here and give me a hug!”

The elleth gave a cheeky little look and made her way faster towards them. The ellith embraced, and Glorfindel felt incredibly jealous as he watched them. He knew exactly who she was without ever being introduced. Taking a deep breath, he tried to act as casual as possible.

“Oh, Tauni, I am afraid there are no seats left,” apologized Aranel. “We may need to go to the ground level and stand at the barrier.”

“Oh, Tauni, I am afraid there are no seats left,” apologized Aranel. “We may need to go to the ground level and stand at the barrier.”

“Nonsense. There are many good seats still available. Such as, this one.” The elleth smoothed the back of her dress properly and then sat down on Glorfindel’s lap.

Ecthelion paused in his conversation with Egalmoth immediately, turning in shock to look at Glorfindel and his new companion. In order to cover his reaction, he insisted, “And what is the
“Your lap, sir,” said Tauni, “is too broken-in for me. I like an unused lap, if I can find one.” She wrapped one arm behind Glorfindel’s back as he encircled his about her waist. “Yours will do nicely,” she told Glorfindel.

“Glorfindel,” said Aranel, touching the blond warrior on the shoulder, “this is Tauniel. Tauni, to everyone who knows her.”

“Pleased to meet you,” answered Glorfindel with a polite smile. He did his best to look thrilled over the fact an unknown young lady had decided to perch upon him, and hoped it did not look too strained.

Tauni looked amused at the blond’s unease, but simply made herself comfortable for the second part of the competition and said to him, “Likewise.”
The next forty years were spent keeping up appearances, with Erestor spending the small amount of free time he had either wooing Aranel or secretly teaching Glorfindel how to court Tauniel. The majority of his day was filled with the training and overseeing the newest part of Rog’s army: the cavalry. The one-time scholar found himself in the midst of military life, having moved swiftly up the ranks to captain. So well did he fight with sword, knives, and bow that the small office he kept in Rog’s barracks was in need of another shelf every few years to hold the many trophies and ribbons he won each year.

Glorfindel’s time was spent less and less in the stables and training fields and more and more in his study or haunting the libraries. Less time outdoors had diminished his tan, and his hair was left to grow past the middle of his back so that when he sat without it braided it created a rippling golden pool upon the floor. At first Ecthelion had issued warnings to Glorfindel that his recent behavior was unfit a warrior, but he stopped voicing these concerns after told one day as Glorfindel worked on a particularly difficult mathematical equation from behind his large desktop abacus, ‘Perhaps I do not wish to be a warrior anymore.’

Ecthelion may still have continued to harass Glorfindel about the changes that had taken place, except for one essential fact: Glorfindel spent most evenings strolling in the gardens with Taunii, and it gave Ecthelion great relief to see this change in his friend and comrade.

Tonight, Glorfindel was spending extra time readying himself before dinner. Most nights he ate now in the Great Hall, but not with the other lords. Instead, he found a home at the table of high scribes and scholars, where once he used to see Erestor sit for meals. Subsequently, his companions changed as well – he spent many hours late at night in the company of Pengolodh and Celebrimbor, and at times with Laiqalassë and Galdor. Topics of lore, history, languages, and philosophy were not uncommon, but it was when discussions turned to math, alchemy, and science that Glorfindel was particularly engaged and enlightened.

Sometimes he did see Erestor, but when he did, the dark haired ellon took up residence at a somewhat rowdy table of mid-ranking officers from the various houses. It was infrequent for them to dine together, and only did they do so if Aranel and Taunii were present as well. Now and again Glorfindel did find Erestor at the market, conferring with a vendor who now sold the seeds from the fields he owned. Military ventures gave Erestor little time to tend his own fields, and so he hired others to do it for him, and still made a tidy profit. Most of the time, Glorfindel turned and went round to another pathway rather than try to make conversation in public, for the scientific pursuits which most excited Glorfindel were the ones that seemed to cause Erestor’s eyes to glaze over despite his smiles and nods.

Tonight, Glorfindel was not going to the Great Hall, nor was he planning a trip to the market or an evening with his erudite companions. It was time, he and Taunii had decided, for him to meet her parents, and more importantly, for him to fulfill his part of Erestor’s grand plan. Enough years had passed for it to be more than suitable that he transition from suitor to fiancé. He checked himself over in the mirror again and again before patting the same pocket of his vest that had been checked over and over. The little box was still there. He pulled it out, opened it, and checked the contents. The silver ring was nestled in the small square of fabric that protected it.

On his way through the corridors to reach his destination, Glorfindel passed by Salgant, who looked startled, and then waddled off quickly with his head bowed. The minstrel, ever since the
embarrassing showing at the games, had kept himself scarce. The only time he was heard from was during debates in council regarding the inability of anyone to leave the city. What he once had thought a wonderful idea he now called idiotic and insane. Salgant was now in the process of building a house on some extra land he had, no doubt planning upon residing in it rather than in the tower once it was complete. Duilin had chosen to do the same, and there were times even that the pair of lords once highly engaged in the political arena of Gondolin chose not to attend council at all.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Glorfindel knocked on the door and waited to be admitted. The door opened, revealing Tauniel. Glorfindel supposed that any straight, sensible male elf would be delighted to see the elleth as she thusly appeared. Her hair was swept up and cascaded down her neck and back in a waterfall of curls, and the dress she had chosen revealed bare shoulders and a dipping neckline that gave a view of some cleavage. Glorfindel looked at all of the key spots for what he had been told was the appropriate amount of time, while Tauniel smirked, unseen by her parents. “Please, come in. The halls are so drafty.”

“Thank you.” Glorfindel stepped in, carrying a bottle of liquor wrapped in a velvet sack and a bouquet of calla lilies and chrysanthemums.

“Oh, how sweet. He brought you flowers, and at such a time when they are mostly frosted over,” said the approaching elleth that Glorfindel took to be Tauniel’s mother. She confirmed this with a curtsy and an introduction. “It is so lovely to have you in our house, m’lord. I am Lasivien, and my husband will be out shortly.”

“Please, please, just Glorfindel. Lasivien, a pleasure to finally meet you. As for the flowers,” he said, adjusting things to hold them out to her, “these are actually for you. I wanted to thank you for raising such an enchanting, kind, beautiful daughter.”

“Oh, for me? Oh, Taunos, look,” said Laivien as an ellon who looked a bit uncomfortable in the formal attire he was wearing entered from a side room. “Flowers, and in the dead of winter.”

“Sir,” said Glorfindel in greeting, giving a slight bow of his head. “I am honored to finally meet you, Taunos.”

“Likewise, your lordship,” Taunos answered, bowing his head lower than Glorfindel had.

Uneasily, Glorfindel shook his head. “Please, just Glorfindel. I much prefer my name to my titles. Sir, your daughter told me you enjoy a good brandy; I thought you would prefer that to a bunch of flowers.”

The group had a good laugh at this which relieved the tension somewhat as the bottle was handed to Taunos. “How very interesting. I am not familiar with this type.” He turned it in his hands gingerly, for it was not one of the unmarked bottles from the market which he might have saved up to afford, but packaged in princely fashion, with ribbon around the neck and a brightly painted bottle. The wax alone, poured over the cork to ensure the seal, was likely worth more than a week’s wages for Taunos. “It nearly seems too pretty to open.”

“It was a one-time experiment that Galdor attempted. A great product, but when he found out how long the process took, he vowed never to do it again. A pity, and a promise I hope he does not keep forever,” said Glorfindel. “If you find you like it, so let me know. I can have another bottle sent to you.”

“Oh, sir, one is by far more than enough!” Avisien carefully took the bottle and carried it with reverence to a place of honor on the mantle.
“I was given two entire cases, and am not much for liquor,” Glorfindel admitted. “I prefer a nice glass of wine to savor, or a spiced cider in the autumn.”

“I believe we have some cider left, if you would care for some,” offered Taunos. “My wife spices it herself. I find it brings a fresher taste than pre-seasoned ciders.”

“That would be very kind of you. Thank you.” Glorfindel smiled as a mug was produced by Avisien almost as quickly as Taunos had offered it. He took a deep breath of the steam that rose from the amber liquid and closed his eyes. “I feel as if it is autumn once more.”

“What about my gift? Do I not rate a present?” teased Tauniel as Glorfindel sipped his drink.

Glorfindel regarded her with a look which would have fooled anyone into thinking they were in love. “Yours will need to wait until later this evening.”

“Dinner will be ready shortly,” said Taunos. “Perhaps you and I might wait in the study until then, while the girls see to setting the table.”

Glorfindel nodded, his hand absently touching the bulge in his pocket where the boxed ring was. “Actually, there was a matter I wished to speak to you about.”

The ellyn disappeared into another room. Lasivien gave her daughter a knowing look, and Tauniel grinned giddily before skipping her way into the dining room.

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Glorfindel stood at the double doors of the sub-basement of the tower. While there were pubs aplenty in Gondolin, there was only one place within the tower that boasted all-night access to liquor, smoking, dice, and cards. There were practice dummies in one corner as well, where haughty young officers showed off their perceived strength, and a billiard table that was almost always in use. Glorfindel had never entered the space, and only passed by a few times in all his years spent in Gondolin. There was something about tonight that was keeping him awake, through the brisk walk back to the tower at such a late hour with snow flittering around as he breathed in the crisp winter air.

He looked down at the band of silver adorning his finger. Yes, that was what it was. Tauniel was crafty, he learned tonight, and had not only acquired a silver ring for him, but one that matched the one he had commissioned for her. The light of a trio of candles on a ledge bounced off of it in the dim hallway, and Glorfindel smiled as he turned it to the side. Yes, it was a sacrifice, but it was not as terrible as he thought it might have been. To have Avisien call him son and Taunos slap his back with fatherly approval had filled him with such joy that he hardly wished to leave.

It was Tauniel’s third attempt to cover her yawns that led him to say his goodnights. He went from their home to his stables, and while it was too cold and dark to consider the sort of ride he wanted, he spent time visiting his horses and sharing his news with them until their snorts cued him that he had overstayed his welcome there as well.

And now he was here, standing before doors that used to make him nervous. He laughed at the thought now, and fearlessly shoved both doors open to enter. A trio was singing nearby. Cards were being shuffled, balls hit the wooden lip of the table, and drinks were poured. All sound stopped as Glorfindel strolled in.

Casually, Glorfindel approached the bar, a large circular structure at the center of the room. Until now he had not seen it, and it was impressive and quite beautiful, adorned with crests of the houses, including his own. It seemed that many opted to sit in segregated groups based on these symbols, but
in the segment of the King’s house, Ecthelion, Erestor, and Egalmoth were each nursing a drink and playing a game of dice. They, like the others, were watching Glorfindel as he found a stool under the banner of the Golden Flower. “Are you… lost?” asked Erestor once Glorfindel was seated and looking at the board that hung from the ceiling with the list of beer and wine available.

Glorfindel looked down and grinned. “Mayhaps I am, though whilst I am here, I should make myself useful. A round for everyone!”

Now Erestor propped his chin on one hand, elbow resting on the counter, a smirk gracing his lips. “You do realize there is no charge for beverages here, if your intention was to buy everyone a drink.” He used his free hand to point to the pitcher of dark liquid sitting between himself and Egalmoth.

“And I shall gladly pay regardless,” he announced, and now his banter with Erestor had the attention of everyone at the venue.

“What, might I ask, is the occasion?” prodded Erestor.

Glorfindel folded his hands together and continued to smile. “Do bachelors come here often?”

Erestor furrowed his brow. “I suppose,” he answered.

“Practically my second home,” admitted Ecthelion as he gathered the dice on the counter and dropped them into a cup.

“I have a wife,” Egalmoth stated. “I just come here to reminisce.” A few nearby warriors chuckled or nodded in agreement with the statement.

Glorfindel nodded and looked around. “I guess I should get my time in while I can.” He was met with the stares of three blinking captains. “Someone is getting married,” he said slyly. “I will give you three guesses as to who. Whom? No… eh.” Glorfindel lifted his hand up to show off his ring. “She said yes!” he shouted to everyone who cared to listen, and even a few who were indifferent.

The look of amusement vanished from Erestor’s face, while several officers in the room amassed around Glorfindel to offer congratulations. To his left, Ecthelion started laughing. “Just what is so amusing?” demanded Erestor.

“You started courting Rog’s daughter, what, half a century go?”

“Not quite that long,” defended Erestor. “Twenty, perhaps thirty years.”

“Longer than that,” interjected Egalmoth. “You joined Rog’s Rebels forty-five years and some months ago, and knocked Salgant out at the games a year or so later. That was the same competition you knelt to Rog and announced to everyone your intentions to marry his daughter.”

“So?” Erestor took the pitcher and poured himself another mug of beer.

“So I see no ring on your finger, nor on hers.” Egalmoth poked at Erestor’s shoulder. “Fifty years is a long time to make a girl wait.”

“Some people are bolder than others,” remarked Ecthelion as he raised his glass to a toast being made across the room to Glorfindel and his bride.

Erestor gulped down his drink and set the mug onto the counter. “Fine. I can go do it now. Anyone know of a good jeweler?”
“At this hour?” Egalmoth shook his head. “You can try Celebrimbor; he stays up past his bedtime.”

Ecthelion waited for Erestor to leave before he said more. “That was strange.”

“Mmm… I guess you win upon forfeit,” said Egalmoth as he slid the board he had used to keep score of their game to Ecthelion. He picked up his own mug and looked to the doors as they closed behind Erestor. “I wonder if…” Egalmoth waited for the bartender to pass by before he spoke again. “Something I have noticed about Erestor is that he might be elusive, and he might talk around the truth, but he never lies. In fact, he can be pretty easy to read at times.”

“Go on,” suggested Ecthelion, sensing that was not the end of Egalmoth’s thought.

“What if…” Egalmoth bowed his head closer and lowered his voice. “What if that day in council, what if he was not entirely covering for Salgant? What if he… you know.”

Ecthelion looked about cautiously. At this point, there was a round of ‘He’s a jolly good fellow’ being sung, with Glorfindel on the shoulders of some of the officers of his house, and the noise covered just about anything he would say. “If you are accusing what I think you are, know that it is a serious label to suggest.”

“But what if he is, Ecthelion?” asked Egalmoth. “For the sake of his future wife, I hope it to be untrue, but there are others who pretend. He could be among them. When I asked my wife to marry me, I did not do it with such haste or lack of thought. She was not an afterthought to me. Erestor just acted like he forgot to pick up his laundry.”

Ecthelion frowned. “Erestor is just… Erestor.”

“And probably a homosexual. I may be years beyond holding an active interest in an elleth who is not my wife, but I have eyes. Aranel is a pretty little thing, and she would make a good wife and mother. When she is around Erestor, he plays the game, and when she is not, it as if she is not there at all. I fear he may be using her, and if Rog finds that out…” Egalmoth waited for Ecthelion to refute his words, but Ecthelion only pressed his lips together. “You have your doubts about Erestor, same as I do.”

“I have many doubts about Erestor,” replied Ecthelion, “but there are few others I would trust to stand side by side with in battle. If it comes to it, I would rather have him here with us than six feet under a pile of rocks. While I might share your views to a point, Egalmoth, leave me out of your cleansing war. Is it really worth it to know? What do any of us gain from it? And if you are wrong, what then?”

Egalmoth sat back and turned his glass in his hands. “That attitude tells me you either know he is, or know someone who is.”

“We all know someone who is, Egalmoth. We only need to thank Eru he chose to save us from a life of persecution. As for Erestor - maybe he is,” said Ecthelion waving a hand one way, “and maybe not,” he said as he motioned in the other direction. “He was with an elleth in Valinor, but maybe it was all an act there as you suggest it is here. Do I know?” Ecthelion shook his head from side to side slowly. “Do I care?” He looked at Egalmoth. “What do you think?”

“I think you might be a little drunk.”

“I think you might be a little drunk,” parroted Ecthelion, and Egalmoth raised his glass in salute. “The point is, you, me - we have no reason to worry about this shit. First girl who sits on my lap long enough, I plan to shag her until her bodice bursts. Or… corset… whatever the fuck that thing is,” he
muttered amid Egalmoth’s laughter. “Point being... I have a great life. I can sit out at that fountain and grab the ass of just about any young lady who passes by without so much as an eye roll from anyone. These others who are around... they came here thinking they would be safe, or they were born here unwillingly, and what do we do? Make them live in fear; make them live a life not their own. So I guess that leaves it up to us to decide if we treat those who are what we think they are with respect, indifference, or hatred.” And once said, Ecthelion spoke no more that night.
Glorfindel looked up suddenly as he heard movement from the front of the room and the sounds of someone approaching. Immediately he yanked the reading glasses from his nose and shoved them into the left pocket of his pants, then bowed his head. He concentrated on his work once more, albeit with difficulty now as the words blurred together and letters doubled when he squinted.

The footsteps paused when they reached the table he was working at. “Excuse me, but we closed an hour ago. The staff is leaving for the night as well. You need to leave now, sir.”

Flipping to the index hastily and squinting to try and make out the word he was looking for, Glorfindel mumbled, “I just need five more minutes.”

“Yes, you have said that many, many times since I gave you first warning that we were closing. You need to go now, or I will be forced to call the king’s security.”

Glorfindel looked up, narrowing his eyes. “I thought you librarians lived in your domains.”

“And rumor has it we never retire, we just die.” The librarian crossed his arms over his chest. “If you want, you can leave those there and come back in the morning.”

“All I really still need is this one.” Glorfindel closed the book he had been attempting in vain to read and held it up. “If you would please just check it out to me—“

“No, that is a reference volume. It is library use only.”

“I would gladly use it in the library if you had reasonable hours of operation,” countered Glorfindel. “It makes no sense for you to close early at week’s end and keep the doors locked on the days most people have the time to visit. If you would just check it out to me, I promise I would keep it in good condition and return it immediately when you reopen at the beginning of next week.”

“We have been over this before, sir. You are wasting my time. Reference works stay here. You go now,” added the scholar in a slightly angered tone.

With a snort, Glorfindel slammed the book down on the table and gathered up his notes. “Fine.” Unable to come up with any other response, Glorfindel stomped his way out of the library with the librarian on his heels. The door was promptly locked as soon as he was in the hall. “Bloody stupid jackass,” muttered Glorfindel as he gave the door a good kick. He scuffed it, and turned, checking over his notes as he walked back to the quarters in the tower he was temporarily residing in before the wedding. For some time he had been living in his penthouse above his and Ecthelion's barracks, but it had been Erestor’s suggestion he move back to the tower. The barracks would certainly be no place for Glorfindel's future wife, pretend or not.

His inattentiveness did not alert him to someone coming down another hallway, who was also not paying attention. As Glorfindel turned the corner and collided with Erestor, he was knocked down, papers flying everywhere.

“Oh, goodness me! I suppose that will teach me to walk and read at the same time,” chuckled Erestor, though both of them knew he would continue with that bad habit he had anyhow. After offering his hand to help his friend up, Erestor assisted in gathering all of the sheets together. “Is this part of that secret project you have been working on?” he asked.
“I am so very close to reaching my goal. Trust me, you and everyone else will be amazed when I figure everything out.” Glorfindel counted the sheets to be sure they were all back in his possession.

Erestor adjusted the quiver and bow on his back. “I expect full disclosure soon—everyone is wondering what it is you are working on so intently.”

“In time,” promised Glorfindel, shoving his left hand into his pocket. He wiggled his fingers and frowned as Erestor continued talking.

“I suppose you want to keep things secret so that no one else beats you to your discovery. I can understand that; I tend not to share my poems until they are finished in case someone... is something the matter?” asked Erestor as he watched Glorfindel glance about nervously.

The blond bit his lip, squinting his eyes as he looked around. “Erm... I... I think I lost something...”

“Oh?” Erestor began to look about, too. “What is it?”

“Ahm... uhh...” Glorfindel looked to the place he had fallen down in the hall. “Bloody hell, if I left them back in the library—”

Meanwhile, Erestor had crouched down and was inspecting the area as well. Something against the wall caught his eye, and he picked up the wire frames that held two curved lenses. “Have you been doing a lot of reading by candlelight?” asked Erestor as he held out the pair of glasses.

Glorfindel reddened considerably as he snatched the spectacles and hid them away in his pocket again. “Please, do not tell anyone.”

“You should do your reading in the daytime. Or else, use a lantern or sit beneath a well lit chandelier.”

“If the library offered any of these, I would,” said Glorfindel grumpily. “But that stupid git refuses to let me take the books that I need, so I am forced to work in those horrible conditions.”

“Ah. I see.” Erestor took a step closer and asked, “Why not just take the book you need?”

“What? Steal it?”

“Yes.”

Glorfindel laughed uneasily and looked around to be sure no one could hear them. “You really do have a criminal mind.”

“No, no,” argued Erestor. “I always return them later.”

“So you have done this before?”

“Many times.”

“Ai.” Glorfindel shook his head. “Somehow, I would be unable to manage such a thing.”

“What is the title of it?”

After a long pause, Glorfindel said, “I would not want you to get in trouble. Not on my account; you have done more than enough for me already. I am still in your debt from before.”

“Consider all debts repaid,” offered Erestor. “Now, the title of the book?”

Erestor nodded. “Consider it done,” he said, giving Glorfindel a hearty pat on the shoulder.

“Ow!” Glorfindel rubbed his shoulder and hissed.

“Sorry.” Erestor stepped back. “Did I really hurt you?”

“Just a little. You are really strong now; you have to be careful with me. My recent bookishness has made me become fragile.”

At first Erestor laughed, but he killed it with a cough when he saw from Glorfindel’s expression that his friend was not lying. “We have changed much, you and I.”

“Aye. I am sorry I never completely fulfilled my part of the bargain,” said Glorfindel. “You became a soldier without my aid.”

“Untrue. You laid the foundation, just as I could never have instructed you in science and mathematics, but I did pave the way for it.”

There was a long silence until Glorfindel asked, “So, are you ready for the wedding?”

To this, Erestor smiled. “Of course I am. You?”

Glorfindel nodded. “Having them both on the same day is much more economical.”

Erestor rolled his eyes and smiled. They both knew the reason that Tauniel had come up with the ‘most wonderful plan’ of holding a double wedding had nothing to do with economics. “Your future wife is a clever little thing.”

“That she is,” replied Glorfindel. “Well, I suppose I should leave you be. No doubt you have much work to do tomorrow.”

“We graduate another group of recruits in the morning. Are you coming to the ceremony?”

Glorfindel’s gut reaction was to say no, for he had lost the desire to partake in the pomp and circumstance of military celebrations, but instead he nodded. The thought of seeing Erestor dressed in his uniform and riding magnificently atop his horse sent a delightful chill through Glorfindel and caused goosebumps to appear unseen on his arms and legs. “Eru willing, I will be there.”
“Normally,” said a sudden, familiar voice, “I exact a toll for this sort of thing. However, I believe this one time I will allow it to slip.”

Glorfindel looked sheepishly up at Ecthelion, who was hovering over the pair of lovebirds in the courtyard. Tauniel laughed and buried her head against Glorfindel’s shoulder, but her embarrassment was false. With a wink at Glorfindel as he kicked a stone into a small fluffy snow bank that gave the barest proof it was winter, Ecthelion rounded the fountain and continued on his way to the council chambers.

“Psst! As you were, soldier,” teased Tauni quietly so that no one could hear her. It took Glorfindel a moment to realize what she meant. Once again they were lip-locked, holding one another in a passionate embrace. People passing by pretended to ignore them, but it was difficult to do so. It was rather indecent for them to act in such a manner; the lord of a great house and his soon-to-be-wife and lady, but they wanted no one to doubt their relationship.

“So, when you kiss me, who do you imagine you are kissing?” whispered Tauniel into Glorfindel’s ear as he kissed her slender neck.

“Does not matter,” Glorfindel mumbled against her pale skin as his hands lifted her up onto his lap.

A bell tolled some distance away, and Tauniel sat back and wrapped a long wisp of Glorfindel golden mane around her fingers. “Sounds like your council meeting is being called to order.”

“That it is.” He tried to stand up, but her fingers holding onto his hair caused him to be yanked back down again. “I need to go now,” he said, gently untangling his hair from her fingers as she reached her other hand out to snarl into the other side. “Stop that,” he said, shaking his head. “You are going to make me late.”

“Then answer my question.” Tauniel extricated her fingers, but refused to leave her perch upon Glorfindel’s lap. “You kiss me with a great deal of passion,” she whispered. “It nearly feels the way it does when Aranel and I kiss.”

Glorfindel looked away and prodded Tauniel from his lap before standing up. “I must take my leave.”

“Oh, and you think it that easy, do you?” Tauniel followed on Glorfindel’s heels, past the glorious fountain, down the path that led out to the main road. “Look, you! I am not about to leave you be until I get an answer!”

Turning on his heel so that Tauniel walked square into him, Glorfindel smirked and said, “Persistent, are we?”

“Brutel!” accused Tauniel, her fist hitting against Glorfindel’s chest. A crunching noise surprised them both, and from his vest pocket, Glorfindel pulled an empty wire frame, followed by chunks and shards of glass. “Whoops.”

Glorfindel took hold of Tauniel’s hand, pulled her fingers until her palm was flat, and deposited the remains of his glasses into her hand. “I need a new pair,” he said in a rather unhappy voice as he pushed her fingers closed over the smashed spectacles.

“All you had to do was tell me who it is,” sulked Tauniel as she shoved the pieces into her pocket.
“You would think, two weeks to our ‘wedding’, you might not keep any secrets from me.”

Glorfindel took hold of her hands and drew her close. As crunching footsteps nearby could be heard, he whispered softly into her ear, “Him.”

“Huh?” Tauniel tried to scan the area over Glorfindel’s shoulder, but she was spun around so that her back was pressed to Glorfindel’s chest, and he had one arm tightly around her waist. Not far away, one of Rog’s officers stolled by, a book in his hand as he walked.

“Erestor!” Glorfindel waved his arm in the air to catch the attention of the captain as he crossed the courtyard.

“Glorfindel, you are going to be late for the council meeting!” shouted Erestor back as he continued on his way instead of backtracking to reach his friend, not needing to look up from his book.

Tauniel waited until Erestor disappeared past the side of a building. “Well, well. I should have seen that coming. That makes so much sense. So the two of you—“

“He does not know.”

Tauniel turned in Glorfindel’s arms. “Does he know about you?”

“Yes.”

Tauniel’s eyebrows rose when Glorfindel did not elaborate. “Well?”

“He is not like that.”

“Are you sure?” Tauniel placed a hand upon Glorfindel’s cheek. “Because according to the rumors I heard—”

“What rumors?” Glorfindel’s mood darkened and he gripped Tauniel’s arm. “What did you hear, and from whom?”

“Shhh…” Tauniel looked around to be sure no one was close enough to hear them. “At my sewing circle, everyone loves to gossip. I think it was Gwaeleth who brought it up first.”

“And who is Gwaeleth?” pressed Glorfindel. “Which house does she come from?”

“Gwaeleth is Egalmoth’s niece.”

The bell tolled for the second and final time, and Glorfindel stepped back and ran a hand through his hair. “I would not be surprised if Egalmoth himself was trying to sabotage Erestor’s life. Know this - I know Erestor better than almost anyone else in Gondolin, and he is not like that.”

“Did you ever ask him?”

“This conversation is over,” hissed Glorfindel.

“Perhaps I should ask him.”

“I forbid you to do that.” The warning look Glorfindel gave his betrothed made her roll her eyes. “Promise me.”
“As if I would say something.” Tauniel gave Glorfindel a gentle shove in the direction of the palace. “Go on. We cannot have you late for your meeting.”

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“The first order of business,” announced Turgon as the council doors closed and Glorfindel slid into his place at the very last moment, “is to install the newest member of this council. I suppose this is more of a reinstallation.”

Glorfindel turned his head just as everyone else did to watch Erestor stand up from a seat that had been placed behind Rog. Nearly everyone, including the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower, wore surprised looks on their faces. Erestor stood before Turgon, saluting the King as was proper for a captain greeting his general. “Sir. It is good to be called upon for such a duty of honor once again.”

Turgon gave a small nod and spoke loud so that even the pages and maids listening at the doors could clearly hear his words. “Lord Penlodh’s prestigious house has far surpassed double the size of any house here. Not even Egalmoth’s houses are of such degree as Penlodh’s. A decision has been made, for Egalmoth’s houses to be condensed once more as one house. Because I still believe our numbers bless us, twelve houses there shall be. Lord Penlodh, name your second house.”

“From the House of the Pillar shall rise the House of the Tower of Snow, appropriately befitting this season upon us,” announced Penlodh, his smooth tenor flowing in a soothing manner.

“Whom will you choose to lead your house in your stead?” asked Turgon, using a ceremonial air.

“I honor a tradition of old, to pay my respect upon those who aided me. In days of old, when only stars shined across the heavens, a brave elf took the initiative to be the leader of those who are proud to call themselves Noldorin. His name was Tata, and among those he awoke was an Elda named Pendreth. Pendreth was my grandsire, and today I repay my debt to heir of Tata.” Penlodh brought forth a staff, identical to his own. It was a base of silver, with ivy of gold chasing up to the top where a deep red ruby was embedded. “The blessings of Eru be upon you, Erestor, Steward of my house.”

Applause erupted throughout the council as Erestor smiled and took the staff, bowing to Penlodh. Turgon motioned the dark ellon to him and spoke words only for his ears before Erestor took his place at council between Penlodh and Egalmoth, sitting in the front row, directly across from Salgant.

“Well, now that we have that settled, let us get to the issues. I believe Galdor wished to bring forth an item of new business?”

At his place, Galdor stood. Behind him sat his steward, Laiqalasse, his designee in case he should need to leave early and miss a vote. The blond lord shuffled some papers that were before him and took a sip of water from his glass. Someone in the chambers coughed. It seemed out of place for Galdor to act nervous, for he was second only to Turgon in his boldness. Finally, he spoke. “I propose to make an amendment to the current gate rules. Section two of the document states, and I quote, ‘Whoever doth enter shalt not leave, and he who doth tryeth escape woll therefore be sentenced to death.’ I propose to add a sentence to follow which shall read, ‘If a challenge upon thy sentence be made, thou shalt have trial before this council to determine the due course of action.’ In light of certain events which have plagued my mind, I think this the best solution to prevent any other tragedies from occurring.”

“To the floor for discussion,” offered Turgon. It was Erestor’s hand that was up first, and next he stood to speak.
“If I am recalling correctly, the Charter of Gondolin still bears the words, ‘Above all, the voice of the King is the law’, correct?”

“Aye, it does,” offered Laiqalasse, who had one of the few copies of the charter unfurled upon his desk.

“Then, ultimately, the King’s rule would still be the final judgement upon this or any matter?” asked Erestor. Galdor nodded. “Thank you.”

As Erestor sat back down, Ecthelion lifted his hand. “I understand the concern, but does the outcome of one incident make it necessary to alter such a perfect document? There seems no reason to burden the council with trials. We should simply follow, as always, what our King commands.”

Salgant made a snide remark to Duilin, who snickered and shook his head. Turgon frowned upon seeing the exchange, but it was something that was happening all too often for him to interrupt a meeting every time one or the other felt like acting childish.

Penlodh was voicing his concern over the possibility that other rules might be altered when a door into the chamber burst open. A wide-eyed page rushed forth while a bedraggled soldier wearing the colors of Dorthonion followed stoically behind. The page spoke to Turgon while the council members murmured to one another.

Finally, Turgon stood, and victorious was the look upon his face. “Soon, my friends, we shall have need to hide no more! A messenger has been sent, from the lands of Dorthonion and from my father, upon the wings of an eagle. Morgoth the Terrible brought forth upon our kin in other lands a siege of demons and fire, and though our losses were great, we have not given up! As I speak, my father rides to Angband, to slay Morgoth once and for all! A day of celebration shall be had! Make haste to the courtyard!”

Cheers rose up, but Erestor bit his lip and furrowed his brow. He began to speak, but too many others began to announce their congratulations.

The messenger, still caked with blood and dirt, cut through the room and came directly to Glorfindel as the council began to break apart. “I beg your pardon, sir, but you look familiar to me. Do I know you?”

‘I look familiar because you could well be looking into a mirror,’ thought the blond, but instead he merely shook his head and frowned. “I highly doubt it.”

“Are you sure? It... it just seems I know you. Forgive the interruption.” The soldier turned away, but just as quickly he turned back. “Is it possible you were ever in Dorthonion? My father was Angrod, perhaps you knew him?”

“Was Angrod?” An odd feeling churned Glorfindel’s stomach.

“Yes.” The young ellon bowed his head for a moment. “My father and my uncle Aegnor were both killed at the onset of the battle. Did you know my father?”

“Briefly,” said Glorfindel quietly. He blinked to stave off his tears – not for his deceased father, but for his mother, whom he knew had faded if she had not been killed in battle. “I am sorry to hear of your loss.”

“It was more difficult losing mother.” The ellon needed to take a moment to collect himself, which gave Glorfindel time to cover a few tears he was unable to chase off.
“I imagine so. I... I knew Eldalôtel, your mother, as well. She... she was a... very kind lady. Again, I am sorry.”

The soldier seemed to want to ask or say something more, but also appeared to have some way of knowing that Glorfindel would deny whatever claim might be made. It was an internal war that lasted as a few more tears were dried. Finally, he said, "If you ever meet an Elf by the name of Anglorel, will you give him a message? You see, he was my brother, perhaps still is, but I never really met him. I was very young when he left. My parents never told me about him, but my sister did. If you meet him, will you let him know his brother and sister are well?"

With a nod, Glorfindel set his jaw and blinked rapidly, and then nodded again.

"You see, our sister was sent to the Falas, where she is being protected, and I am going there as soon as I am done here. She, her husband, and I are going to be there. He should know that, so that he does not worry, in case he still cares about us."

"I am certain he does," replied Glorfindel, so close, and yet so far from his family. "I will be sure to tell him, if I happen to see him. He will be relieved to know that you are all safe. I am sure he misses you very, very much."

"Thank you."

Glorfindel watched the messenger walk away, battling the emotions within. There was a part that rejoiced that he would never again have fear that he might see his father, while another part wished their relationship might have been mended. To learn of his mother’s death was a harsh blow, but to see his brother, grown, alive, and well, was a great relief, as was knowing his sister's fate. He still wished he could have said and listened more, but it was far too dangerous to do so, he realized with remorse.

He felt something poke his shoulder and turned to find Erestor. The dark elf nodded his head to the doors, and Glorfindel followed Erestor out of the room and down a hallway until the joyful camaraderie was vaguely audible. “I wish I could simply give you time to grieve and reflect, but what has happened is much more serious than perhaps it seems.”

“What do you mean?” asked Glorfindel.

Erestor looked around to be sure no one else was around, and even then, his voice was soft and low. “There is no possible way for Fingolfin to fight Morgoth and win. The mission is suicide.”

Nodding, Glorfindel said, “If Fingolfin brings an army, that is another thing, but it sounds as if he plans to battle Morgoth alone.”

“He cannot win, even with an army. We should be preparing here for war now, in case Morgoth finds us, but Turgon still believes the city completely hidden. There is another item that I am now pondering,” admitted Erestor.

“That is?”

“If Fingolfin dies, who becomes High King?”

“Fingon,” answered Glorfindel almost immediately.

Erestor shook his head. “Fingon has no heirs and never will.”

“How do you know that?”
“Because his lover cannot bear children,” answered Erestor with a wry smile. “I worked with Fingon once, many years ago. We talked about his lifestyle; he was the first person I knew who was open about his preferences. He is not only in love with another man, but that other man is his cousin. He has no plans to have children, and there is an expectation of a line of succession. The title may pass further along, all the way to Turgon.”

“Would it surprise you if I said I hope of the two that Fingon is crowned King?”

Erestor did not answer, he only looked about. “Changes, my friend. They are coming, and we must be prepared.”
“A few minor problems have arisen.”

Erestor furrowed his brow as he turned to the door. “Why do I get the feeling these problems are not as minor as you would have me believe?”

Dressed in his finest—the blue, silver, and white that designated him as both head of the military and keeper of the sixth Gondolin gate—Ecthelion scratched at the paint peeling from the molding around the doorway. “The official ministrant still keeps his vigil over his father’s body and refuses to come down to perform the ceremony.”

“He said that to you?” asked Erestor.

“Not in those words, but I think my explanation is a little friendlier than the words he used,” Ecthelion said carefully.

Momentarily, this seemed to dampen Erestor’s spirits. The captain simply shrugged as he turned back to Laiqalasse, his designated elf of honor for the marriage, and continued to ready himself for the day. “Then we shall need to find another to perform the rites. What are the other issues?”

“The wedding cake was accidentally dropped on its way to the hall. Not only is it destroyed, but there is an attempt being made to scrub the evidence from the carpeting before the event occurs.”

“I never liked wedding cakes myself. Too sugary. I hated the design, too,” he remarked, referencing the fact that half of the cake was decorated with yellow flowers and ivy leaves atop snowy white icing, while the other half was dark chocolate with blood red roses and swirls of black piped around the base. “I suspect there is something that can be done to replace it somehow?”

“The bakers are scurrying around in an attempt to do so.” Ecthelion nearly managed to get a sliver in his finger from his worrying of the wood, so he folded his hands before him and said, “There is one other item of greater importance.”

“Oh?”

“Glorfindel is ill.”

Erestor smirked. “Because he is young, and one would expect him to get marriage jitters. It will be alright; I shall speak with him before the ceremony. I am sure our brides are going through the same thing.”

“No, I think Glorfindel is more than nervous. I truly think he is sick. He is in bed, writhing in pain, clutching his stomach. When I suggested calling a healer, he refused vehemently. He will not answer my questions, and when I told him about Turgon and the cake, he told me we should cancel and reschedule for next year. I had no idea what to do, except to come to you.”

Unfastening the ceremonial sword from his hip, Erestor placed it upon the bed and turned once again toward Ecthelion. “He is in his room?” asked Erestor. Ecthelion nodded.

Erestor took long strides across his quarters, passing by Ecthelion as he went. “See if you can find a Sedryner minister or something,” he said, to which Ecthelion responded with, “Sure, give me the impossible task.”
Laiqalasse was on Erestor’s heels as he walked briskly down the halls to another wing entirely. “Do you think we might need to postpone?” offered the younger elf.

“No. I think Glorfindel is just being dramatic,” mumbled Erestor with a sigh. The last few days had been full of complaints of headaches, stomach cramps, and fevers, all of which the dark haired ellon had brushed off. He came to the door of his friend and rapped on the wood before trying the knob and finding the door unlocked.

Glorfindel was still in bed, as Ecthelion had described, doubled over and clutching his belly. “Oh, no, none of this. Come on, get up,” Erestor insisted, grabbing hold of one of Glorfindel’s feet and shaking it. A whimper came from the bundle of blankets. “Fin?”

Wincing, Glorfindel sat up, drenched in sweat. “I feel like I am dying,” he moaned.

“You look terrible,” remarked Laiqalasse, standing beside Erestor with his arms crossed.

Erestor sunk down onto the bed and placed his hand upon Glorfindel’s moist forehead. “You are a bit warm,” he admitted. “Where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere, but mostly here;” he said, still holding his stomach. “And my back hurts, too.”

“Alright, lie down.” Erestor scratched his chin and looked around for a cause. “Have you been drinking much lately? Did you eat something down at the lesser market?”

“No, nothing. I can barely eat,” groaned Glorfindel.

“It could be a pulled muscle or something of that sort,” suggested Laiqalasse, but again, Glorfindel shook his head.

Looking around the room, Erestor saw the freshly pressed garments for the impending ceremony and the small box of personal items still waiting to be moved to the new rooms Glorfindel would share with Tauniel. “The guests are already assembling. We need to get you bathed and dressed. Laiqalasse, can you go to the kitchens and see if there is some sort of soothing tea or healing herbs that you can bring?”

“Sure.” Laiqalasse headed for the door, but then stopped and came back. “Erestor, about the minister... well, I could always try to perform the ceremonies if you want me to. I have never performed one, but if it comes to it, I meet the qualification.”

“I know that, but if you and Galdor want to keep your sway in council, it may be best for you not to appear as a religious extremist,” said Erestor.

“Extremist?” Laiqalasse laughed at this. “I would take that risk; I think you overestimate the negative perception of my beliefs.”

“Overall, the population would side with you, yes. In council, it is a different matter.”

“Still, it is a risk I would take.”

With a nod, Erestor turned his head. “So be it.”

Laiqalasse smiled a little. “Thank you. Now, which of the ceremonies is to be first, so that I can prepare?”

“They are to happen simultaneously.” Erestor moved to the tub to check the temperature of the
water, and then added drops of oil into the bath.

“That would not be proper,” Laiqalasse replied. “The prayers must be spoken for each individual couple. It is the way the blessings are done in every ceremony.”

Walking back to the bed, Erestor coaxed Glorfindel to sit up again. “That is the way we want it to be.”

“You should tell him,” mumbled Glorfindel.

Laiqalasse frowned and came closer again. “Tell me what?”

Erestor chewed his lip for a moment, and then sighed and lowered his voice. “There is a bit of deception going on. It is not Aranel and I who are getting married or Tauniel and Glorfindel, but rather Aranel and Tauniel.”

“I see,” said Laiqalasse after a pause. “So, the two of you are just the stand-ins, to make it look convincing. There does seem to be a flaw in your plans, chiefly, the two of you.”

“We will work that out later,” Erestor said hastily. “Knowing what you know now, are you still willing to perform the marriage?”

Laiqalasse nodded without hesitation. “When I chose my path and began to minister, I did so knowing that things like this could happen. I am glad you told me ahead of time; I will adjust the ceremony accordingly.”

“No one else must know,” warned Erestor.

“I assumed as much,” answered Laiqalasse. “I will go to the kitchens and see what I can find to ease your pain, my friend,” he said to Glorfindel, who was huddled on the bed.

Once Laiqalasse had gone, Erestor helped Glorfindel to sit once more. “We need to get you cleaned up,” he said, pulling the linen nightshirt up over his companion’s head. Glorfindel promptly flopped over onto his opposite side, arms crossed over his hips. “Glorfindel, I am going to ask you something. I am only asking once, and I expect an honest answer. It will not anger me to hear the truth, but I will be upset later if I find out you lied to me now. Are you trying to find a way to stop the wedding from happening?”

Glorfindel whined softly, and shook his head. “No. I wish I felt better. I am not backing out. I just feel terrible!” Tears began to fall, and Glorfindel was drawn up into Erestor’s arms.

“Alright, alright, I am so sorry, my dear, dear friend. I had to ask—you understand, I hope,” crooned Erestor, and Glorfindel nodded against him. “You are so dear to me, Glorfindel, and it would upset me greatly to find that you were only doing this for me.”

Glorfindel turned his head just slightly and looked up. “I thought you were doing this for me.”

“Right,” said Erestor after an unexpected pause. “For Aranel and Tauniel as well. Here; let us get you to the bath. It may make you feel better.”

“Is it warm?” asked Glorfindel, teeth chattering. “The air is a bit chilly now.”

Confusion set in as Erestor checked Glorfindel’s temperature once more and found his face and temples were cool to the touch. “When I arrived, you were burning, and now... I wish you would allow me to call a healer!”
“No, no healers. The last time this happened, I was laughed at. They told me it was all in my head.”

“The last time?” Erestor was aiding Glorfindel to the tub, hoping the water had not cooled overly much. “This has happened before?”

“About ten years ago,” confirmed the blond as he sunk down into the water with a shiver. “Feels like ice.”

“You should have gotten in earlier when it was still warm,” Erestor half-scolded. “Wait here, I will be right back.”

“Where do you think I am going to go?” wondered Glorfindel, sinking down into the water until it covered his shoulders and lapped against his chin. He squeezed his eyes shut as he felt another sharp pain in his middle and willed himself not to cry again.

Erestor returned soon, as promised. “I asked a maid to bring hot water to add to the bath. Ecthelion was in the hallway, and I told him we found a minister, so he is going to calm the masses and let them know there will only be a slight delay. The bakers solved the cake issue, but it is a bit odd what they have done. They are using chocolate cake for the bottom layers and cheesecake for the middle, with glazed strawberries atop. There is no time to decorate a cake properly, so this is the best they could do. It will be... different,” decided Erestor.

“Cheesecake? Have I had that before?”

“You tell me,” said Erestor as he located the shampoo and set it at the ready for when the water arrived.

“I do not think so.”

“Then we had best make you presentable, or it will remain that way.”

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“If Laiqalasse is presiding, who is your elf of honor?” asked Ecthelion.

Erestor squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed the back of his neck. “I have no idea anymore. I tried to find Rog, but that makes no sense. He has to give away his daughter and I... asking someone this late is terribly inconvenient and seems like a poor afterthought. ‘I thought about you, but not first’.”

“What about Egalmoth?”

“Oh... is that really a good idea? Egalmoth always seems like... he seems odd around me. Nice, but odd.” Erestor looked over his shoulder as Glorfindel groaned in the room behind them. Slipping into the hallway, Erestor shut the door and shook his head. “I have no idea if there will even be a wedding today, with the state he is in.”

“You have a courtyard full of guests, a kitchen staff rushing to make a cake in time, and Laiqalasse having a grand time mingling with non-believers. I am not going to be the one to go out there and call things off,” said Ecthelion.

“If it comes to it, I will do it. No one likes me anyhow.” Erestor crossed his arms over his chest. “What about Egalmoth... I do not know. I hate to establish an alliance like that.”

“Why? What is wrong with him?”
“Nothing, nothing. Would it hurt Penlodh’s feelings? Of course not, he really hardly knows me, but protocol... well, again, it would be rude, so short of notice.” Erestor paced in front of the door, and then stopped. “Shit, I... I need to find Egalmoth.”

Ecthelion blocked Erestor from going any further into the hall. “No need. I already asked him on your behalf. He was pleasantly surprised. He is getting ready and will meet us in the grand foyer. Do you think there is any chance Glorfindel will be ready in the next hour? Everyone is being more than patient, but at some point we are going to have some antsy, hungry guests, especially the children.”

“We will be down soon. One way or another.” Erestor went back into Glorfindel’s room and closed the door behind him. On the edge of the bed was a tray with a kettle on it, filled with raspberry leaf tea. He poured a cup and took it to the tub that Glorfindel was still in and knelt down beside it. “Try drinking a little of this. We need to get you ready, and soon. Everyone is waiting and we are losing light. Are you feeling any better?”

Glorfindel shook his head no, and took the cup in his hands. “I am so sorry for ruining today.”

“You have not ruined it, you only delayed it. We will get there, I promise you that.” Erestor coaxed his friend into drinking the entire cup, and then refilled it. “Laiqalasse told me that according to the ladies in the kitchen, this is the best remedy for cramping. It should help you relax. Do you think you pulled a muscle?”

“Maybe, but it never hurt like this before.” Glorfindel drank the second cup thankfully, for it warmed him and after a few minutes did seem to help. “How late are we?”

“Never mind that. I am going to ready your clothing so that the minute you are up to the task we can get you dressed and down to the courtyard.”

“Actually, I think I might be able to right now. The sooner this is over with, the sooner I can return to bed,” reasoned Glorfindel.

Erestor nodded and aided Glorfindel from the tub, then helped to dry him off and braid his hair. After getting dressed in the formal, layered outfit that was vibrant with the greens and golds of his house, Glorfindel sat on the edge of the bed sipping what was left of the tea while Erestor laced his boots. “Ready?” he asked, putting his hand on Glorfindel’s knee when the last leather strap was tucked into place.

With a slight nod, Glorfindel stood up, and Erestor joined him. Daring the possibility of revealing his secret, Glorfindel placed his hand upon Erestor’s shoulder. “You look absolutely stunning,” he said, moving his hand away in such a manner that his knuckles brushed against a few stray strands of ebon hair.

Erestor studied Glorfindel’s face, lips parted slightly. Glorfindel drew his tongue along the edge of his teeth, then held his breath as Erestor continued to stand so close, simply watching, perhaps waiting for more words. Then he turned his head away, almost bashful, and cleared his throat. “Well, thank you, but I feel drab compared to your natural radiance.” Erestor went to the door to open it, missing the wide grin on Glorfindel’s face after giving the compliment. “Well, our brides await us. Terrible to say, but unlike most grooms on their wedding day, my heart is sadly not aflutter with thoughts most passionate. How dreadful, and yet, how true.” He opened the door fully and stepped into the hall, waiting for Glorfindel to follow.

The pair arrived in the courtyard nearly ten minutes later, after Erestor stopped in his rooms, only to find the sword he had left hours ago was no longer there. It concerned him, but he was thankful to be greeted by Ecthelion, Egalmoth, and the missing weapon some minutes later. “Sorry, I thought you
would forget it,” apologized Ecthelion as the ceremonial blade was snatched away.

“A likely story. I think you were holding it for ransom,” Erestor teased as he straightened his clothing one final time. “How agitated are the guests?”

“You had best have a LOT of wine,” suggested Egalmoth.

“I hope we do. I expect to be in need of some myself,” Erestor said. He nudged Glorfindel. “Last chance to run for the hills.”

“Hmm? Oh, yes... no, um... what?”

“Sounds like someone is a little preoccupied with his impending wedding night,” joked Egalmoth. Glorfindel blushed crimson while the other three laughed heartily. “Well, then, here it is. Are you walking in together, or separately?”

“Together, I think,” said Glorfindel at the same time as Erestor said, “I can go first.” They all laughed, and Erestor bowed briefly toward Glorfindel. “I defer to you, being the younger and obviously more eager member of the grooms’ party.”

Again, Glorfindel felt his cheeks burning. “I think it would be less intimidating to walk in together, side by side,” he managed without stuttering.

“A united force, with the two of us behind. I like that.” Egalmoth nodded. “Best to hurry, though, before the guests decide to skip the wedding and start the reception.”

The quartet had been standing in a covered, curtained gazebo that led down a path to an altar at the front where a small group of musicians tirelessly played. Laiqalasse stood at the ready, his book open in his hands, smiling cheerfully despite the fact it was taking an awfully long time to begin. There was another path leading to the altar, connected to a second gazebo. No doubt, two blushing brides waited therein to begin the ceremony.

With Glorfindel at the left and Erestor to the right, they exited their sanctuary, marching up to the platform with Ecthelion and Egalmoth trailing behind them. Once all four were positioned at the front, the music stopped briefly. The guests rose as one as the song ‘Lady of Starlight’ began, and two veiled ellith appeared from the gazebo, stepping gracefully down the path.

Somehow, Glorfindel managed to stay in a bit of a daze through the entirety of the wedding until he received a nudge from the ellon standing to his right. “Take the rings from Ecthelion,” Erestor muttered in a very, very low voice, his lips hardly moving. Fumbling for the box that was held out to him, Glorfindel smiled his thanks to Ecthelion before lifting the cover. Two golden rings shined in the setting sunlight. One was smaller than the other, and more ornate, and this one Glorfindel took carefully from the box.

“Aranel and Tauniel, stand before me and with witness from Manwë and Elbereth, and His majesty, Eru, speak true these words. I swear to forevermore cherish my beloved, to love, and to be loved; to honor, and to be honored; to share with my life and if it be so, my death.” Laiqalasse waited for the pair to repeat the words, and for the golden rings to be placed upon their fingers.

Then, the Sinda looked to Erestor, and then to Glorfindel. Tauniel slipped the box from Glorfindel’s hands, allowing him the chance to clasp his hands in prayer. The vow was stated to them, and each repeated it synchronously.

As two more golden rings were exchanged, Laiqalasse announced, “From this moment forth until the end of all and beyond, you are, in the eyes of the Valar and Eru Himself, bound to each other.
Erestor, Glorfindel... you may kiss your brides.”

Now, more than ever, Glorfindel had to look convincing. He and Tauniel had spent days in secret practicing this moment. Slowly, Glorfindel lifted back the snowy veil to reveal to him the lovely elleth he had befriended many decades before. For a moment, as he smiled back at her, he thought, maybe, had things been a little different, maybe he could have truly fooled some elleth to think he loved her, in order to keep up appearances. Then the thought that, had he done such a thing, there would come a time when he would be expected to sleep with her. At least with Tauniel, there was no fear of that.

Bowing his head down slightly, Glorfindel’s arms found the familiar path around Tauniel’s back. He licked his lips, then brushed them against hers. Just as they had practiced: Two chaste kisses, one that was more passionate, she would turn her head slightly and blush, he would grin. They executed the maneuver perfectly to the cheering crowd, while Erestor and Aranel put on a similar performance a few feet away.

Soon after came the long lines of well-wishers, followed by the feast, after which there was to be dancing. The music was continuous, with groups of bards replacing others so that all of the musicians were granted reprieves to join the reception at some point. On another day Glorfindel would have enjoyed the atmosphere, but he said little and ate less and after only a few dances more than those which were customary, he took himself back to the head table and there sat with hopes of the night ending soon, for his ailment was quick to return after the meal.

Then there was Erestor, far seen as the less social of the two, taking on the role of the party’s chief host. He turned down no dance, and mingled from place to place within the crowd, accepting the congratulations and gifts given to himself and Aranel, and sometimes those for the other couple on Glorfindel’s behalf, including two sets of brass keys, identical in make, which Rog handed to him, a ribbon on each. “My wife insisted upon the bows,” he informed Erestor with a small amount of disdain. “Then, she insisted I give them to you. Please, take them, lest I be forced to hold this frill much longer.”

“Why are the keys identical?” asked Erestor, looking them over. “I spy two sets upon each ring, all cut the same.”

“All in good time. Be sure to go through the right door, though,” explained Rog. “Meleth put much work into setting everything just so. I do believe she will expect a full report from you as soon as you emerge.”

“And hopefully not too soon!” announced Caragcal, one the lieutenants serving in Erestor’s company. He saluted sloppily, then slapped his commanding officer on the back. “Many long years of happiness to you, Captain, many, many long years!”

“And my thanks to you for that, and to you and your brothers for your generous gift to us.”

“When will we see you on the practice fields again?” asked Caragcal. “Not that it vexes me so to command in your stead, but your wry humor is missed among the troops.”

“I am not sure, but I expect, there may someday be a chance again for that,” Erestor replied.

As Caragcal tried to make sense of Erestor’s riddle, Rog cleared his throat.

“That looks a little long to be regulation,” commented Rog of Erestor’s hair as a small group of soldiers approached to congratulate their captain on his marriage to their lord’s daughter.
“Section three, paragraph six. This is for ceremonial reasons, and I promised you at the time that if I ever carry your banner again, in practice or in battle, I will be sure it is not a hazard.” Erestor’s hair barely made mid-length down his back, but it was a severe contrast to the short style he had kept for the years he was on active duty.

Rog nodded his head. “Yes, I know. Have you told her yet?”

“With the stress of the wedding, I decided to wait until after.”

“Now qualifies as after.”

Erestor smirked as he shook hands with those who had joined them. “Is that an order? Technically, I am still on leave, and unless we are in a state of emergency, I am not obligated to follow your commands.”

“You are lucky I like you or I would kick your ass into next week,” answered Rog, but he was smiling a bit as well. “Go tell her. Think of it not as an order from your superior officer, but from your father-in-law. Good luck in taking a leave from that.”

“Yes, sir.” Erestor walked away from the other officers and to the raised platform where the wedding party was seated. He touched Egalmoth’s shoulder as he passed and thanked him for agreeing to be part of the ceremony on such short notice, then smiled to Laiqalasse, and finally came to where his bride was sitting. Placing his hands upon the back of her chair, he bent down to kiss the top of her flower adorned head and then asked, “Where is Glorfindel?”

“Last I saw him heading inside again. His illness seems quite severe. You are sure he will not see someone?”

“I asked him, and I threatened. He claims they will laugh. We will need to keep a watch on him this evening,” he said, whispering the last bit into Aranel’s ear. “I have an announcement to make.”

“An announcement?” The elleth looked more than curious.

“Aye, but he should be here. Is Tauniel with him?”

Aranel nodded and turned to look at Erestor as he sat down beside her. “She was with him, yes. What sort of announcement?”

Taking a sip of wine, Erestor shook his head. “Soon. I want to tell everyone at the same time. Ah, there he is,” he remarked, standing up.

Glorfindel, hanging more onto Tauniel’s arm than she was hanging upon his, noticed the gesture Erestor made to him once he and his not-quite-wife had returned to the grounds. He nodded slightly, and then began to walk toward the platform. “I want to go to bed,” he muttered.

Tauniel gave his hand a little squeeze. “I have a feeling most husbands say that on their wedding night.”

“I want to curl up into a ball under the blankets and go to bed.”

“Well, I suppose everyone has a kinky side. Whatever makes your silmaril shine,” she said with a wink, but her smile was apologetic.

She may not really have been his wife, but Glorfindel smiled at the fact that, for better or for worse, Tauniel was technically the only family he officially had any claim to. Despite the fact it was all a big
lie, it was a lie Glorfindel found easy to play along with. Their ascent to the head table was not without incident – Ecthelion caught them along the way and insisted upon congratulating them twice more.

Impatiently, Erestor picked up one of the silver stirring spoons and tapped it against his goblet, standing again as he did so. “Excuse me, might I have a bit of everyone’s attention? Your attention, please, everyone.” The tapping continued until the conversation died down and most were either watching the front or else in their seats wondering what was going on. “I have an announcement to make,” said Erestor as soon as everything was settled down.

“We got that impression!” shouted someone near the back, gaining the laughter of some.

“What I would like to say is something that I wish to share with all of you who are here,” Erestor continued, “except perhaps whomever interrupted me.” This caused a few more to laugh. “I think you are all well aware of the massive transition that has taken place for me over the last few decades. A military occupation was never something I anticipated to happen in my life, and yet, it did. I am grateful it happened, and I am better for it.”

A few shouts of things like ‘You think flattery is going to help you?’ and ‘Erestor, I think there is something brown on your nose!’ rose up from his audience, but Erestor continued. “The best part of that unexpected adventure by far was meeting this lovely elleth who today is here, by my side.” He took hold of Aranel’s hand and leaned down to kiss the back of it, which was met with some light applause.

“We will be together now through many things, and one of those many things I wish to share with everyone now. As of this evening, I have tendered my resignation to General Rog.”

“What?” hissed Aranel through clenched teeth, trying hard to force her smile.

Erestor patted her hand, getting a similar sort of reaction from the crowd that was assembled. “As of next week, you can find me upon a stage and not a practice field. I have joined the ranks of the artisans, and will be performing with the White Fawn Acting Guild.”

This gained a goodly amount of applause and hurrahs, for of all of Gondolin’s acting companies, the White Fawn was exceptionally well-known, second only to the King’s Company, which many had no doubts that Erestor would be with within a year or two. In fact, the only one who did not seem so thrilled with this was the supporting actress beside him. “I think perhaps we should have discussed this first,” said Aranel after she succeeded in pulling Erestor back down into his chair.

“Erestor the actor? That, I have to see!” Egalmoth reached his arm past Aranel to shake Erestor’s hand. “A huge congratulations to you, my friend!”

“You will do well,” added Laiqalasse before leaving to visit the lavatory. “A fine occupation to choose.”

Outnumbered, Aranel swallowed her arguments for the moment and concentrated on the well wishes of a pair of ladies who had drifted over to the table.

Excusing himself from his conversation with Egalmoth, Erestor followed the path Glorfindel had taken from the wedding party. “Still feeling a little under the weather?”

“I should be in bed,” he complained. He was doubled over, leaning against the side of a waist high stone wall. “When can we go home?”

“Soon. Very soon. In fact, actually, I think I can persuade Aranel and Tauniel to throw the bouquets
and be done with it. You are in no state for dancing, and I think I may have upset my wife with my news.”

Glorfindel nodded in agreement, but a sharp pain made him groan and slide down to the ground. “Let me know when we are ready to leave.”

Crouching down in front of Glorfindel, Erestor shook his head. “I am not about to leave you here like this. Come back with me to the table and I shall have the ladies say our goodnights so that we may take our leave. I believe there is indeed a nice, warm bed awaiting you in your new rooms.”

This seemed a much better plan than curling up on the ground, so Glorfindel forced himself to get up and follow Erestor back to the reception. A few words whispered into Tauniel’s ear brought her to her feet, and she began the ritual addressing of the crowd, thanking of the wedding party, and so on. By the time Glorfindel had found a comfortable position to sit in that did not make him look like he had developed food poisoning, he was being ushered away again.

The group made it almost to the entrance of the main palace tower before they were stopped by an unlikely ellon. “I was unable to offer my congratulations earlier, for the minstrels needed my harp and my voice, but I do so now.”

All four looked between one another, until finally Aranel said, “Thank you, Lord Salgant. Your words are kind and appreciated.”

From his side, Salgant lifted up an oddly shaped item wrapped in a velvet cloth. “The maker was unable to produce a proper case for today, but it shall arrive in time.” He held the package out carefully to Erestor. “I welcome you as my cousin’s kin.”

“Uhm... th-thank you,” he stuttered, taking the gift. The velvet was removed, revealing not only the item, but awe upon Erestor’s face as well. “I can hardly accept something so well crafted,” he whispered.

“But you shall,” said Salgant sternly, holding out another item, this one a long, carved stick with a thick length of horse hairs strung across it. “Perhaps you do not recall, but during the games some years ago you sang of me. No one has ever done that before, or since. I know not whether it was done in pity or spite, or if you truly meant what you said, but I expect to hear you play again.”

Salgant walked away, leaving the violin in Erestor’s care. It was made of polished walnut, and the inlay on the back displayed a pasture of grazing horses. “Thank you,” called Erestor once he had regained his sense, though he was not certain if Salgant had heard him or not.

“So can we go inside to look at that more?” pleaded Glorfindel, fighting to stand straight and keep the appearance of health until they were safely indoors. Erestor nodded and the group hastily made their way within. It was then that the keys were recalled, and Erestor handed the instrument to Aranel while he retrieved the two rings from his belt loop. “These are for the two of you, and these are ours,” he said, handing Tauniel one of the sets of keys.

“Nearly the top story, just below the King’s own penthouse,” remarked Tauniel upon examining the numbers. “I expect the view will be lovely.”

They climbed the many, many flights of stairs; an exhausting task for poor Glorfindel who fell behind more than once. The rooms, as it turned out, were directly next to each other. “This is splendid – we will be able to breakfast together,” Tauniel remarked.

Erestor tried a few keys before finding the one for the main door. It was unlocked, but not opened,
and before he entered, he startled Aranel by picking her up in his arms. “Always wanted to do this,” he said with a wink, and a grin to the other couple, and kicking the door open without too much force, he carried Aranel into the room.

A few feet away, Tauniel gave a wistful look at the disappearing couple. “I can try if you want me to,” offered Glorfindel.

Tauniel turned and shook her head, her smile a sad one. “No, not that... I secretly had hoped I would get a chance to carry her over the threshold someday.”

“You want to hear something silly?” asked Glorfindel, leaning against the wall beside their unopened door. Tauniel nodded. “I always hoped that someday, someone would carry me over.”

Taking a step back, Tauniel appraised Glorfindel. “I might pull a muscle in my back, but I just might be able to—” A loud knock on the inside part of the door shocked them both. “Uhm... yes? Who is it?” asked Tauniel, fearing now that someone had heard their conversation. To her relief, familiar giggles and laughter were heard instead.

Finding the right key, Tauniel unlocked the door and pushed it open. On the other side, she and Glorfindel saw Aranel and Erestor grinning out at them. “What? How did you...?”

“Come in and see!” squealed Aranel in delight, and she yanked Tauniel into the rooms. After a few moments, Glorfindel heard Tauniel’s elation, and looked to Erestor for an answer.

“The rooms are connected by a shared parlor and kitchen.” Erestor led Glorfindel in, his arm around his waist for support, and then shut and locked the two entrance doors. “Also, there is a balcony.”

“But is there a comfortable... never mind.” Glorfindel wandered as far as one of the plush settees before settling himself down upon it. He snuggled into the many cushions, and mumbled his thanks as Erestor draped a quilt over him and removed his heavy leather boots for him.

“I will send for more tea, and perhaps water later for you to take a bath; those seemed to help,” offered Erestor, but Glorfindel fell asleep before he was able to answer.
When Glorfindel next opened his eyes, the room was dim and the laughter was soft. A conversation was taking place, but the voices were kept low on account of him, no doubt. There was a hot, sticky sort of feeling in his mouth and he pushed at the blanket tucked around him. He was damp, having sweated during his nap, but felt better now than he had previously.

“Looks like he is awake,” whispered Erestor’s familiar voice. “Aranel, would you kindly warm the tea for him?” A few moments later, Glorfindel was shadowed from the glow of the fireplace as Erestor stood over him. “Did you sleep well?” Erestor knelt beside the couch and took from his pocket his handkerchief, which he dabbed across Glorfindel’s brow.

Glorfindel only nodded, not wanting his voice to drown out the lingering, soothing sound of Erestor’s words. When Erestor sat back on his heels, Glorfindel removed the blanket the rest of the way, still dressed in the finery of the wedding. He noticed that Erestor had removed most of what he had been wearing, but still had on the expensive embroidered pants on that were part of his uniform. “Are you really leaving the guard?” Glorfindel finally asked, for the details of the day were hazy in returning to him.

“Not leaving, exactly. I see it as a temporary resignation. Now that Fingolfin is dead, the second generation of Morgoth’s wrath is gone, and he will actively move to exterminate the third. That includes Fingon, and our king as well.” The worried look on Erestor’s face told Glorfindel the rest; that the fourth and currently final generation now faced peril as well. Though Glorfindel could tell untruths to other elves, Morgoth would not be so easily fooled by Glorfindel’s tales. Glorfindel was in peril now, too. “But let us not speak of that now, and forgive me for bringing it up.” Erestor stood and tucked the handkerchief away before extending his hand toward Glorfindel. “Maybe we can find some different clothing for you while the tea is being heated.”

Glorfindel followed Erestor into the bedroom on the side of the joined apartment that Glorfindel and Tauniel would share. Quite a lot of things had been put away already, though not where Glorfindel would have placed them. He preferred a closet to a bureau, but opened the door to the closet to find a row of dresses hanging there. “What does she need so many pairs of shoes for?” he muttered as he kicked a slipper that had tumbled out back in before closing the door. He turned to see Erestor opening a dresser drawer and frowning. “Something wrong?”

“I thought perhaps you would have some sleeping pants in here somewhere, but I cannot find any. Maybe they were not unpacked.”

Joining Erestor by the bureau, Glorfindel peered down into the drawer. “That will be amazing if you find a pair, for I do not own any. I have a couple of long nightshirts, but I feel a little silly putting one of those on and going back out there.” He selected a pair of loose grey leggings. “These will do for now.”

When they emerged back into the main sitting room, they found Aranel and Tauniel snuggled close to one another on the couch opposite the one Glorfindel had slept on. Tauniel had one leg twined around both of Aranel’s, and they were whispering to one another as they caressed each other gently. Aranel nudged Tauniel as the ellyn entered, and they straightened back up into more proper ladylike positions again.

“Do not stop on my account,” said Erestor, grinning. He seated himself on the other sofa after rolling the blankets down to the end of it.
Glorfindel sat down next to him and smiled at the ladies. “Those robes look very nice on you. Both of you; the colors are nice.”

“Gifts from my ‘husband’,” said Aranel, putting her arms around Tauniel and leaning against her lover. Aranel wore an aquamarine silk robe with delicate embroidery around the cuffs of the sleeves and the hem. The one Tauniel had was identical, though in a vibrant magenta.

“That reminds me; I have something for you as well.” Erestor patted Glorfindel’s knee twice before standing and disappearing into the other bedroom.

Flushing slightly, Glorfindel called out, “I.. I did not know we were giving gifts.. I.. I have none to give you.. any of you,” he added a little quieter to the pair sitting across from him.

“We did not know he was doing this, either. We have so many wonderful gifts from everyone else.” Tauniel kissed the top of Aranel’s head and drew her closer. “Of course, this is the best gift in the whole world,” she said, tucking Aranel close to her.

Erestor returned with a wrapped rectangular object. “I hope you do not already have one,” he said with a wink as he handed it to Glorfindel. It was in plain, rough paper, but was tied with a yellow ribbon and adorned with a golden hued rose.

As he slipped the rose out of the loop of ribbon, Glorfindel mumbled about Erestor going through too much trouble for him, but part of him was savoring the moment. In his mind, he pretended they were alone in the room, and that the gift was not to celebrate their false marriages, but was instead a token of affection. Glorfindel inhaled the scent of the bloom and a smile spread slowly across his face.

“Well, go on then, open it!” insisted Tauniel. “We have been made to look and wonder all evening!”

The ribbon was untied carefully and slipped off, followed by the paper. Revealed to him was a book, and Glorfindel smirked, for what else would Erestor give as a gift? The title baffled him, and Glorfindel looked at Erestor in alarm. “This... you did not really...?”

“Steal it from the library? Nay, I did not. There are few items I would liberate from the stacks, although, I did consider it. No, this is your copy.”

“Where did you get it? I was under the impression it was rare and I would not be able to acquire my own copy of it.” Glorfindel opened the cover carefully, finding an inscription within. He paused to read it, and tears came to his eyes which were swiftly wiped away lest they ruin the text.

“What is it?” asked Aranel with worry.

“Nothing, just a little message,” said Glorfindel, though to him, it was everything. He reread the message again, which began with ‘To my dearest friend and companion’ and ended with ‘Love and light, Erestor’.

“I copied it for you,” Erestor explained as Glorfindel flipped to the text, and it was obvious to Glorfindel that Erestor had, for his precise penmanship was plainly displayed on each and every page. “Now you will have no worries of evil librarians chasing you out of their domain at night.”

“Other than thank you, Erestor, I do not know what to say. This is such a gift to give me, and I have nothing for you.”

“Your smile and the light in your eyes is gift enough for me. I know it will give you great joy for many years, and that makes me glad enough to have done it.”
“What is it?” asked Aranel again.

“Only the most interesting book in the city. ‘A Guide to Equations for Alchemists and Mathematicians’, and now I will not have to sit in that dark library reading it.” Glorfindel continued to examine the book while Aranel brought him a cup of tea. “I have been working on an idea for something, but it was so difficult to write down what I needed, get home, and realize I needed to reference something else.”

Glorfindel’s excitement ebbed away the residual pain he was feeling. With help from the tea, soon he was engrossed in his book. When he finally looked up from it to rub his eyes and retrieve his reading glasses, he blinked in shock. “Whhh... oh, umm...”

Erestor, who was still sitting beside him but now had his arms resting across the back of the couch on either side, turned to regard him with a smirk. “Well, they seem awful happy together.”

Unable to look away, Glorfindel watched as Tauniel and Aranel kissed one another, hands disappearing between folds of fabric and soft moans coming from each of them. Aranel pulled back with a bashful smile and began to untie Tauniel’s robe. Tauniel tugged impatiently on the sash of Aranel’s robe in return. As the blue-green fabric slipped down her shoulders, Aranel leaned her head back. Tauniel continued to push the material away, exposing Aranel's breasts as she crawled atop her lover and shoved her down onto the couch.

The blond warrior’s head snapped downwards. He stared at the pages before him but was unable to make out the words. “M-maybe they should go into one of the bedrooms,” whispered Glorfindel to Erestor.

Erestor shifted to face Glorfindel a little, still keeping his focus on the pair of ellith. “This bothers you.”

Glorfindel nodded. “I... umm...” He swallowed hard and his eyes drifted to the empty cushion beside him, back to his book, and then to Erestor’s lap. Glorfindel grew even more uncomfortable when he took note of the bulge of Erestor’s desire. At any other time, it would have been arousing. To know that it was Tauniel and Aranel who were causing such a reaction and not him made Glorfindel ill. “I think I am going to go into the bedroom, where the light is better,” he said quickly, leaving his book and his cup of tea before Erestor could speak further to him. Curiosity caused his eyes to flick toward the pair on the couch, and he became more uncomfortable to see Aranel writhing on the couch, fondling her own breasts, with Tauniel crouched down at the foot of the couch, licking and nuzzling the hidden space between Aranel's thighs.

An hour passed, but even with the door closed and the pillow over his head, Glorfindel still heard the faint moaning and panting coming from the main room. There were a few occasions when the noises would stop and Aranel would ask Erestor if they were bothering him. Whatever his soft replies were, they never put a stop to the lovemaking of the two ladies. The few glimpses Glorfindel had gained stirred his imagination, but none of it delighted him as it seemed to please Erestor.

A brief time passed after they finished, followed by gentle laughter, some giggles and insistence, and finally a knock on the door. “Darling, are you in there?” called out Tauniel.

At first he thought to lie and say nothing, and to pretend not to be awake. He was getting hungry, however, and doubted there was any food in the bedroom. “Of course I am. Did you think I crawled out the window or something?”

“I wondered.” Tauniel opened the door and padded in, closing it gently behind her. “Did we traumatize you?”
“Only a little.” Glorfindel yanked the pillow off of his head and tossed it aside. “I was expecting you to be a little more discreet.”

“I apologize. Both of us do. We never dreamed to be together, and now, to have this... it is amazing, and we could not help it.” As she sat down on the edge of the bed, she touched Glorfindel’s cheek. “We both owe you so much, for your sacrifice in all of this.”

Glorfindel shrugged modestly. “Well, I... I am glad to help, and anyway, it is not all that terrible company that I have now.”

Tauniel smiled, mischief dancing in her eyes. “I know. Speaking of... there is something in the living room for you.” Her voice was very low and secretive now. “You must not say a single word, though, and walk quietly. Come with me.”

They snuck out of the bedroom, Glorfindel stepping as Tauniel did so as not to reveal himself. His mouth gaped open and he nearly crashed into a low table when the main part of the room came into view again. Aranel was standing behind a chair, massaging Erestor's temples and saying very dirty things in his ear. He was blindfolded, naked, and tied to a chair, grinning yet nervous, answering her back with little phrases, calling her a naughty little minx and other such things. “Tauniel, did you find it?” asked Aranel. She raised her voice a little louder, helping to muffle any sound Glorfindel might inadvertently make.

“Mmmhmm... and do not worry, Glorfindel is still engrossed in his book.” Tauniel winked at the blond ellon as she plucked a small bottle out of her pocket. She removed the cork and took a small sip. “Mmm... delicious...”

Aranel was handed the bottle and sipped from it as well before handing it back. “That is good,” she purred. She bowed her head back down to speak into Erestor’s ear. “Want to taste?”

“You are both such wicked teases,” he admonished. Aranel smiled and came around in front of him as he flexed his hands against the bonds. His arms were bound behind the back of the chair, and his feet to the legs of two chairs placed at either side and further away, so that his erection was pointing up toward the ceiling. Putting her hands on his shoulders, Aranel leaned down and kissed him deeply, forcing her tongue into his mouth with little resistance.

As she did this, Tauniel offered the bottle to Glorfindel. He took a small drink after sniffing it, and another when she coaxed him to again. The liqueur had a strong minty flavor to it that made his mouth warm and cool at the same time.

When Aranel stepped away, Erestor groaned at the loss of contact and struggled again, to no avail. “Now... the fun part of this game is you not knowing which of us will be where, doing what, and when. The fun starts... now.”

Erestor was letting out soft little pants that were a delight to Glorfindel’s ears. While Aranel had spoken to Erestor of their devious plan, Tauniel whispered to Glorfindel into his ear. “Do not touch him with your hands, for he will know your touch, and do not kiss him on the mouth, for he will know it is not one of us.” The rest did not need to be said.

Glorfindel looked at Aranel, as if seeking permission from her as well, before stepping closer. Tauniel came with him, and stood behind the chair. As Glorfindel knelt down, looking in awe up at the handsome elf, Tauniel fisted the dark hair and pulled back. She began to kiss Erestor slowly, seductively, making Glorfindel jealous. Then he looked back to what was before him.

A leg jerked but stayed in place as Glorfindel's tongue ran up the opposite leg, teasing the skin
between thigh and groin. Erestor whimpered into Tauniel’s mouth, but thrust his pelvis out further. “Feels like you have... ughhh... done this before! Ah!” Erestor gasped for air as the talented tongue continued to torment him. Smooth, satiny lips enveloped him, making him cry out again. An assault of both fire and ice shot through his body.

As for Glorfindel, he was trying very hard to make as little noise as possible. He devoured Erestor hungrily, for his taste was so very different from Gildor’s and so much more appealing. Erestor’s scent was muskier, and more masculine. It was enticing, and as Glorfindel looked up, his eyes half-closed, on his hands and knees as he took Erestor’s length down his throat, he could not help but feel subservient despite it being Erestor who was restrained and he who was left free.

It was a powerful feeling, and such a pleasurable one for his imagination to explore. If only Erestor knew it was Glorfindel causing him to gasp and moan. If only Erestor would be pleased to know it. If only Erestor's hands were free, free to take hold of the blond mane, to hold him where he wanted, to wrestle him to the ground without a fight, to keep him on all fours, to make Glorfindel beg to be taken, to prepare the tight passage that had felt only fingers and tongue and longed to be filled with the whole of Erestor's length, to take him rough and yet at the same time with such fierce passion.

These thoughts were making Glorfindel speed up, and he suddenly felt something warm in the back of his throat. With his eyes closed, Glorfindel swallowed again and again while he expanded and contracted his sphincter, imagining how it would feel if the hardness filling his mouth was piercing him from behind instead. He had never quite managed to keep Gildor in his mouth when this happened, but with Erestor, he continued to milk the rest of his essence until he heard Erestor let out a spent sigh.

It was then that Glorfindel realized he had spilled his seed as well. He let Erestor's limp member slip out of his mouth and hastily retreated. His loose hair accidentally brushed against Erestor’s thigh, making the dark one moan one final time.

Tauniel aided Glorfindel in getting back into the bedroom without being heard while Aranel nipped at Erestor’s neck and teased him just a little more. Glorfindel began to speak once they were in the room, but Tauniel put her finger to his lips, shook her head, and silently closed the door.

Looking down at his damp trousers, Glorfindel cringed. He had only the one pair like these, and it would make Erestor wonder if he came out in some other ones. Quickly, Glorfindel stripped them off and began to wash the scent off at the basin. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he muttered quietly, wadding up the now damp leggings. He shove them into a pillowcase, and shoved this into the closet behind the many, many, many pairs of shoes.

Yanking open the middle drawer of the dresser, Glorfindel sighed as he looked through the contents. Another drawer was opened, and then the top one, but still there was nothing he could find that might work.

The laughter in the main room became louder and louder, and Glorfindel opened the closet in a panic, hoping that perhaps there was something there.

“Glorfindel? Glorfindel, are you still awake?” Aranel called out a third time.

“Yes, are the three of you done yet?” He tried his best to sound exasperated instead of alarmed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his answer. Back to the closet he went, grabbing the pillowcase. He removed the pants and tossed the pillowcase back inside, then raced back to the nightstand, where the remainder of his tea was resting.

He poured the liquid onto the spot on his pants, set the cup aside and waited.
“Glorfindel!”

“Aiya!” He paused and then shouted. “Now I have gone and spilled my tea upon my trousers! It is a good thing it was those and not my book. I will be out in a moment, as soon as I change!” Glorfindel listened carefully, and when Aranel called out an apology, he made some grunting noises of some sort and breathed a sigh of relief afterwards as he pulled out a new pair of pants and a loose white sleeping shirt that was slit a third of the way down the front.

When Glorfindel rejoined them, Aranel had just finished giving her request to one of the maids she had flagged down in the hallway. Tauniel was lighting a few extra candles and Erestor gave Glorfindel a worried look as he took his place once again on the couch. “Are you alright?”

“Just a little wet,” replied Glorfindel.

“You were not burned?”

“The tea was cold.”

“You drink cold tea?”

Glorfindel opened his mouth, and began to feel the warmth in his cheeks. The look Erestor was giving him was so innocent, and yet, there was something so crafty about Erestor. Cursing himself inwardly for letting his guard down, Glorfindel shook his head and said, “No, I just forgot it was cold. What is wrong with cold tea, anyhow? It still tastes the same.”

“No need to get defensive; I was just asking.” But something in Erestor’s tone made it evident he was not simply just asking.

“I asked them to bring up something light for us. The maid thinks there may still be some wedding cake left,” said Aranel brightly. She and Tauniel snuggled onto the other couch.

Erestor was watching Glorfindel curiously, running the tip of his finger back and forth along his bottom lip, until finally the blond gave him a small glare in return. “What? What is it?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Erestor picked an imagined piece of lint off of his leggings. “So, how is the book?”

“Very nice, thank you,” answered Glorfindel quickly. Perhaps, a little too quickly.

“Good, I am glad. Which chapter are you on?”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Which chapter, Glorfindel. You know, chapter, a collection of pages with a similar theme, set aside as a section with a title of its own—”

“I know what you meant,” Glorfindel snapped back.

Erestor nodded, looking down at the pattern on the couch. “Good. So, which chapter are you on? Which one intrigued you the most thus far?”

“I... I do not know, it has been awhile since I looked at the chapters in that book.”

“You just spent the last two hours reading it, Glorfindel.” Erestor captured Glorfindel’s gaze with his own. “Or were you engaged in some other activity?”
Across the room, Aranel was looking slightly uneasy as she unbraided her hair. Tauniel ignored the banter, or at least pretended to, as she unpinched her long blond locks and unraveled them from the pile on her head. Glorfindel felt perspiration upon his forehead and pushed his hair back, letting out an indignant little snort. “If you really must know, I was reading about the bonding of inorganic materials, focusing on single and double displacements. There are some theories I have about chemical equilibrium when dealing with the combination of mithril with other metals and substances. I could go into great detail about my work, but then, I think you would all find it rather boring, difficult to follow, and even among the greatest minds, impossible to understand.”

Glorfindel resisted the urge to bite his lip after his short speech. He looked away from Erestor, who slowly licked his lips and sighed. “Alright, I am sorry. I did not mean to accuse you of anything, Glorfindel.” Erestor put his hand on the blond’s shoulder. “Sorry. Truce? Still friends?”

“I suppose,” said Glorfindel with a sigh, thankful that he did not hurt Erestor’s feelings with his comments. Although Erestor’s knowledge covered a vast amount of topics, the simplest mathematical subjects were challenging for him, and alchemy tended to be completely out of the question as something Glorfindel could discuss with his friend. “I really do enjoy the book, Erestor. I just tend not to memorize chapter titles. Actually, I skip around a lot. It is a reference volume, you know.”

“I know. I actually had to smuggle it out of the library to copy it. Bloody library dictator refused to allow me to check it out.”

“You said you did not steal it!” blurted out Glorfindel.

“I did not steal it. I borrowed it without permission, and brought it back later.” Erestor stood up as someone knocked on the door and went to answer it. “Ah, good evening, thank you, I can take it from here.” He returned with a large tray laden with a variety of foods, including a large slab of the wedding cake, smothered in strawberries and fresh whipped cream.

The tray was set on the table, and everyone milled around it selecting bits of this and that. Glorfindel poked the knife at the odd dessert and made a face. “What kind of cheese is in it?”

“Creamed cheese, very soft and sweet,” said Tauniel, plucking a berry from the cake and popping it into her mouth.

Glorfindel put a chunk of bread on a plate for himself and added some of the strawberries that had fallen off of the cake. “I think I shall pass.” He went back to the couch and sat down.

“You have to have some. At least try it.” Tauniel cut a small piece and put it onto a plate. This she took to Glorfindel, holding it out to him. “Please?”

As he chewed his bread, he shook his head. “No thank you.”

Erestor came over to Glorfindel as Tauniel walked away. His plate contained a large slice of the cake and a good amount of cream and berries beside. “Cheesecake is not a thing to miss, in June, under the stars, if you care for such things. That said, I am taking my dessert onto the balcony. The invitation is open to all.”

“It is not June,” called out Glorfindel as Erestor walked away.

“Cheesecake is always in season,” came the reply.

It was only a minute that Erestor spent alone on the balcony. Glorfindel wandered out to join him, bringing the plate of berries. “You know what goes well with berries, right?” asked Erestor.
"It looks very unappealing," Glorfindel said.

"It is delicious."

"Cake should be firm. That looks squishy."

"Try it. Just a bite." Erestor broke away a piece of the cheesecake from the rest and scooped it up with his fork. He dabbed it into the cream and offered it out to Glorfindel. "Please, just taste it. For me?"

Swallowing hard, Glorfindel was unable to resist even the smallest plea that Erestor made. He reached out to gingerly take hold of the fork, but Erestor still kept a hold on the end of it as Glorfindel closed his mouth around the delicacy. The smooth texture was unexpected, and the taste was more divine than Erestor could have described. "Mmm... that is good." Glorfindel opened his eyes, surprised he had closed them. Blushing, he let go of the fork he still had hold of.

"I told you it was." Erestor took a bite himself, and then offered another to Glorfindel, this time with berries. Glorfindel ate without taking possession of the utensil, secretly pleased that he was sitting on the balcony, alone with his secret love, being fed dessert by him. It was something the blond could get used to. They sat and talked quietly about the weather and their new living space until the rest of the cheesecake was gone, and then returned back inside.

"Ah, we were just about to go to bed," Tauniel informed them as the doors to the balcony were closed.

"A sound idea," agreed Erestor, walking toward the bedroom on the east side of the quarters.

Tauniel gave Erestor an odd look as the two of them reached the door at the same time. "What are you going to do, sleep between Aranel and I?"

"Uh... well, I just thought... since... my stuff is in there..."

"That is true, your ‘stuff’ is in there. But so is the bed that Aranel and I are going to be sharing. I promise we will keep an eye on your things for you." Tauniel blew each of the ellyn a kiss. "Good night." She disappeared into the room, and closed the door behind her.
Erestor was rooted in place as he stared at the bedroom on the west end of the shared suite. Glorfindel finally sighed and patted the pillow that was still on the couch. “This was pretty comfortable. I can sleep here and you can have the bedroom.”

“No,” Erestor countered immediately. “I can stay out here on the couch. All of your things are in that bedroom. Anyhow, you had the worse day. You deserve peaceful rest.”

A long silence followed, which was interrupted by Glorfindel saying, “I promise not to get any of my ‘queer germs’ on you if we share the bed. We can even use separate blankets.”

“You know I have no phobias about such things. I just thought it would be incredibly rude to assume...” Erestor turned his head toward the other bedroom as the sounds of passion rose up. “I guess sneaking in there to grab my nightclothes will be out of the question.”

“I would not suggest it.”

Erestor poured a glass of wine and walked toward the empty bedroom. “Do you mind very much if I retire?”

The moaning in the adjoining room became louder. Glorfindel grabbed the pillow from the couch and picked up the open bottle of wine on his way, entering the room first. The candles were still lit, but they were nearing the end of their wicks, so Glorfindel lit new ones as he listened to Erestor blowing out the rest that were in the main area.

He ventured a look out the window and gazed across the city. The party had not stopped, even though the hosts had left long hours ago. A group of harpers led by Salgant were playing upon the dais with a handful of flautists from Ecthelion’s house dancing gaily in their midst. The happenings in the gardens could be seen by anyone looking from this point, including a pair of ellyn who looked quite nervous as they sat on a bench almost beneath an elm tree, holding hands with one another. A sudden queasiness hit Glorfindel’s stomach: There was no place secret in the hidden city. The floor above was the king’s own and his penthouse had windows aimed in every direction. Nothing secret; nothing safe.

In his mind, Glorfindel ran through all of his encounters with Gildor. Outside of the city when they hunted for Aredhel, there were romps in the underbrush and sensual baths under waterfalls. Glorfindel doubted that those nights of passion would have been seen by Turgon. In his rooms or Gildor’s guest chamber, Glorfindel did not think Turgon could snoop. Once, Gildor had his way with him in the stable... but from this vantage, Glorfindel could not see through the roof of the building, and it was unlikely Turgon’s sight could be that much better. It would explain how the king knew of their transgressions, but Glorfindel drew a blank trying to think of when it might have been that they were seen.

Deciding to put it out of his mind, for now he believed himself safe from the king’s edict, Glorfindel engrossed himself once more with the book. He was sitting on the bed, leaning back against the headboard, when Erestor entered. “I tried to slip in undetected to get my things, but I was assaulted with this.” He held up a dainty pink slipper.

Glorfindel snorted as he looked over the curved frames that helped him to read. “Add it to the sea of shoes in the closet,” he suggested, pointing to the door while still reading. “At least it is good to know they are not helpless creatures,” he added, pushing his glasses back into place.
“I did manage to rescue this, though.” Erestor triumphantly held up a stack of papers bound by blue cording. He tossed it onto the empty half of the bed before going to the closet and opening the door. “My goodness gracious, just how cold does she expect her feet to be?”

Shrugging, Glorfindel muttered, “Ellith,” as an answer. His eyes wandered to the item that had joined him on the mattress, and found it was a manuscript for a play. Then he froze, his breathing shallow. Past Erestor, in the midst of the shoes in the closet, the pillowcase he had thrown in earlier was visible. Whether the stains of his seed could be seen or not, Glorfindel could not tell, and he hoped Erestor could not, either.

“Quite. Enough shoes for the entire city, perhaps.” Erestor threw the slipper in to join its mates and shut the door before any others could topple out. Realizing he left his glass of wine in the other room, Erestor simply picked up the bottle Glorfindel brought in and drank from it. “The auditions are in two weeks, but for me, I was told it was merely a formality and more to decide who gets a line or two and who is in the chorus.”

“There is singing? A musical?” Glorfindel set aside his book as Erestor sat down on the bed.

“Not exactly. Just a play with a few songs in it. Seven songs, seven characters...” Erestor turned back the cover and displayed the title to Glorfindel.

“‘The Seven Sons of Fire’.”

“They want me to play Maglor.”

“Interesting. I thought they all had red hair.”

“A general misconception. The eldest and youngest did; the middle child looked like Finwë, black hair and all. The rest had brown hair with varying degrees of red highlights, except for Celegorm, who was blond, and honestly, I always had to wonder if he was really Fëanor's son or if--” Erestor caught the thought Glorfindel was having and interrupted himself. “Oh... well, maybe we are just supposed to wear wigs.”

Glorfindel tried to imagine Erestor with red hair, and gave up because he knew it would make him break into a fit of laughter. “So, you will be singing?”

“One song, and I already forgot the name of it. The play is fantastic, though. Really well written.” Flipping through the handwritten pages, Erestor added, “I hardly have any lines, but I get to be on the stage a lot and carry around a harp as if I have a clue what to do with it.”

“No one starts with a lead role,” offered Glorfindel. “Give it a year and I am sure people will be packing the house to see your performances.”

“I just hope I do not make a fool of myself.”

“No, you have nothing to worry about. You control the floor when you are in council; how difficult can it be on stage?” Glorfindel smiled, and nudged Erestor with his foot until the smile was returned. “Tomorrow, I want to hear everything about how you were accepted into the guild and what Rog said about you leaving and anything else I have missed.”

“Yes. We should get some sleep. I do not think Tauniel or Aranel will let us miss the gift opening tomorrow, no matter the excuse.”

“Tauniel and Aranel probably would allow us to miss it. Meleth, not a chance.” Glorfindel set his spectacles on the table and stretched his arms over his head, eliciting a yawn as he did so. “Do you
“Does not matter to me.” Erestor turned down the sheets, and turned his back as he undressed. Glorfindel watched every movement as the fabric slipped onto the floor. Erestor stepped out of his pants, the toned muscles of his thighs and calves tightening slightly, making Glorfindel swallow hard but silently. As Erestor turned to crawl into bed, Glorfindel quickly looked away. “Go on. It is too hot to wear anything to bed,” coaxed Erestor. “I know everyone says heat rises, but who knew it could be a sauna in this tower in the winter?” The thin sheet covered only to his hips, and just barely as he leaned back against the pillows. “So odd.”

“What? The weather and the temperature?” asked Glorfindel as he removed his shirt, keeping his back to Erestor.

“Yes, that, but this, too.” Erestor tapped the cloth on the corner of a pillow. “One of your pillows it missing the cover. It is one of those things I doubt Meleth would have missed when she set up the room.”

Drops of sweat formed on Glorfindel’s brow. “Oh?” he busied himself with his leggings and tried to be as casual as he could.

“Yes, but here, I will just move the one in back in front of the other.”

Glorfindel listened as this was done. He bent down to collect his clothing, using the opportunity to wipe his brow on the sleeve of his soon to be discarded shirt. “Thank you,” he said, taking the clothing to the basket at the door. His walk back was slightly awkward, for now he was facing Erestor and hoped that even while nude he could hide his emotions from his companion.

They settled in for the night without further discussion, and the candles were extinguished. Faint humming from the harps below made it into the room from time to time.

It was after the sounds began to die down that Erestor asked quietly if Glorfindel was still awake. “Just a little,” replied the blond, though his eyes were staring at the ceiling and no dreams were tempting him.

“I just considered... well, with it being such a night as it is... and you were not with us earlier to find release.”

Whether Erestor suspected, knew, or was just being kind, Glorfindel did not yet know. It was possible Erestor was certain what transpired, and it kept him from sleep. There was still that sliver of hope - that hope that flitted the image of what he would find if he faced Erestor now. That those strong, firm hands would reach out and take hold of his face with gentle insistence, that commanding lips would find their mark, and in the morning, he, too, could be blissfully bound to the one he most desired. Glorfindel did not answer the lingering question, but instead said, “I am fine.”

“Yes, but it hardly seems fair to you.”

“Well, I doubt I can obtain the ladies’ interest now, nor would I want to. So unless you were planning to offer a hand in the matter...” Glorfindel trailed off, his voice bitter, his heart yearning.

Erestor was quiet, and then said, “I meant, it would not offend me, if you... if you ever had to take care of matters, as it were, with me in the room. I am sorry that I am not of any help otherwise, but I did not want you to think you had to suffer. I do not wish you to deny yourself on my account. Besides; I... I honestly do not mind.”

“Ah.” At first, Glorfindel had the urge to smack his friend with the pillow, and shout at him just what
had previously transpired, but he held his tongue. Remembering his own words earlier to Erestor about the play, he fashioned them now for his personal use: Start slowly, Glorfindel, he may well come around. Never could you imagine him sharing a bed; perhaps a day will come to share a spirit as well. He says he is not offended. He says he does not mind. Is there more than that? Perhaps so. Perhaps he knows just what to say because he is in need of someone to say the same to him. This Glorfindel took comfort in, unsure if the words were his own. “I may take you up on that offer.”

“Well, I never would have said it if I did not mean it.”

Glorfindel’s hand slid down under the sheet. He felt his limp sexuality, the head soft as he curled his fingers around the shaft. Twice he stroked his hand up, then stopped. Was this really what he wanted? No. Was this what he needed? No. Tears welled up in his eyes and a miserable sob burst forth.

“Glorfindel?” Erestor sat up with genuine concern. “Are you hurt?”

He had thrown an arm over his eyes, though the tears could not be stopped. “I just... I do not want sex... I just... I just want someone to touch me. I need someone to hold me. I... I hate being alone,” he bawled, feeling ashamed of his breakdown. He felt strong arms pulling him up, cradling him against a firm chest, but his mind was no longer envisioning thoughts of sensual pleasures. Instead, he felt the warmth and invitation of a friend, the gentle calming upon his soul as he was rocked and held.

Glorfindel clung to Erestor, matting the dark hair with precious tears. He could blame this upon his father, his past, his failed relationship, but he could not bring himself to name the true cause. ‘I love you’ seemed so far away, and so he sniffled until his eyes were red and dry and his hiccupping interrupted his apologies.

“Shh... it is alright. Nothing here to hurt you anymore.” Erestor brought them back into a supine position on the bed. It was breezier now, and he pulled the sheet up to cover them both before pulling Glorfindel onto his side and against him. He kept his arms around the exhausted blond elf, and kissed the top of his head. “I can do this for you at least, Glorfindel. You need to rest. Sleep; I will protect you.”

A little nod against Erestor was all Glorfindel managed before Irmo intervened. Sleep took him quickly, and he awoke the next morning, still in Erestor’s arms.
“I want names, Gildor.”

Still wrapped in a thick bearskin cloak, Gildor kept one arm around several dozen scrolls he personally intended to deliver to the king, while the fingers of his other hand played along the hilt of his sword. “Cousin, I see not the relevance.”

“If I am to make any progress in Gondolin, I need to know what support I might have there.” The king coughed a few times before he unwrapped a thin sheet of unleavened bread to inspect the ingredients of the filling, which was mostly comprised of olives, cheese, and pickled vegetables. He rerolled it and held it up, but did not take a bite yet. “Do you believe my request to be unreasonable?”

“I just think--”

“You may do all the thinking you like when you are king. Names. All of them.”

“Listen to me. I know of them only through means most secret.”

“Yes, well, you are the only person who knows any of them and manages to get in and out of that city.”

“Fingon, please. Your brother--”

“Exactly. You are not required to explain him to me.” Fingon bit into his lunch, and a large portion plopped out of the other end onto his plate. Outside, at the top of a not-too-distant temple, someone was singing a summons to midday prayers. Fingon glanced out in the direction of the building as he chewed. “Sit, Gildor. Dine with me. You must be starving. Winter travel is never pleasant.”

Now Gildor set the scrolls down on the high table where the king sat and pulled one of the stools out from beneath it. Two more Elves were at the top of the temple now, and the sounds of drums and horns accompanied the trio of singers. Some shopkeepers nearby closed their doors, while people walking along the streets either ducked through doorways before they were closed or hurried to the temple. Fingon pulled a bowl of hummus closer and dipped the end of his rolled sandwich into it before he took another bite. Gildor found himself in possession of a plate of food mere moments later, and nearly as quickly as he had appeared, the servant was gone. “I understand and appreciate your motives, cousin, but your timing seems premature,” said Gildor.

Fingon cleared his throat and set his lunch down to take hold of his glass of water. “You may appreciate it. I doubt you understand it. Yet.” Fingon sipped from the glass. “Names. Now. Stop stalling.”

Gildor folded his hands in his lap. A woman scurried past the window, her child clinging to her hand as they made to clear the street. The pair ducked down an alleyway just as a procession came forth from the temple. Two dozen men in long robes carrying bowls of burning incense began to walk in two straight lines in the direction of the palace. “There are some I would… caution about,” said Gildor carefully. “One in particular. I would prefer you leave him out of whatever plans you have.”

“Your lover there?” guessed Fingon.

Gildor sighed and picked up a chunk of flat bread. He began to shred it into strips. “At one time he was. He has married. I would very much appreciate it if you left him out of all of this.”
“He married? So secret marriages are going on in Gondolin. How interesting,” mused Fingon.

Gildor shook his head. “This was no secret marriage. He married a woman.”

Fingon rubbed at his closed eyes before he took another drink. “Does she know?” Gildor gave a nod. “...does he know? That she is a she?” Fingon smiled just slightly. “Or does he have the misfortune of nearsightedness?”

Gildor’s attention was drawn away from the approaching congregation to Fingon and his smirk. “You tell me that you do not share my father’s talent, but I cannot help but think you are gifted with foresight at times.”

“So no one told him yet that he married a woman?”

“No, not that.” Gildor dipped a piece of bread into a bowl of herbs and oil. “He has a vision impairment.”

“Ah.” Fingon wiped his mouth with the napkin from his lap and placed it aside. The group walking down the otherwise empty street was nearly to the palace, and he appeared intent to wait until they were done to continue with his meal. “Like Angrod.”

“Mmm... I would say exactly like Uncle Angrod.” Gildor scratched behind his ear. “Exactly like Uncle Angrod.”

“Ahhh.” Fingon nodded, but his focus was outside. “The older one, then?”

“Glorfindel,” confirmed Gildor. “I really want to keep him out of whatever plans you have.”

“You still care for him,” recognized Fingon. “That must be hard.” Fingon stood, for the procession reached the window, and he stayed standing as they turned to circle around a path that would take them around the base of the palace. At the end of the two lines, there was one man dressed in slightly more ornate clothing and holding a wooden staff. Fingon placed his hands together and bowed his head slightly; the cleric paused to motion with his hand in Fingon’s direction, to bow slightly, and speak words in a low voice indiscernible through the glass. Then the procession was gone, and Fingon sat again to resume eating. “How are you coping?” asked Fingon after he had another bite of food.

“I get used to the religious rituals no matter where I am,” answered Gildor. Fingon gave Gildor an odd look, and then clarified with, “Glorfindel.”

“Oh. That. Well...” Gildor swirled a piece of bread in the bowl of oil. “I get it, but, I do not get it. It seems extreme.”

Fingon squeezed his eyes shut. “I feel as if you have neglected to share important details.”

“Oh, right. Sorry. All the noise is distracting,” he said with a wave of his hand, for the drums and horns continued to play, and three strong voices dominated the ambient sounds. “Glorfindel married in an attempt to fool your brother, and others, into believing he is not like us. His wife has been a long-time client of mine; I am still the only way certain goods are imported and exported, and she has a love of Dorthonion silk. She confided their plan to me. I feel somewhat guilty at times; she does not know of my connection to him.”

“We never get court intrigue like that here,” said Fingon. “Everyone knows my marriage is solely for the purpose of producing an heir.” Fingon shook his head. “I already feel sorry for that child.”
“How is your wife?” asked Gildor.

“Very, very pregnant, and she still has the better part of a year to wait,” answered Fingon. “Worry not; her every whim and want is taken care of. She is well; thank you. So, before you sidetrack me any further, what exactly was this fantastic plan that your client developed?”

“To be fair, it was not her idea,” explained Gildor. “Erestor came up—”

“Erestor?” Fingon dropped his food back onto his plate, wiped his hands, and turned in his stool as he took hold of Gildor’s arm. “Erestor from Valinor?” Fingon waited until Gildor slowly nodded. “I thought he was dead.”

“Uhm…”

Fingon narrowed his eyes. “Wait, you were the one who gave me that news.”

Gildor cleared his throat. “I may have slightly exaggerated his demise.”

“To what end?”

Gildor looked around with uncertainty, even though the only other person within the room was Fingon’s butler, who stood silently at the door and rarely spoke. “We need to keep this between us.”

Fingon sat up straighter. “He is alive?”

Gildor nodded.

“I need you to bring him to me.”


Fingon blinked once. “When you admitted you have been spreading rumors about someone being dead who apparently is not. And I realize, I do not care why you were doing it. I just need you to bring him here.”

“How did he become so damned popular?”

Fingon looked off to the side a moment, and then back to Gildor. “How is my brother using him?”

Gildor squirmed in his chair. “I am not sure I follow.”

“Adviser? Seneschal? Mentor for his daughter?” Fingon motioned with his hand to prod Gildor along as the sounds of the procession returning around the other side of the palace were faintly heard.

“Oh. That.” Gildor licked his lips. “Last I heard, he was farming and joined a players guild.”

“A what?”

“Acting,” clarified Gildor. “Oh, and he holds a secondary seat on the king’s council.”

“That is all?” Fingon looked mortified.

“Mmm… he spent something like fifty years in the military. He made officer fairly fast.” Gildor frowned. “You look pissed.”

“Erestor is a cat, not a dog.”
“I beg your pardon?”

Fingon blinked once as he took a deep, calming breath. “Dogs are intelligent, but they need a pack to be at their best. They can be trained. They need a leader.” Fingon glanced out the window, for the first members of the two lines were coming into view. “Cats require… space. They can get along with others, but they have their limits. They need to be free. Let out at night.” He looked back to Gildor. “Gondolin must be a nightmare for him. A cage. I want him here. He was the best adviser my father ever had. Turgon should be utilizing his talents. Erestor was one of the best teachers in Valinor. I want him here to instruct my… child, children, whatever it ends up being."

“That might be a little complicated,” admitted Gildor.

“If you need money, name your price,” said Fingon.

“If I need money, I can go to my father,” Gildor reminded him. “It has nothing to do with money. Smuggling anyone out of that city is difficult enough, but Erestor would be impossible.”

Fingon stood again to acknowledge the group outside the palace once more as they continued on their path back to the temple. “I am unfamiliar with this word ‘impossible’ you use.”

“Gondolin has one exit. Even though Turgon trusts me, he still has someone examine every cart or carriage that leaves for stowaways.”

“You are clever,” said Fingon as he sat down again. “You will think of something.”

“Ehh… shit.” Gildor rubbed his face. With food now in his stomach, sleep was on the horizon. “The plan with Glorfindel was not just his idea. He is part of the plan.”

Fingon folded his hands in his lap and focused on Gildor. “I need less riddles and more of a positive attitude from you.”

Gildor sighed, and as briefly as possible explained the pseudo-wedding that had taken place. “So if you try to extract Erestor, you would need to extract the whole group. One person, maybe I can get them out. Four people is inconceivable.”

Fingon politely smiled. “I have faith in you.” The music stopped suddenly, and Gildor looked out to the barren streets. Within the span of a few seconds, people once again milled around the streets, and businesses were open. Peddlers called out from their carts, which seemed to almost materialize from thin air. “Look at at all of them,” he said, as if he knew that Gildor’s attention was on those outside. “They disappear, and then,” he snapped his fingers. “Magic. All back again. Everyday this happens. You only need to do it once.”

“Why not just ask your brother? Better yet,” suggested Gildor, “why not just tell your brother? You are high king now,” he said, and at this it sounded as if Fingon growled. “What good is being high king if you do not get to make the other kings do things. Please do not mention to my father that I said that,” he added as an afterthought.

“I should not be high king,” Fingon said.

“And I should not be the crown prince of Nargothrond, but really, what are we going to do? I use it to my advantage every chance I get,” said Gildor, in case Fingon had not already noticed the privileges Gildor afforded himself in every other realm. “If you want, I can give you a beginner course in Royalty. No charge. Family discount.”

And Fingon laughed, and so rare a sound it was that his butler, typically stoic and serene, flinched. “I
“I think I understand the basics.” He turned to look outside, where the streets were once again abuzz with activity. “Do you see that maiden over there?” he asked as he pointed discreetly at a woman sweeping the stoop of a shop. She wore a red and white dress, and her golden curls were pulled back so that they spiraled down and bounced as she worked. After Gildor nodded, Fingon said, “If I wanted to, I could walk out to her, spin her around, shove her against that building, and sodomize her in front of three dozen witnesses, and none of them would stop me. That is what royalty means, and I fucking hate it.”

“But you would never do such a thing, and that is precisely why you should be high king,” said Gildor.

Fingon shook his head. “The fact that I even know that I could do that is exactly why I should not be high king. However, you do bring up an excellent point. I need to rethink my plan.”

“You have the power to make whatever changes you see fit. You have the power to require your brother to open his gates. You are the leader of us all now, and, I really respected your father, and I cannot imagine your grief right now, and I hope I never do know that feeling. However, if it had to be anyone, thank Eru - and I say that so infrequently - thank Eru it was you, Fingon.”

Fingon let out a long-held breath. “Maybe you should be my advisor,” he said.

“You can send out a decree that all of the nonsense observed by your brother - no offense, but some of his rules are juvenile - are to be rescinded. Then you can recall Erestor from there, and whomever else you want. If you want names for that, I can give you names. Get all of them out of there before-.” Gildor snapped his mouth shut.

“Go on.” Fingon shifted his gaze and lifted his brows. “Everyone else says it when I am not around. They take bets, you know,” he added. “I have half a mind to put money on it myself, except if I am right, I could never collect.”

“Stop,” begged Gildor. “I am sorry. I ran my mouth. I do that at times.”

Fingon only cleared his throat and smiled. “Before I am dead,” he finished for Gildor. “Before my brother becomes high king.”

Gildor looked to the floor.

“Ten years. Actually, find someone who has a spread, put the money on ten to fifteen, and I think you will be able to collect a handsome sum.”

“Fingon, please do not speak this way.”

“And then,” he continued, “when Morgoth finds Turgon, and burns his city down… I suppose it all falls to your father, if he is still alive, and if not, then, to you.” Gildor shook his head and turned away, but Fingon was not yet done. “For that, I apologize now. I do not wish that burden for you. But then, perhaps my wife shall have a son, and it will all pass to him.” Fingon waited until Gildor looked back again, then said, “I hope I only father daughters. I hope they all make it back to Valinor, or someplace away from this hell we all helped to create. What a horrible thing for me to say,” he finished.

Gildor rubbed his chin. “I will do what I can to try to get them out. Erestor, and whomever he insists upon bringing with him.”

“Clearly, the wives, because they will be shunned if they are left there alone, and of course Erestor, and his lover.”
Gildor furrowed his brow, and then shook his head. “No, no… Glorfindel is not… they do not have a relationship.”

Fingon frowned. “You just explained earlier that they did.”

“No. I explained the plan, which was Erestor’s idea,” said Gildor. “Erestor is not--”

And Gildor tilted his head when he saw the way Fingon was looking at him. “Wait. No…”

Slowly, Fingon nodded. “Yes.”

Gildor snorted his laughter. “No. Definitely not.”

Fingon sighed and waved a hand. The butler exited the room. “Ask Maedhros,” he said.

“Ask Maedhros what?”

“About Erestor.”

Gildor shook his head adamantly. “No. You are wrong about him. He--”

“He had an affair with Fëanor.”

Gildor leaned back, forgetting he was upon a stool, and reached back to touch the wall for support. “Fuck. Really?”

Fingon rested his elbow on the counter and leaned his cheek against his hand. “Not sure if fucking was involved, but there was something.” He waited until Gildor recovered slightly before he said more. “Maedhros and I found some old lover letters stuffed into a book that Uncle Fëanor owned. When we were caught by Fëanor with them, he told us that it was nothing more than a casual affair from their youth. For Erestor, I think it was something more. There were times I would be at a family gathering, and now and then, I would catch a glimpse. A hint of something. There would be these moments when Erestor would look at Fëanor with such… heartbreaking longing.” Fingon pressed his lips together. “It meant something to him. There was nothing casual about the way he looked Fëanor. Maybe he is suppressing it all, in Gondolin, where my brother has his rules and his punishments. I think you are right. I think, maybe, I need to act like a high king and stop some of this insanity while I can.”

“Tell me how I can help,” insisted Gildor.

For a few minutes, Fingon stared out the window. Occasionally, he drummed his fingers on the top of the counter. Just as Gildor felt his eyelids drooping and the lack of sleep creeping upon him, Fingon said, “I want you to help me draft a… response… policy change… something to my brother. Something that will abolish these stifling laws he has. Now that I reflect upon the situation, I do not think you should try to extract anyone just yet. If you do, it could call them out. They would be marked. I do not want to jeopardize anyone. Let us send the message, and then, I will wait. I can give it some time, and then, once it is not news any longer, then I will ask again for your assistance in retrieving my cat.”

“Your cat?”

“What?”

“Just… this has not been a great year. I would appreciate it if you gave me a little slack. I was promoted into a crappy job where everyone is going to hate me at some point for something I say or do, and I never quite have privacy, and I am required to be social even though I kind of mostly hate being with people, and not a damn person really understands me or what I am going through or what it means to be king, even though I hear ‘I understand’ from them about thirty times a day. So… deal with the fact I called him my cat. I was trying to make a joke and I clearly failed.”

“You need a hug,” Gildor suddenly said.

“I need a lot of fucking hugs.”

Gildor carefully got to his feet. He placed a hand on Fingon’s shoulder and said, “I am sorry about your father.”

Fingon pressed his lips together, nodded twice, and closed his eyes as tears welled up in them. He, too, slid down from his stool and accepted his cousin’s embrace. “Do me a favor, right after we write up this whatever to Turgon,” insisted Fingon. Gildor nodded. “Go back to Nargothrond and hug your father twice. Once for you, and once for me.”
“I can hardly believe he is doing this,” announced Aranel, her concern and anger mingled.

Tauniel sat in front of the mirror at the dressing table, fixing her hair. “I thought you had come to terms with him leaving the army.”

“This has nothing to do with that.” Aranel was pacing in a small space just behind Tauniel, tickets clutching in her hand, so that she appeared in the mirror every few seconds going one way, and then the other.

Glorfindel sat in the corner of the room. He was already dressed and pretending to be immersed in his reading. It was opening night for Erestor and with the play being new as well it was making things in their home more stressful than one might have expected with two perceived to be newlywed couples under the same roof. Aranel had been very cold to all of them ever since opening the envelope that held the tickets, yet refused to reveal the cause.

“Then what?” Tauniel set her brush down and folded her hands, continuing to watch the mirror. “If it is that important, then speak now, for I will not have you interrupting the play.” For Tauniel, the event was an exciting one as well. Her family could not afford the luxuries that the finer theatres could offer, and had only ever attended the street shows and performances found in the Greater Marketplace. Glorfindel, upon learning this, paid not only their tickets, but for her parents to attend as well — a gift they had happily accepted after many rounds of thanks that made Glorfindel slightly uncomfortable. For him, the theatre was just another form of amusement, and he had never before realized how few in Gondolin had the finances to truly be able to enjoy it.

The pacing continued, though Aranel said nothing. Tauniel muttered a few curses under her breath and went to the closet to find shoes – an easier task than it might have been in the early days of their residence in the suite, now that the clothing had been redistributed into the proper rooms. As Tauniel bent down to retrieve a pair of velvet slippers from the closet, Aranel announced, “Does he realize what sort of message he is sending?”

“What are you talking about?” Tauniel closed the door of the closet and sat down on the bed, watching Aranel walk back and forth, huffing and muttering. “Fine. If you are not going to tell us, Glorfindel and I will take the coach and you can walk.”

“He is condoning it!” burst out Aranel.

“Condoning what?”

“Everything! Everything he ever said he does not believe in. By being in this production he is a propagandist for the Fëanorians!” Aranel shot a look in Glorfindel’s direction. “Even if she can not agree with me, you should be able to.”

“Well, it... it is just a play,” Glorfindel finally answered, truly stuck now and having to take a side.

Aranel narrowed her gaze upon him. “Did you read through it?”

“Of course. I helped him learn his lines,” Glorfindel reminded her.
“Propaganda! And half of it is untrue! It makes all of them out to be heroes, and does it once mention Fëanor's madness? No! Does it once tell how he disgraced his wife in public? No! Does it make mention of his fight with his brother, or the great animosity he had with his stepmother, or anything about the horrific kinslayings? It is a conspiracy, I tell you, one designed to--”

There was a knock on the main door, which Glorfindel hastily went to answer before Aranel could continue. He returned to inform the ladies that Tauniel’s parents had arrived. Aranel took a deep breath, masked her displeasure, and went to greet Taunos and Lasivien.

“Is it just me, or are there times when she is just a wee bit paranoid?” Tauniel asked Glorfindel in passing before joining her parents and secret lover in the sitting room. Glorfindel took a deep breath before he exited the room and jovially entertained his in-laws, neither of whom had any idea that Glorfindel was not really their son-in-law, until it was time to leave.

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The journey to the playhouse was uneventful, and after being ushered to their seats, Lasivien thanked Glorfindel for what had to be at least the fiftieth time since his offer had been made to have his in-laws join them. “It looks so big from the outside, but when you are in here, you can see just how majestic it is!” The ceiling vaulted upwards three stories, with statues depicting the Maiar devoted to Nessa adorning the ledge over the stage. Glorfindel already had the royal box rented for the full duration of this play – forty-two performances spanning six weeks.

“Wait until they dim the lights and open the curtain,” advised Glorfindel. “Then you will see how large the theatre really is. There is space for an entire orchestra behind the curtain, and a balcony for the chorus singers hidden behind a second curtain.”

They did not have to wait much longer for the ushers to beg silence from the audience, but it was not the narrator who stepped forth onto the stage. Wearing full military garb, minus his impressive spiked helmet, Ecthelion marched to the center of the stage with its curtain still drawn. “Might I have the attention of the house? Your attention, please, ladies and gentlefolk.”

When he had control of the audience, Ecthelion cleared his throat and unfolded a sheet he carried with him. “It is my honor to announce to all of you that our time of mourning our beloved King Fingolfin has ended, and that a new king has been crowned not so very long ago, not so very far away. Three cheers from you, good people, for the reign of High King Fingon, brother of our Good King Turgon! Long may they both reign!”

A trio of huzzahs erupted from the audience. Ecthelion held up his hands for calm once again, and over the buzz of the crowd announced, “With the crowning of King Fingon brings forth changes. I shall not list all of them here, but among them is a charge that all able males between the ages of fifty and three-hundred are expected to complete three years weapons and combat training, as a precautionary measure. Over the course of the next two weeks, those who are eligible and not currently trained will be expected to report to the captain of the house to whom they have registered their allegiance. Anyone who does not adhere to this rule will face a penalty of no less than ten years jail and hard labor. All of the new rules and regulations will be posted at all kiosks throughout the city by noonday tomorrow. Thank you for your attention.”

The buzz grew louder as Ecthelion retreated from the stage. In the next box over, Glorfindel overheard one elf explaining to another that obviously the upper-class would not be expected to adhere to such laws that were really meant for the peasants to follow, and not to worry, for the word of Fingon would not hold up in Turgon’s land. As he rolled his eyes, Taunos, who has also heard the exchange, said loud enough for it to carry, “And so it never changes. Those of us who would do right stay at the bottom, and those who do not, somehow rise to the top. Well, I can say with
certainly, if King Fingon thinks it is a good idea for us to be at the ready, then we should be.”

Behind the curtain the musicians were checking the pitches of their instruments, and the ushers began to walk through the audience, extinguishing torches on the side walls and candles in the balconies. The head usher entered the box, bowed to all who were there, and put out the candles before leaving, closing the heavy curtain of the box to keep out the light in the hallway behind them.

The sound of the orchestra died down, and then a single flute accompanied by the softly chanting chorus rose up. Once the audience quieted, a single voice broke through while the chorus fell back and light percussion and harps joined in, and a song of Fëanor’s great deeds and Morgoth’s terrible darkness was sung. The singer ended her part, and the flute was again alone. Then came the chorus again, seven voices, and the greatness of Fëanor’s sons was proclaimed as the curtain was pulled back to reveal the cast. Glorfindel leaned forward and squinted, trying to see which of the seven was Erestor. The royal box was nearly too high up, and too far from the stage. While he generally only suffered from issues with his sight when he read, in the darkness, his vision was blurry. He rubbed his eyes and moved to the edge of his seat.

“I thought Amras was killed by his father,” whispered Aranel, directing her comment to Tauniel, who was on the other side of Glorfindel.

Tauniel nodded. “He was.”

“Then why do they have him in the play like he is still alive?”

“Conspiracy, obviously.” Tauniel sat back in her seat and stared straight down at the stage in order to ignore anything more from Aranel.

Glorfindel nudged Tauniel gently. “Tauni, which one is Erestor?”

“Second from the left. Shh, he is about to speak.”

But when Erestor stepped forward and opened his mouth, Glorfindel became even more confused. “That cannot be,” he said, fumbling in his pocket to find his glasses, no longer concerned about his vanity. “That is not his voice.”

“Well, it is him,” replied Tauniel quickly. “Maybe he just sounds different from this distance.”

“No, I know what he sounds like. That is not Erestor.” Glorfindel adjusted his spectacles and focused on the figure that was walking across the stage, addressing the audience casually. It was Erestor, there was no doubt, but the voice was not deep enough, and the speech was too clear and too well practiced. Searching the stage and then the pit for the orchestra for someone heard but unseen, Glorfindel frowned. “That is not him talking.”

“Shh, yes it is,” hissed Tauniel. “Now be quiet or I will call for the usher,” she half-teased.

Glorfindel watched the rest of the play in an uncomfortable state. Every time Erestor spoke, it made Glorfindel frown. There were two songs sung by Erestor, and neither sounded like him, either. When the curtain dropped, and the applause rang out, Glorfindel made haste in attempting to leaving the box.

“Do you not wish to wait for the curtain calls?” shouted Tauniel over the din.

Bowing to the wishes of the others to wait until the lights in the house were relit, Glorfindel impatiently drummed his fingers against the wall beside the box exit until the usher came around to open the curtain to their private little chamber. Dropping a coin into the usher’s palm, Glorfindel led
the group down the hall to the stairway.

Tauniel momentarily stopped their progress. “When we leave, we will have Erestor with us. That is going to be quite a squeeze in the carriage, and I am sure mother and father are tired. Could we let them take the carriage back now, and send it back for us later? Surely it will take Erestor some time to get out of his costume and makeup.”

Everyone agreed to this, and after exchanging goodnights, Tauniel’s parents took the passage to the exit, while the others journeyed on to the backstage area. They were stopped by a page, but Aranel’s insistence that her husband was in the cast gained them admittance.

It was a bit of a maze, past prop rooms and long counters and mirrors with extras galore, cheering and making merry, before they reached a series of chambers used by the principal actors. The one with Erestor’s name upon it was shared with two others, and the door was ajar. Glorfindel peeked in, and then knocked when he recognized the elf sitting on a chair, staring at the mirror. “Can we come in, or are you too famous now for us?” he teased.

“Hey.” Erestor motioned for them to enter. Costumes were draped over every available surface, and a red-brown wig was sitting in his lap. “You came to see the play.”

“I told you we were going to.”

“Oh, right.” Erestor tried to smile, but gave up.

Glorfindel looked to the ladies for support. Aranel pushed her personal opinions of the subject matter aside and placed her hand on Erestor’s shoulder. “We all enjoyed your performance this evening.”

“I was just let go,” answered Erestor.

Aranel’s hand dropped away. “Oh.”


“Can we discuss it on the way home? I really want to get out of here. You came in a carriage, right?” Erestor was in motion now, gathering up the few items that were his and shoving them into a burlap sack. He had already changed out of his costume and into his own clothing, but now took a damp cloth and wiped off the remaining powder and makeup that made his appearance so unnatural.

“Nana and Adar took it home. It will not return again for us for a while,” explained Tauniel. “We could walk, though.”

Erestor nodded, and rubbed his eyelids with one hand. “I want to get out of here now.”

They took the back exit out of the theatre, and from there, the less traveled roads and paths. Once they were a fair distance from the theatre, Erestor shoved his hands into his pockets, the sack dangling from his belt by a short piece of thin rope. “Two days ago, when we ran through the dress rehearsal here, I received complaints from the director that when I projected loud enough to be heard in the back, my accent made it hard to understand me. They had my understudy speak my lines from backstage while I acted out front; they told me they still wanted me in the production because I would help to attract an audience.”

“There is some truth to that,” spoke Aranel. “I know of five people who came just to see you.”

Erestor stepped closer to Aranel and put his arm around her as the group continued walking. “They were even talking about getting a vocal coach for me... and then the director figured that the added
cost of a vocal coach and someone to cue the understudy backstage was not worth it. So, starting tomorrow, my understudy will be playing Maglor, and I will be playing the part of the unemployed actor.”

“I like your accent,” offered Glorfindel. “They were probably just jealous that you really sound better than they do.”

“I appreciate that, but I think if you honestly consider... Glorfindel, how many times in council does someone ask me to repeat what I have said?”

Glorfindel nodded. “I know, but I still like your accent. I like it when you sing, too. Why did they keep you from singing?”

“Yes, that made no sense. When you sing, your accent is much less distinguishable,” agreed Tauniel.

“They did not want the voice to sound different, and I was having some trouble anyhow. The notes were too high for me.” Erestor shivered slightly and rubbed his nose. “I am sorry. We should have waited for the carriage. Surely you ladies are feeling the chill if I am.”

“We are almost home, and it hardly bothers me,” lied Aranel. “When we get home, we will all snuggle on the sofas, have a little wine, and forget all about this. Tomorrow, you can go to my father,” she said to Erestor, “and let him know what happened. I am sure he will be glad to have you back in command of your company, especially with all of the new recruits he will have.”

Erestor nodded but said nothing, and nothing more was said until they returned. The carriage was just being readied to depart for them, and was instead sent back to the stable. After the long climb to nearly the top of the tower, the ladies retired for the evening. This left the ellyn some time to share a bottle of wine and reflect upon the day.

A bottle of red was selected, which Glorfindel poured into two crystal goblets. He took up residence on one sofa, while Erestor half-reclined upon the other. “I guess that was a waste of three months.”

“Have you thought of trying another acting company?” suggested Glorfindel. “There have to be at least a dozen others that would love to have you on their cast.”

“Not after tonight. Most of the other theatre owners were there, and they talk to one another. I think I can safely say my acting career is over, unless something strange happens. Maybe if there was someone who enjoyed the gestures I was making tonight, and they were the patron of another theatre... no, it is an impossible idea.”

“I suppose you are going to go back to Rog’s army then.”

“That is my last choice,” said Erestor bitterly. “I would rather work as a scullery maid than return to the military.”

Glorfindel snickered briefly at the odd image Erestor suggested, but sobered quickly. “You... almost seemed to enjoy what you were doing in the army, though. And, you were good at it.”

“Are you aware of the deal I made with Turgon?” asked Erestor as he regarded the glass of wine in his hand, holding it up to the flickering light. It cast odd red glimmers of light onto the floor. Glorfindel shook his head. “My decision to join Rog’s army was not really my decision. I was ordered to by Turgon, or else he was going to have me denounced publicly as a homosexual, and then killed in front of that same audience. He turned everything that happened to Aredhel back around on me. Suddenly, it was my fault she left and my fault she died, because I was too busy protecting a friend.”
Shoulders slumped, Glorfindel apologized. “That was my fault. You would never have been in that situation had I kept my hands off of Gildor.”

“No, it was not. I do not think it would have been very long before I did something else that would have brought upon Turgon’s wrath. For the moment, he is appeased. The army kept me busy, and it was to his advantage to have someone with my skills in that position. He seemed less happy when he was informed of my plans to take leave in order to act.”

“Why does he care?” prodded Glorfindel. “Forgive the blatant honesty, but you have gone from being unpredictable to being quite calm and disciplined.”

Erestor smirked. “Like I said, the army kept me busy. I was too tired at the end of the day for arguments and outbursts. These plays would have done the same, but obviously that venture is now at an end, and I am at a loss of what to do to stay in his good graces. I would really rather not go back to Rog’s army. I did not realize just how much I missed my freedom. Then again, what else am I to do?”

Before any other suggestions could be offered, there was a tentative knock on the door. Neither seemed to have any idea who it might be, and after the second knock, Glorfindel went to answer it.

“Good evening, Ecthelion,” he greeted jovially, though his false happiness was not returned. “Good. You are still awake. I know it is late, but do you mind if I step inside to discuss something with you?”

After Ecthelion entered, Glorfindel fetched another glass for wine, but Ecthelion declined the offer. “I have been practicing this, so I will be brief. As of late, there have been some changes. You have spent more time at home and in your scholarly pursuits, and I have spent more time on the practice fields. The training center is filling up, but it is my sections that have become crowded while the numbers in yours have dwindled.”

“I have always intended to return in full capacity,” Glorfindel assured his friend. “This has been a temporary leave on my part. Now, with King Fingon’s decree, I believe I have no choice.”

“Though that may be, Glorfindel, your absence has lasted for a number of decades. When we built the stadium and the barracks, we had decided that if one of our houses surpassed the other by at least twice the number, we could buy out the other half.”

“Ah. So... you are evicting me.”

An awkward silence followed. “The new edict will cause a sudden and unexpected influx of new recruits. I know you were not expecting this, so I would give you until the end of the month to move your supplies and weapons, and to give notice to your soldiers. As a... sign of goodwill, I can offer you one hundred and forty percent of the value.”

“I am not in need of charity, Ecthelion. Just pay me what it is worth and I will remove myself and all that is mine by the end of the week.”

Ecthelion looked to Erestor for some support, but the other ellon was amusing himself with the rosy shadows cast by his wine onto the floor. “Glorfindel, this is not easy for me, but you know how difficult it is to find land now. I have no choice.”

“I understand.”

The Noldo closed his eyes and shook his head. “I can tell from your voice how pissed you are right now.”
“I think this was something that could have waited until morning,” admitted Glorfindel, his words terse, expression unpleasant. “This has not been an evening for good news, that much is certain.”

“What else happened?”

Erestor sighed heavily. “Better it come from me than a gossipy housewife. The theatre company I signed on with fired me.”


“Creative differences,” Erestor said wryly.

“I thought you were good. Your voice was clear and very—“

“That was not my voice.”

“Oh,” Ecthelion looked away uncomfortably. “Well... I will return tomorrow with payment, Glorfindel. I wish there had been a better way.”

“Do you want me to show you out?” asked Glorfindel when Ecthelion did not say anything else.

“No, the, uh, door is right over there. I know where it is.” Ecthelion stood up, and unable to come up with a suitable farewell, simply left.

Glorfindel tightened his grasp on the glass he held. “Fuck,” he said, mouthing the word silently.

“That is an excellent summation of the evening.” Erestor drank the rest of his wine, and then went to the bar to refill his glass. “Would you like more bad news, or shall I save it for the morning?”

“Pile it on,” grumbled Glorfindel. He rested his head on the cushion of the couch and stared up at the ceiling.

“You heard the announcement that Ecthelion made? About King Fingon?” To each of Erestor’s questions, Glorfindel nodded. “Well, I saw a copy of this infamous list of changes, and among them, Fingon is charging that a union between any two elves is valid and not punishable by death, as Turgon has been holding to.”

Glorfindel lifted his head. “Any two elves.”

“Yes.”

“Male or female or whatever.”

“Right.”

“So, this whole thing, with you and I and them and... we could have avoided this.”

Erestor nodded. “If we had only waited six months.”

Glorfindel closed his eyes. “Fuck.”

“I know. I am sorry. I rushed us all into this.” Erestor brought the bottle with him and sat down next to Glorfindel. “Maybe not rushed exactly. We did plan things out. And still, it was my plan. Aranel and Tauniel could have been with each other, and you could have been with Gildor instead of being forced to share a room with me.” He tipped the bottle to refill Glorfindel’s glass.
“I would much rather have you than Gildor.” The words slipped out faster than Glorfindel expected. “I mean… Gildor... he... it would not have worked.”

“In any case, you could be with someone you wanted to be with.”

After a deep drink of wine, Glorfindel said quietly, “It is too bad you are straight.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” asked Erestor with an uneasy little laugh.

“Just, if you ever turn gay, let me know, alright?”

Erestor laughed louder and shook his head. “No, you are much too sweet to deal with anyone as old and grouchy as I am. Besides, I do not think anyone can ‘turn gay’.”

“I said ‘if’. Just wanted to throw my hat in early on, just in case. I already know you are a good cuddler,” Glorfindel said, and Erestor blushed and looked away. “Cute, too, and really intelligent. So, you know, if you just happen to wake up someday and think ‘You know what I have been missing? Someone else’s cock in my life’, then you come and get me right away, alright?”

“Alright, well, if it happens, you will be the first to know, how about that? In fact, I promise to let you have the first go at me. If it happens.” Erestor laughed again. “This conversation is getting ridiculous.”

“Yes, it is, I quite agree,” said Glorfindel, though he was enjoying it and the fantasy daydream being constructed in his head of Erestor suddenly deciding to jump the fence with his sexual preferences. “We should get to bed. In the morning, there are going to be a lot of things to do and decisions to be made.”

“I suppose you are right.” Erestor yawned and stretched his arms over his head. “This has been a most unforgettable day.”

“It certainly has been,” said Glorfindel as he stood and followed Erestor to the bedroom. “Let us hope we do not have another like it for quite some time.”

End: Book One

Chapter End Notes

These are the original notes that accompanied this chapter when it was originally posted:

Author's Chapter Notes:
This story began two years ago, as a 60 second prompt. It has now become even longer than envisioned, and has been split into two ‘books’. This is the end of book one; there is a story that will be an intermission piece, which will go over what is happening with Fingon, Maedhros, et al. during the ‘in between’ time (will be titled ‘Spiraling’) and follow along a bit with Book Two. Book Three of Unforgettable will pick up right around where Spiraling ends.

NEW Author's Notes for 10/13/2017:

Hahahahaha, self of 2007, do I have news for you...
On 10/13/2017, exactly 12 years after I started this work, I finally finished, for realsies, book one. I started it on a college campus. Several chapters were combined, and some were added to, and a few are brand new compared to what was out there for the first 11 years of the life of this story. In order to make it feel 'authentic' in some weird way, I went to another college campus and sat in the back of an empty lecture hall with the lights off to write chapter 39 and edit 38 and 40. I have a lot of feels about today and this story and how it all connects. Tolkien first wrote about Gondolin in 1916-17, and when Unforgettable became more and more spread out, I kept thinking I wanted to completely finish posting all of the books by one of those two years. I still have time for that, so we shall see, but polishing this one off to this point makes me pretty happy tonight. It will be on to book two tomorrow, but I feel like book one was the 'original' Unforgettable (and really, it was). As before, they will all live in this same file, so keep those bookmarks around, darlings, you'll need them in the morning and beyond. If this is your first time reading, thank you for sticking around. If you've followed this from elsewhere, it's so good to know people are still hanging around my vision of Gondolin after all of these years. And for those of you who left this world before I was able to get this out there, I'm thinking about all of you tonight as I look up at the stars.
“What if we built our own theatre?” Glorfindel sorted through the rocks in his pile until he found the one he wanted.

“That sounds expensive,” replied Erestor. “Would we even have enough money to do that?”

“Maybe. Actually, it will be more difficult to buy the land to build it on, although, we might be able to use some of the land that my stables are on. How much money do you have?”

Erestor tilted his head to the side. “From what?”

“From your farming and your soldiering and everything else.” Glorfindel picked up another stone and threw it across the water. It skipped twice, and sunk.

Shifting his position slightly, Erestor nudged a few of the rounder rocks off of the top of his pile and lifted up a thin, flat piece of granite. “Probably... not much? I have some, but just what I need plus a little more.”

“What did you do with the rest, though? Did you save it? Invest it?” Glorfindel sighed at the blank stare he was being given. “Erestor, when you got your profits or when you got your weekly pay, what did you do with the excess – the part you did not need for room and board or other necessities?”

For a moment, Erestor stared back, and Glorfindel wondered if he intended not to answer or perhaps still did not understand him. “Come. I will show you,” said Erestor in order to bring the uncomfortable silence to an end.

Erestor stood up and brushed the dust from his pants. Glorfindel did the same, and pushed the stones off the edge of the fountain they had been sitting on. It became part of their morning ritual over the last few days to take a morning walk after breakfast and end up at Ecthelion’s fountain, where they would skip stones until it was time to return for lunch. Ecthelion was very particular about debris in the fountain, which meant he himself would eventually find the unwanted items and fish them out. Without an office at the present time, Glorfindel took the comments and complaints from those in his house in the courtyard. By far, there were more complaints than comments that week.

There was a great deal of concern in regards to what the Elf-lord intended to do now that there were no barracks or training areas. He had yet to tell anyone that there was no money coming from the king now, either, since Ecthelion’s house had grown to such capacity that the Golden Flower’s meager resources were no longer seen as necessary. A vast treasury, mostly acquired when Ecthelion bought out Glorfindel’s part of their joint barracks, kept Glorfindel’s current soldiers and all debts incurred paid, but it would not last indefinitely without replenishment. It was also a curious thing that Glorfindel was referring those of his house to other houses for the mandatory training, but something no one had yet to question openly. It was more than evident that a new source of income was needed, and fast.

Glorfindel mulled over these thoughts as Erestor led him down the main avenue, and from there down a few lesser traveled paths. They passed the entire length of Glorfindel’s pasture and stables, the last bit of space where the flag of the Golden Flower was still flying. Years ago, Ecthelion had built his own stables aside the barracks, adequate for the few horses he kept, and moved them off of Glorfindel’s land. Erestor walked a few metres further. Then, they stopped.
“This,” said Erestor pointedly, “is mine. From this post, to the forest to the east, and then all the way to the river and across for half an acre, all the way up again, flush with this fence. Actually, a metre or so past, but the fence for the land beside it was here, and it would have cost extra to extend it the extra metre.”

“Wait.” Glorfindel held up his hand. He looked over his shoulder, checking to be sure his stables and horses were still where he thought they were, and then back at the land that Erestor was showing him. “You own this plot of land?”

Erestor looked over at Glorfindel as if he was deaf. “I think I just said that.”

Glorfindel walked up to the fence. “You own... ALL of this?” He motioned with his hands from the post toward the north. “All of this, this is yours?” When Erestor began to nod, Glorfindel burst into laughter. “So you,” he said, pointing to Erestor, “own this,” he motioned to the fenced in area, “while I, own that.” He thrust his arm in the direction of the plot of land directly next to Erestor’s.

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Erestor!” Glorfindel stomped his left foot into the ground. “Erestor, sixty years ago, I tried to buy this land to expand my own area. Do not tell Ecthelion, but I had a plan to build new barracks there, and make him pay out to me for my share of the ones we had together. Of course, I was outbid, but I never knew who else was interested. I was surprised anyone else would want it, considering the location.”

“Oh... so you were the other bidder,” mused Erestor. “I had no idea... well, it was a secret auction, how would I?”

“Erestor, that is not the point! I bid eight thousand for it, and it is only really worth seven. To me, it meant more because of the location, but... why would you have paid nine thousand for it?” questioned Glorfindel.

Looking a little uneasy, Erestor said, “I paid eleven for it.”

“Eleven thousand?!” Glorfindel shook his head, looking around. “Erestor, it would be hard to build on. There are no natural resources, and nothing but the land. At least when I bought mine from Turgon, it came with the stables. Besides, I only paid six thousand for mine.” Glorfindel rubbed his jaw. “Of course, that means there was a third party interested, since I was told I was outbid by a bid of nine thousand.”

“That was me, but my nine was outbid by ten, so I went to eleven.”

“Ah. Hmm. I wonder who else might have wanted it, considering how little it is good for.” Glorfindel looked past the river, but the next parcel belonged to the king, and it was unlikely that Turgon would have intentionally tried to raise the price on land he would already have made a good profit on.

“I was going to use it to farm on. With the access to water and the main road it seemed like a good idea at the time. Then, of course, I had the trouble with Turgon and joined the army and no longer had the time for it. But it would still be good to farm on, probably more for an orchard than crops, to raise the profitability. I just never got around to it.”

Glorfindel looked around. “I suppose you could do that. I admit, my knowledge of farming is still limited. The land would be good for it?” asked Glorfindel. Erestor nodded. Becoming quiet, Glorfindel walked back and forth, looking out over the empty area that Erestor had, and then back to
his own area. “This is perfect.”

“Sorry. I did not know at the time that you wanted it.”

“No, I did not mean it sarcastically. Honestly, this is perfect. All we need to do is take down the fence and we have all the land we need.”

Erestor nodded reluctantly. “You want to build on my side.”

“No... well, a little something. My side has been so trampled, but yours would be great for the horses. I would assume you could still plant trees and the horses could graze around them. On my side, we can build the theatre.”

“Who wants to go to a theatre that smells like horse manure?”

Glorfindel contemplated this new bit of information. “You do have a point. It would be difficult to build structures on yours, though. See how damp the grass is near the water? I have a feeling if we started to dig for a foundation, we would hit marsh or clay.” He leaned his arms on the tall fence that surrounded his stables and field. One of the sickly looking foals tripped its way over and made a sad sort of noise that resembled a whinny. “At the rate things are going,” Glorfindel admitted, “I may not need the stables very much longer. I have my doubts on whether this next generation will be able to breed or not.”

Pushing the gate open, Glorfindel walked with heavy steps to the stable and opened a box that was nailed to the wall. “Ecthelion believes it to be something in the water or that the feed crops have been bad, though Penlodh assures him that nothing has changed.” From it he took a lump of sugar to give to the foal. He frowned when he turned to see it had not followed them, and went back outside, Erestor following.

“I have heard them arguing in council,” said Erestor. They found the foal sitting in the grass nearby, looking utterly exhausted. His mother, who was grazing some distance away, seemed not to notice or even care. “Who do you breed your horses with?”

Glorfindel crouched down next to the foal and offered him the sugar. It was sniffed at, but the horse gave a tired whuffle and leaned his head against Glorfindel instead. “I do that myself.”

Erestor grinned. “I can see how you are having such trouble with them, then.”

“Pardon?” Then Glorfindel heard Erestor snicker, and he shot him a dark look. “Funny, Erestor, very funny. You know what I mean! I do not hire someone to come and take care of it, I just... oh, never mind.”

“Oh, no sulking, Glorfindel.” Erestor crossed his arms over his chest. “What I meant was, whose horses do you breed yours with? Whose horses sire the ones your mares have, and who do you lend your stallions to?”

“Nobody. Why would I want to give them the advantage? And why would I want to taint the lines I have here? My horses have been pure for centuries. I will not take a chance now at having mottled coats and odd colored tails.”

Looking down at the struggling foal, Erestor said, “You will have no horses at all if you continue like that. Hundreds of years, and you have not interbred? No wonder the horses here are all dying.” He began to walk toward the gate.

“Where are you going?” demanded Glorfindel.
“Stay here. I will be right back.”

Glorfindel spent the time alone coaxing the young horse to stand, and after a few failed steps, actually carried him to the mare. “You take care of your baby, Sunshine. No more abandoning him.”

The mare snorted, and stepped away as soon as the foal tried to nurse.

Giving a snort of his own, Glorfindel walked to the front of the creature and dropped down on one knee. “Look at me.” When the horse continued to graze around Glorfindel’s leg, he took hold of her head and forced her to look at him. She clenched her teeth and glared, but did not pull away. “If you are not going to take care of him, then I am sending you off to be made into glue. You want to be made into glue?”

The horse snorted.

“Then take care of your baby.” Glorfindel let go and stood up. He helped the foal to stand again, and this time when the baby started to suckle, the mother stayed put, harrumphing and gnashing her teeth.

A whistle caught Glorfindel’s attention, and he turned to see that Erestor had returned. His friend was riding bareback upon a midnight colored stallion with pure white boots and hooves. Trotting beside him was a dark grey mare, dappled with light grey and brown. “Which ones are your stallions?”

“I only have two. They are still in the stables; they rarely come out anymore.”

Erestor dismounted. “So, if I bring her to them, are they going to be able to handle it?”

“To tell you the truth, I am not sure.”

With a nod, Erestor patted the side of the darker horse. “This is Dragonsong. I doubt you will need to tell him what to do... well, and there he goes...” Erestor and Glorfindel watched as the black stallion sauntered his way down to the end of the pasture where a trio of mares stood.

“Who is this?” asked Glorfindel, nodding at the grey mare Erestor led into the stable.

“This is Aranel’s horse, Cloudancer. Hopefully she will not mind.”

“Who, the mare or your wife?” wondered Glorfindel as they made their way to the stall where two somewhat elderly male horses resided. Each had a thick blanket draped over their back. One looked slightly stronger and was chewing slowly on his feed, while the other stood stock still, staring wistfully out the window that faced outside. Down at the far end of the field, Erestor’s horse was mounting one of Glorfindel’s. The blond became flustered after watching the dark stallion ride the xanthic female for a few moments, and so rushed to close the shutters and block the view.

“Is that Pumpkin?” asked Erestor, somewhat disbelieving. “I did not know he was still around.”

Erestor left the mare outside of the stall while he slowly entered and approached the forlorn male.

“Poor thing is losing weight and will not tell me what is wrong.”

Gently, Erestor touched the horse’s side, pressing just a bit as he went. He reached midway before the animal suddenly flicked his ears and pulled to the side. “Some sort of growth, I fear. There is a tumor inside of him, right here... steady, boy,” whispered Erestor when the horse flinched again.

“Is there nothing we can do for him?”
“Other than what you are already doing for him, I do not believe so. He just needs to be kept comfortable.” Erestor rubbed the side of Pumpkin’s face, frowning at the sunken features. “If it was one of mine... well, he is in pain, Glorfindel, and I hate to see him suffer as he starves and wastes away.”

The other male seemed to sense what was being discussed and raised his head from the feed basket. Stepping over, he forced Erestor out of the way and stood between the Elf and the horse. “This one is Birch,” Glorfindel said in reference to the lighter, younger male. “Pumpkin sired Birch, and Birch sired Lemon Drop.”

“Lemon Drop?” Erestor looked around in confusion.

“The little one outside that probably will not make it.”

“Oh,” Erestor nodded. “It seems Cloudancer is getting impatient.” The young mare was pacing at the gate, and nudged it a few times to try to get in. “Is there an empty pen we could take her and Birch to?”

For the better part of the afternoon, the pair waited outside, checking every now and then on the horses in the stable. Each time they checked, Cloudancer would be prancing herself about looking rather discouraged, while Birch ate and Pumpkin watched from across the stable, eyes glued on the newcomer. As they began to watch people heading home after work for supper, Erestor shrugged his shoulders. “I suppose we will have to hope for the best with your mares, because your stallions are of little use.”

“That is that, I guess,” resigned Glorfindel. He opened the gates to lead Birch back to the large stall he shared with his father, but as Birch lazily made his way down the aisle, Cloudancer pushed past and entered the main stall. Pumpkin sprang into action immediately, circling around her. Shoving Birch out of the way, Pumpkin mounted Cloudancer.

“Never underestimate the power of experience,” joked Erestor as he quickly led Birch back over to an empty stall.
Chapter Notes

The title for this chapter is taken from a suggestion by Aglarien that the entire work be called 'Horse Opera'.

As soon as Erestor walked into the apartment, he was shoved against the wall. Aranel poked her finger against his chest and glared at him. “What did you do to my horse?”

“Nothing.” He glanced at Glorfindel and then looked back at Aranel. The two of them had finished their business at the stables late, and after returning the horses to the House of the Hammer, had gone to the library to find books with examples of theatres in them. Erestor handed the books he had checked out to Glorfindel before addressing his wife again. “Why? Is something wrong?”

Aranel narrowed her eyes further, looking at him from tiny slits. “My horse is not right. What did you do to her? My father said you took her and your horse out for nearly six hours today, and now she is exhausted. What were you doing?”

“Do not blame Erestor. He was trying to help me out.”

Turning her attention to Glorfindel, but allowing no quarter to Erestor, Aranel waited for an explanation. “You have ten seconds to tell me what the two of you did.”

“We were breeding my horses,” said Glorfindel, and at once Aranel became even more furious. “Mine are all sickly, and—“

“I know that! Everyone knows that! Do you think I want mine getting the same disease yours have?” Aranel kept shouting, tears running down her cheeks. “Maybe horses are just things you own to you, but I love my horse, and if she gets sick now, I will never forgive you for it! And you! I know that legally you can lay claim to all that I own, but this was beyond measure. You might have at least asked me!” For a moment, it looked as if she was going to turn around and leave, but Aranel drew back her hand and slapped Erestor hard across the face. He did not so much as flinch. “I really do not like you right now,” she said before retreating to her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

From the couch, Tauniel sighed. “Sorry. She has been in a mood all day, before the horses. We had lunch with her parents, and Rog kept asking what you were going to do with your life. This just put her over the edge. I think you might have to find supper on your own tonight.”

Glorfindel nodded as Tauniel set her knitting aside and quietly walked across the room. She knocked on the bedroom door before letting herself in and disappearing as well. He turned to Erestor and motioned to his cheek. ‘Do you want me to get a cold cloth for you?”

Erestor shook his head. “I thought I was getting the calm, reasonable one, and you were getting the spitfire.”

“Surprise,” said Glorfindel after a few seconds. He tugged on Erestor’s sleeve as he opened the main door again. “Where do you want to go, the king’s hall or Ecthelion’s place?”

“Neither. I may still say something regrettable to Ecthelion, and Rog will be in the hall.”
“Still avoiding him?”

“As long as I can. So far, I have done quite well when you consider I have yet to miss a council meeting and still have managed not to be confronted.” Erestor walked with Glorfindel down the hallway. “We should try one of those outdoor places in the valley.”

“You mean the pit?” Glorfindel’s comment received a nasty look from Erestor. “What?”

“Just remember, the undesirable people who live there are the ones who are not as fortunate as us. Undereducated, underpaid, and underappreciated. They cook the food in our halls and clean our chamber pots; I could go on but I think you get the idea.”

Glorfindel nodded meekly. “I did not mean to say that. I just hear everyone else say it—“

“And if everyone else jumped off the Echoriath, would you follow them?” Erestor shook his head. “If you want a world where someday no one remembers the vile definition of ‘unclean’, then I would suggest you give consideration to others who are different for a different reason.”

For the rest of the walk, Glorfindel was silent. They passed away from the tower and down into an area where the buildings were small and crowded together. No ornate gardens were found here, but instead, there were backyards filled with clotheslines and choking gardens. Some of the buildings were constructed so that the living quarters were on the upper level and the lower would be a bakery or a bar. One such spot advertised with a picture of a fish head over the door, and this one Erestor led Glorfindel to.

There were three people in a line at a large open window. Steam rushed out and upwards as a sweaty ellon wearing a grease-covered apron greeted customers and handed them paper cones filled with wedges of potato and chunks of fried, battered cod. As Erestor approached the window, holding up two fingers and depositing a pair of copper pieces into a jar on the counter, Glorfindel exclaimed in fascination, “Look, they reuse the old newsfolios to put the food in!”

“We reuse everything here, m’lord,” said the fishmonger as he held out one of the cones to Glorfindel, and the other to Erestor. “Sorry; we ran out of lemon.”

“Not to worry. Your fish is good even without, Vardir.” Erestor led the mesmerized Glorfindel down the path as he began to eat the morsels from his paper dish.

“This is really good! Much better than the dry stuff they serve at the outdoor games.” Glorfindel frowned, licking the oil from his fingers before he reached in for another piece of potato. “Why does Turgon never serve this in the hall, if the same people who cook here cook for him there? It is far better than some of those dry game birds, and there is far more flavor in this than in the fish I have had there.”

“Well, this is peasant food to him,” explained Erestor, enjoying his meal as they walked. “Just wait until we finish this and find a pub. You will be amazed at how different the ale tastes.”

“Do they have wine?”

“They might,” said Erestor. “But tonight, we are going to stick with the general fare, and that means ale. Wine is something left for special occasions down here.”

Glorfindel followed Erestor’s lead, crumpling his empty paper cone when he was finished and tossing it into one of the communal fires that was burning in a common area near a small well, where large pots of water boiled for cooking, bathing, and washing clothes. They came around a corner to a pub that seemed to have a steady flow of patrons, and Erestor casually entered. Glorfindel was
slightly more hesitant, but it was that or stay outside. He followed Erestor.

Music was provided by a very lively duo, consisting of an ellon with only one leg playing the fiddle and a spirited young elleth with a patch over her right eye singing bawdy lyrics. Those at tables nearby cheered them on; those at the bar were carrying on hushed conversations with each other or sat alone with their thoughts. Erestor walked to the bar and leaned on it with his elbows until the server came over and set down a large foaming mug with a heavy thunk. “My friend needs one, too,” said Erestor, tossing a coin onto the counter.

The server slapped his hand down on the rolling piece of metal, pocketed it, and filled another mug. This one he set a little further away, and upon looking up at Glorfindel as the young elf approached, gave a click of his tongue. “Blimey. Thought it was odd enough seeing a ginger in here once and then, but you really are a different one.”

“Uhm... thanks...” Glorfindel picked up the mug in both hands, and lifted it high enough to sniff. He tried not to look too appalled by the strong smell of the ale.

“Glorfindel, stop analyzing and just drink it.” Erestor was already halfway done with his pint and motioned to the bartender, who came over, drying a mug as he warily approached. “What sort of scotch do you have on hand?”

“The kind you should not drink,” was the reply.

Erestor grinned. “Not to worry. I want a double of whatever is strongest. My friend here will help me find my way home,” he said, slapping Glorfindel on the back. Glorfindel nearly sunk his nose into the foam of his drink. “Oh, come on, Glorfindel, drink it already.”

Glorfindel, still holding the vessel with both hands, brought it up to his lips and took a tentative sip. Erestor rolled his eyes. “What?” questioned the blond, swallowing hard in an attempt to make the taste go away.

“Not like that. Like this!” Erestor hoisted up his own mug with one hand and drank until there was only a little left, then set it down on the counter. “I fear I need another of those to go with the scotch.”

The bartender looked as if he was going to argue against it again, but he looked to Glorfindel, who had pushed the mug slightly away. “You know where this rogue lives?”

“I certainly do, and I will be certain to get him back home again.” Glorfindel looked at Erestor and said, “Does your wife know you come down here to drink?”

Erestor held his finger to his lips mischievously, and used his other hand to pull Glorfindel’s mug closer. “I have never asked her if she does or not.”

The bartender snorted as he retrieved one of the ornate bottles from a shelf behind the bar. “Wives are the reason most of us drink, and most of them let us to keep us from getting in their way.”

“Not my wife,” muttered Glorfindel. “I am quite happy to drink not because of her, when I do drink, which is seldom.” He hid his shock when Erestor downed the hard liquor he was brought, and then the rest of Glorfindel’s ale, only to request another glass of scotch.

When the bartender brought over two mugs, the one he set in front of Glorfindel was much darker in color than Erestor’s. “Try this,” offered the bartender.

Warily, Glorfindel sipped this new concoction. “No alcohol. What is this?”
“Vanilla beer. We make it for the stable boys and pages who come in here. They think they are old enough for the real stuff, but then they turn into lazes. Since they never know what it should taste like anyhow, they never figure out they are getting a forgery. It gets brewed in a similar manner, but made with honey and vanilla and some sort of roots.” Tipping the bottle of scotch to refill Erestor’s glass, the bartender gave Glorfindel an apologetic look. “Good luck dealing with him when he is done.” He set the bottle down on the counter and walked away.
Getting Erestor back home was more of a challenge than Glorfindel expected, mostly because he was not familiar with the surroundings of the valley, and without many streetlights, he took them down dead-end paths more often than not. Eventually, they managed to find the road that led to the upper-class portion of the city, where posts with hanging bowls of oil lit the way back to the tower. On their way back, Erestor’s singing of loud, obnoxious drinking songs earned him a ticket from the night watcher. The ticket was promptly dumped into a garbage bin, but fished out by Glorfindel following a stern look from the watcher and a promise to lock them both up in the jail for the remainder of the evening if they did not get home and keep the peace.

Instead of trying to ready Erestor for bed, Glorfindel dropped his friend off on the couch on his way into the bedroom. The heavy scent of alcohol was not one he appreciated while trying to fall asleep to, nor did he want to take the chance that the alcohol that Erestor had imbibed would suddenly be expelled from one end or the other. A few minutes after undressing and crawling into bed, Glorfindel heard the unmistakable sound of someone bumping into the bar, followed by the uncorking of a bottle and the pouring of something into a glass. Sighing heavily, Glorfindel pushed the covers down and dragged his robe from the peg on the back of the door. Emerging from the bedroom as he knotted the sash, he found Erestor hovering over the counter of the bar, pouring liquid into a glass, drinking it, pouring more, drinking that, and so on. “I think you have had quite enough for tonight.”

“I can still think coherently, so, no, I have not likely yet so far, and furthermore.” Erestor gave a nod and poured another glass.

“Yes, you have.” Glorfindel walked over and gently removed the bottle from Erestor’s hands. “You can have more tomorrow, but now it is time for bed.”

“My head hurts too much to sleep,” mumbled Erestor, his hand still holding the glass as he was herded into the other room. He did not fight against Glorfindel as he was pushed down to sit on the bed, his boots removed for him. After Erestor downed the rest of his drink, he put his hand on Glorfindel’s head and lovingly stroked his golden hair. “What would I do without you?” he asked, setting the empty glass aside on the mattress so that both hands were free to caress the tips of Glorfindel’s ears.

In a moment of shock, Glorfindel stayed knelt on the floor, looking up at Erestor, whose eyes were focused upon him, he lips slightly open in wonder. Glorfindel breathed in as Erestor’s fingertips moved slowly along his jaw, and then back into the golden hair. “I would rather not dwell on that.” Glorfindel gently pushed Erestor’s hands away before he reached up to untie the belt and unfasten Erestor’s trousers. Erestor resumed his petting of Glorfindel’s head instead. “Umm... maybe you should finish with this,” Glorfindel said. He quickly took the glass from where it rested on the mattress and stumbled to stand after he discovered the slight bulge in Erestor’s leggings.

“Mmm? Oh, alright, then. Have to learn to take care of myself sometime, eh?” Erestor fumbled with his belt and pants, and ended up shoving down everything, including his undergarment, into a pile on the floor. He sat down on the edge of the bed again, wearing just his shirt now, and looked down into his lap. “Huh.”

Glorfindel blushed and scuttled over to the other side of the room to examine the state of the unlit candles.

“Well, this is a little odd.” Erestor poked at his erection, pushing it slightly to one side. He looked up at Glorfindel, who was now putting the dirty laundry into the hamper near the door. “Did you do
“Certainly not,” answered Glorfindel. He turned down the bed, and after another glance over at Erestor said, “Stop playing with that.”

“Why? No one else will.”

“Just stop it, alright? You are drunk,” stuttered Glorfindel, who kept stealing glances at his roommate.

Erestor placed his hands against the mattress, thrust his hips forward, and held the obscene pose. “I thought you liked to see this sort of thing.”

As he crossed the room, Glorfindel picked up a clean, folded sheet and tossed it into Erestor’s lap. “Not from you.”


Glorfindel narrowed his eyes, tilting his head slightly. “What do you mean by that?” he asked, heart beating faster.

“Nothing.” Erestor tossed the sheet back in the direction of the chest of drawers where they were stacked. He missed, causing the sheet to splay out on the floor. “Why am I so tired?”

“You drank an entire bottle of... something. You have to sleep it off. Get into bed.”

Erestor turned around to crawl into the bed, and promptly fell off. Glorfindel sighed, and came around to help his friend get back up and under the blankets. “Good night,” he offered, though Erestor was already dozing off. He kissed Erestor’s forehead, and then snuggled himself in for the night.

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The very next morning, Glorfindel arose late, and assumed he had missed the wakeup call that Aranel usually provided. He turned his head to see that Erestor was still asleep, eyes closed, and curled up with one leg draped over the side. A gentle nudge did not wake him, so Glorfindel decided to leave him for the time being, and ventured into the sitting room after putting his robe on.

Aranel and Tauniel were on the sofa, carrying on a discussion related to gardening and when the best time was to harvest certain berries. The appearance of Glorfindel earned him a sour look from Aranel, who then excused herself and disappeared into the other bedroom. “Obviously, she is still not happy with us.”

“She is far from pleased with either of you. I would stay well away until she and Erestor manage to smooth things over. She even forbade me to come and wake you this morning, or to ready breakfast.” Tauniel looked over her shoulder, and then said in a hushed voice, “But I could make something for you if you like.”

“No, I would not want to cause a rift between the two of you. Besides, I think tea is about all I can handle at the moment, and I am having lunch with Egalmoth this afternoon,” explained Glorfindel.

“I have news for you, Glorfindel. It is past noon already.” Tauniel frowned as Glorfindel rubbed his forehead after cringing. “I am certain he will understand.”

“Who is going to understand what?” Erestor, eyes squinted half shut, came into the room and
stopped just a few feet away. “And why is it so bright in here?”

“Let us see what he recalls from last night,” said a slightly amused Glorfindel, almost forgetting about his noontime engagement. “You took me to a pub, where you decided to get drunk.”

“Did I? Good for me.” Erestor wandered into the kitchen. A few curses later, he returned with a mug in his hand. “This coffee is cold,” he announced.

“That coffee is from yesterday,” said Tauniel amusedly. “Here, give me that and I will warm it for you.” She approached, and took the mug from him, ushering him to the couch. “Stay here. I will be right back.”

“Stay here... where does she think I am going to go with a hangover.” Erestor pulled one of the pillows up from the couch, and used it to help shield his eyes from the meager amount of light streaming inside. “When did you get home last night?”

Glorfindel walked to the windows and began to draw the curtains. “Same time that you did. I was the one who walked you home. You took me to get dinner, and then we went to a pub. You do not remember?” Erestor shook his head and dropped down on the couch with a groan. “You really were drunk, not to recall that.”

“Not were, are. Are drunk, Glorfindel, I are drunk. Am. I am drunk.” Erestor put the pillow over his face as he splayed himself out across the cushions. “How much did I drink?”

“An entire bottle of something that made you uninhibited enough to sing a couple of songs and denounce King Thingol as an asshole and a guttersnipe and a number of other things that I will not repeat, and a few things I did not understand, but highly amused the patrons.” Glorfindel lifted the pillow slightly and asked, “What exactly is a balicker?”

“Hmm... oh...” Erestor chortled, but stopped abruptly and put a hand to his head. “Ow... a balicker... I think I meant a ball licker.”

“Oh. Nevermind, then, I know what that is.” Glorfindel let the pillow flop back down, but lifted it once again. “You really do hate King Thingol.”

“Yes, though I am certain the feeling is quite mutual.” Erestor grabbed for the pillow to pull it back down. He tossed it off as he smelled the coffee being brought in from the kitchen. “Tauniel, you are a life saver.”

“I do what I can.” She lowered her voice and said, “You might want to do something to make things up to Aranel. She feels fairly well betrayed by you, regarding what you did to her horse.”

“She will get over it,” said Erestor as he sat up to drink his coffee.

Tauniel shrugged. “Alright. Do what you think you should do.” She and Glorfindel exchanged a sideways glance before Tauniel excused herself to go to Aranel.

Once they were alone again, Erestor rubbed his head and looked at Glorfindel. “How bad was I last night?”

“Hmm? Oh. Well, you did not throw up on me, and that was primarily what I worried about,” admitted Glorfindel.

“I meant as it relates to what I said or did,” Erestor explained. “I have a habit of saying a lot of things I would never say sober, then forgetting everything I said or did when the alcohol wears off. I just
hope I did not say anything to upset or offend you.”

Glorfindel recalled the exchange in the bedroom the night before. “You said a lot of nasty things about King Thingol,” reiterated Glorfindel.

“And that was it?” Erestor sipped his coffee. “I have a tendency to run my mouth when I drink. I am surprised I stayed on one topic.”

Uncertain how long he could converse without bringing up the odd encounter from the night before, and now with the sudden revelation that perhaps everything Erestor said and did was not because he was made unaware by the alcohol but instead that the alcohol provided unmasked clarity, Glorfindel stood up. “I think I am going to bathe and then see to the horses,” he said, and he quickly left the room.
It had been a month since Erestor had put into action the plan to interbreed Glorfindel’s horses with others in the realm. They were fairly satisfied that at least four, including Aranel’s horse, were pregnant. “We will need to watch them closely and make sure they come to full term, which should be a little less than a year from now.” Glorfindel was making notations in a ragged book he had that listed all of the previous breeding at his stables. “Do you think you can bring Dragonsong out again? Cordial Cream is back in her heat.”

“Of course. We still might want to find another stallion to use, otherwise we will only prolong things another generation or two. We have to be more aggressive about this venture.” Erestor was lounging on the couch and having a glass of wine, while Glorfindel was perched on the arm of the sofa at Erestor’s feet. “We need to acquire more mares, too. It will help make the foals stronger, the more we can mingle lines.”

“I believe we are going to exhaust our resources sooner than you think. I could try to purchase a few, but horses are more sought after than you can imagine, Erestor.” Glorfindel tapped the feather end of the quill against his cheek as he thought. “I suppose that is all we can try to do, though.”

“Taunos owns a pair of horses.”

“Yes,” confirmed Glorfindel.

“See if we can borrow them. We do not need to purchase more necessarily, if we can borrow mares, and keep the foals. I will ask around and see if there is anyone who is not having successful breedings. Those are the horses we have to try for. We could offer a small fee for just attempting the breeding, and if there is a foal born, then we give them a bonus sum.”

Glorfindel frowned. “What about the ones who keep the foals afterwards? There will be some who will go back on the deal once they know we can breed their horses.”

“Well, we could set up another course of action, and charge a higher rate for a successful breeding with one of our stallions, working on the same principal. They pay for use of our stallion, and if they end up getting a foal out of it, then they pay us another fee on top of that.”

“Do you think anyone will actually agree to that?” wondered Glorfindel.

Erestor swirled the wine in his glass before drinking from it. “It does not hurt to try.”

A very faint tapping came from the window of the balcony. Erestor put down his goblet and swung his legs back around to stand up before Glorfindel could even wonder what the noise was. He walked briskly to the balcony and opened the glass door. In hopped a thrush with a tiny metal tube attached to its left leg.

“What is that?” asked Glorfindel curiously, standing up now as well.

Erestor had picked up the thrush, which was now sitting in his hand. “Private message.” He walked to a bookshelf and picked up a thin metal rod, which he inserted into the tube. The thrush waited until a little rolled scrap of paper dropped into Erestor’s palm before flying up to perch on top of the bookshelf which Glorfindel had never noticed before. “Friend of mine in Doriath.”

“We get regular deliveries from Doriath. Why do you need to use a bird?”
“Because the messages need to be sent in secret, and not via Gildor. He reads everything.”

"But the letters are sealed," commented Glorfindel.

Erestor laughed. "He keeps a collection of wax and seals with him so that he can make it seem like they were never broken."

“Oh.” Glorfindel sat back down in his chair. “Is there any news of interest?”

“Nothing I can discuss... well, I suppose I could but I do not know if you would really understand it.”

“Try me.”

“Alright.” Erestor read through the piece of paper and then said, “Daeron is still in love with Luthien, she still is not in love with him, and Thingol’s hoard grows ever larger. Oropher has continued to side with Thingol in every matter, though he refuses to pledge aid to Thingol in the case that something should happen.”

“Who are these people?” asked Glorfindel.

“No one you know, and no one of great importance to you. Thingol is the king in Doriath I apparently like to curse in song when I am drunk; he fancies himself king of all Beleriand, but it is far too vast for him to control, and he is truly not up to such a task anyhow. His wife is powerful, a Maia, and that is most of how he has been as successful as he has been. Luthien is his daughter, and Daeron is a talented minstrel who would make Salgant sound like a court jester. Oropher is the king of Greenwood, and grandfather to Laiqalasse.”

Glorfindel joined Erestor at the desk, where his companion was setting out quill and ink. “So who sends the messages?” he asked, taking a seat beside Erestor on the bench.

“Saeros, a friend of mine in Doriath. However, Saeros is also the chief counselor of King Thingol, and since Thingol would rather I not even exist, my being friends with Saeros is not something he needs to know. Saeros would lose his position, and more than likely worse.” Erestor gave Glorfindel a sideways look. “You do know I was Thingol’s chief counselor before Saeros.”

“How would I know that, Erestor? You rarely tell me anything about yourself. I knew you lived there, but I did not realize you worked for him in a courtly capacity or that was the position you held. It does explain how Turgon so readily accepted you when you arrived here, though.” Glorfindel leaned his elbow on the desk so he could rest his cheek against his hand while watching Erestor write. “So, you used to be chief counselor to the elf you hate the most.”

“Yes. Only, at that point in time, I actually had quite a lot of respect for him. It was after Thranduil’s wedding that he started to investigate me. I would have left then, had I thought the others would have been safe without me there. Maybe I should have left then. Once he found out who was who, I was really the only one he had issue with being there.” Erestor shook pounce over the ink on his tiny message. He whistled, and the thrush flew over and lifted his leg. After inserting the message into the hollow tube, Erestor took the tiny bird to the window. “Then again, I would not have seen her again. Whether that was a good thing or not, I am not certain.”

“Her?”

“Artan—Galadriel. I keep telling myself I am never going to utter her name again, and it just keeps happening anyhow.” To the thrush, Erestor said, “Safe journey, little friend, and thank you.” He held out his arm, and the thrush flew away.
“I think we should check on the horses,” said Glorfindel after they watched the thrush disappear into the clouds.

“You go on ahead. I want to see if I can sneak Dragonsong out again.”

Glorfindel nodded, put away his notes, and tucked his spectacles into their case on the table. He doubted he would have any reading to do at the stables, and it was less worry on him that they might fall out of his pocket and be stepped on, or get bent by an excited horse nuzzling him in order to find some treats. As an afterthought, he grabbed a bag of candy from the kitchen, and then headed down to the stables.

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“Erestor!” Glorfindel looked around, feeling as if there could be a spy from the House of the Fountain lurking in the trees. “Are you mad?”

“I thought you had established that several years ago.” Erestor was leading not only his horse past the fence of Glorfindel’s property, but had also gained permission to borrow Taunos’ equines as well. The fourth was a tall stallion who looked slightly perplexed as to where he was going, but did not fuss over it. “Ecthelion was not home, so I took that as an invitation to give his horse a little exercise.”

“He is going to kill me. Ecthelion is going to kill me.” Glorfindel shook his head as Erestor grinned and walked past him, letting go of the reins of all four. “He is going to kill you,” he added, poking his finger into Erestor’s chest when he turned to face him, “and then he is going to kill me!”

“Shh, relax. He will never find out.” Erestor patted Glorfindel’s shoulder. “See? Dragonsong is taking care of Saddle Sleeper quite handily, and as soon as High Stepper figures out what to do with Featherflight... ah, there he goes... I will take him back to Ecthelion’s stable.”

“Wha—How—Someone had to have seen you,” Glorfindel protested. “Someone is going to know!”

Erestor pressed his palm against Glorfindel's mouth, and Glorfindel's face turned a rosy hue as Erestor looked at him intensely. “No one is going to know anything as long as you stop shouting like that.” Erestor drew back, and then closed the gate and leaned against it, watching and waiting for the horses to finish their couplings.

Glorfindel, on the other hand, turned away, blushing furiously. “Give them a little privacy.”

“How am I to know when they are done?” asked Erestor, but he turned around anyhow. After standing with their backs to the horses for a few minutes, Erestor checking over his shoulder every now and then, he finally said, “I cannot see why you refuse to let me watch.”

“Pervert,” shot Glorfindel as Erestor started to laugh at him.

“Takes one to know one,” answered Erestor in a singsong voice as he walked away to retrieve Ecthelion’s mount.

Erestor picked up another rock. “I wonder how long Aranel is going to refuse to talk to me.”

Phh-glub.

“I would ask her, but she stopped talking to me, too. Then again, being as she is not my wife, it makes very little difference that she is not talking to me.” Glorfindel pushed his stones over to Erestor, who had exhausted his pile early, as was becoming custom. “I think we should go to the lumberyard now, scout out what they have, eat lunch, and then go back and put in an order before we go to the masonry.”

“I thought we were going to find out about the lumber after we buy the bricks.”

“Yes, but the more I think about it, the more I think we should get the lumber first,” said Glorfindel. “Prices on bricks stay fairly steady; prices on lumber, if they know how much you need it, will jump. We buy the wood before the gossip starts, and then they might just think we are making things with it, like a bed or a dresser or something. If we buy the bricks first and someone mentions it to the woodcutters before we get the price, I know for a fact it will end up being much more expensive than it should be.”

“Good idea. You are the expert when it comes to trade and finances, Glorfindel, I will not argue with what you choose.” Erestor pulled his arm back to release another rock, but the sound of someone clearing their throat right before them in the busy courtyard made him pause. “Good day, Laiqalasse. Care to join us?”

“Actually, I have a message for both of you from Ecthelion,” said the Sinda. “He asks you kindly to stop clogging his fountain with rocks, or else he will be billing you for the damage and maintenance.”

“If he wants people to leave the fountain alone, he should put it in his house and not in the middle of the thoroughfare,” explained Glorfindel calmly. He took the stone that Erestor was holding and skipped it skillfully across the water. “And, if he does not want anyone to put rocks in it, then he should not line the bottom of it with rocks.”

Laiqalasse sighed heavily and shook his head. “It is no longer in the center of the courtyard as once it was, Glorfindel, what with the buildings that have been erected around it.” Ignoring the snicker from Erestor, Laiqalasse continued. “This area is maintained as a historical marker of the old days of Gondolin, and the Lord of the House of the Fountain would appreciate it if you would leave it alone!”

Erestor was about to answer back, but Glorfindel stretched his leg out and dug in his pocket. “Here. How much does it cost to fill it with water and pull out a few dozen rocks? Two silvers? Three?”

“I would not know the exact figures, but that is hardly the point,” said Laiqalasse quickly.

“Maybe five or six?” Glorfindel counted the money and then held it out, but Laiqalasse took a step away. “Go on. I can pay for his silly fountain to be kept in working condition if he is too cheap to do so.”

“I certainly hope the two of you decide to grow up some day.” Laiqalasse turned and began to walk
back to the path that led to the House of the Fountain and of the Tree.

Glorfindel dropped the coins into the fountain, one by one. “I wish,” he said loudly, “that Ecthelion would stop sending you to give me messages and come and talk to me like he used to do, when we were friends, for now he is a coward.”

As the last coin fell into the fountain, Laiqalasse turned back around, brow furrowed. “Perhaps you think you are being slighted, but how oft have you come to seek him out over the past months? What friendship is this, that you would sit here and spite him, and mock his character? I shall not repeat what you have said, for I hope it an unfortunate and unintended slip of the tongue -- but any future slander will have serious implications.”

Glorfindel did not answer Laiqalasse, and the Sinda went back into Ecthelion’s house. “What happened to the sweet elfling you told me about when he first came here?” questioned Glorfindel as he and Erestor stood and dusted off their pants. Erestor shrugged as they made their way through the crowd to the lumberyard.

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Following their excursion into the marketplace and to the various crafters, Glorfindel and Erestor returned to the king’s tower for dinner with Aranel and Tauniel in the main hall. A peace offering from Erestor to Aranel of an opal necklace and matching bracelet made the meal the first civil encounter since the day she discovered her horse was pregnant. Afterwards they retired to one of the many social rooms instead of returning to their apartment. The ladies drifted in the direction of the ‘powder parlor’, as Elenwe’s Hall was often referred to, while the ellyn continued on to the Hall of the Harpers, where Salgant hosted nightly gatherings in order to have an audience to sing and play to. “Are you sure we will be welcomed here?” wondered Glorfindel.

Erestor nodded. “Salgant seems to have made an offering of peace, giving me the fiddle, and as of yet I have not thanked him for it properly. Going to hear him perform is a start.” They each pushed open one of the doors that led into the dark room. There were no tables set up, but there were many servers with plates of food mingling among the guests. In one corner, Salgant sat at his harp, pudgy fingers amazingly caressing the strings with such elven grace that both Glorfindel and Erestor were temporarily stunned at the door. The sound of someone coughing behind them made them move further into the room.

“He is good,” commented Glorfindel. “Better than when he plays in the courtyard or the king’s hall.”

“He is very good,” Erestor agreed. He plucked two goblets of wine from one of the trays as it came past. “Not many places to sit down.”

“No… look, there is Duilin. Shall we go make friends with him again, too?” joked Glorfindel, but Erestor’s look was thoughtful. “I was kidding. Here, there is a quiet corner at the window.” The pair wandered in that direction, getting closer to Salgant and his harp. “Maybe you should have brought your fiddle.”

“That would have been rude. This is his performance.” Erestor sipped the cherry wine, and looked around. “Rog is here.”

“We should go,” said Glorfindel quickly.

Erestor shook his head. “No, he has spotted us already. It looks as if he is coming over. Besides, I have a confession to make. He asked me to meet him here tonight. I cannot avoid him forever.”
“Great.” Glorfindel took a long drink of wine, and then waited until Rog was a few feet away. “Rog, so good to see you.”

“Likewise, Glorfindel. Erestor.”

“Sir.” Erestor saluted smartly, having placed the wine on another passing tray before his father-in-law came over.

Rog made a wave of his hand. “At ease. For now. We need to talk before you go.”

“We could speak now if you like.”

“Alright.” Rog tipped his head back, finishing the whiskey in his glass. “I want you to be happy with what you are doing with your life, Erestor, since your happiness and my daughter’s happiness are directly related. However, I also want to make sure you are able to support yourself, and my daughter, and any children you might have in the future. Your leaving the army was contingent on your keeping your job with the acting company.”

“I know that.”

“Yet you spent a number of months unemployed.”

“Actually,” spoke Glorfindel, “he has been helping me with a project I have been working on.”

“Does this project offer him regular wages? An actual position?”

“It will,” defended Glorfindel.

In the corner, Salgant finished the song he was playing, and a reserved applause came from the few ladies who were in the room. He motioned a server over, but upon catching sight of Erestor and Rog conversing, he stood up and called over an apprentice to play for a little while.

“My good friends, good evening.” Salgant waddled over to them and smiled in a way that was not entirely unpleasant. Glorfindel noticed for the first time, that if Salgant ate a few less meals in the day and walked a few extra miles, under the bulged cheeks and extreme girth, he was probably quite attractive, with his dark, silky hair and soft grey eyes. The thought went right out of his head, and he resisted the urge to shudder. Had he just imagined Salgant as being attractive? Apparently so, he realized. Quickly, he concentrated on his wine, and on listening to the conversation.

Rog gave a pointed look in the direction of a group of chairs that no one was using, and the party drifted slowly to that location. Once they were seated, Rog leaned forward to regard Erestor, who had chosen to sit across from him. “We have worked out a plan, in order for you not to break the terms of your probation, and so that you might pursue your own interests as well.”

“There is a rumor that you are planning to do some building, Glorfindel, and that you are considering your own playhouse. I do not mean to question your sudden interest in the arts, and it is your prerogative to make such a decision, but I think you will find it difficult to hire many good actors as so many are already a part of established guilds.” Salgant waited to see if Glorfindel would answer, but the blond said nothing. “I will assume it is true, then. Although it is noble to help your friend,” he motioned to Erestor with his chubby hand, “you are not so blind to know that there are certain risks. Are you really willing to take those risks? How much are you willing to lose?”

“There is interest enough in another theatre, I think,” answered Glorfindel carefully.

“If that is true, then I shall reopen mine.” Salgant chuckled jovially at the expression on Glorfindel’s
face. “You did not know I had one, did you?”

“But you do have one,” argued Glorfindel. “There is a concert there every other week.”

Salgant traced his fat fingers over the pattern of water lilies that was woven into the fabric of his chair. “That is my concert hall, Glorfindel. My theatre is on the other side, connected by an enclosed walkway. It may be hard to see it now with the weeds and shrubs that have grown up around it, but fear not, I will hire someone to tend to the landscaping. A fresh coat of paint, a new curtain, and it will be suitable for plays once more. I wonder how long it would take to build one up from the ground these days. Four or five years, perhaps?”

“Three to six, according to the masons.” Glorfindel drummed his fingers on the armrest. “I think I can see where this proposal is going.”

“Excellent, for I cannot. I do not honestly believe that another theatre can be sustained. There is a finite amount of playgoers in the city. But then, you must have had some clever plan, Glorfindel. Your young mind comes up with ideas the rest of us would never dream of – and sometimes, they actually work. So tell me, what was your plan?”

Glorfindel sighed in defeat. “My plan was to build a playhouse with reasonably priced tickets and comfortable seats, featuring entertaining plays. Obviously, Erestor was going to play a large part in the entertainment side of things, whereas I would oversee things financially,” said Glorfindel.

Rog frowned deeply. “After what happened last month at the White Fawn, I cannot believe you were seriously going to cast Erestor on stage in a lead role.”

Glorfindel bristled at the comment. “I had a way of working that out.”

“What were you going to have him do, mime?” Rog looked now at Erestor. “Erestor, you know I have great respect for you. I would never have even considered your petition for my daughter’s hand in marriage if I did not. However, this is ridiculous. What Glorfindel is saying is nonsense. You are not an actor, nor will you ever be.” Erestor bowed his head and studied his hands.

“Musicals,” shot Glorfindel before Rog could further berate Erestor. “We were going to do musical productions. Everything was going to be singing and dancing.”


“See? I told you he had an idea of how to go about it.” Salgant rubbed his chin. “I could see reopening the theatre as the Fox Hill Musical Playhouse.”

Slumping in his chair, Glorfindel shook his head. “Well, go on then, steal the plan we had. Ruin us both.”

“Child, I am not stealing your plan, I am modifying it. You have already admitted to the fact that it will take many years to construct a new building. Using my facilities hurries things along. Erestor could be upon stage again before the year is out.”

“There has to be a catch,” said Glorfindel, not believing Salgant was really offering something so generous.

Salgant smirked. “Not really a catch, just a contract. I will reopen the theatre and pay for the improvements and advertising. The two of you will do whatever you planned to do once you had your theatre built. I will expect sixty percent of the profits; the rest you may do with as you wish.”
“Forty percent,” bargained Glorfindel. “We will need to pay the other actors and musicians, as well as ushers and ticketers.”

“Fifty percent. The actors and musicians will be on my payroll already. You will have full access to the members of my guilds. Tickets can be handled through the main office. The ushers you will need to hire.” Salgant held out his chubby hand. “Do we have a deal?”

Glorfindel looked to Erestor for confirmation. Before he could get Erestor’s view on it, Rog spoke again. “There is another stipulation.”

“That I reinstate myself in the army,” guessed Erestor. Rog nodded. “I doubted you were here simply to help negotiate a deal between Glorfindel and Salgant.”

“If Erestor is back in the army, he will have no time to practice, and reopening the playhouse will be pointless,” argued Glorfindel.

“It would not be full time. I need you twice a week to teach hand-to-hand combat and occasional seminars on archery and torture techniques.”

Glorfindel choked on his wine. “Torture techniques?”

Erestor ignored his query. “I thought you had three archery instructors.”

“I do,” confirmed Rog. “You have a different way about it, though. Your methods are much more practical. I would rather a few of them end up with slight wounds from your lessons and not get killed on patrol than to have them follow the procedures and protocols and not make it back home alive. That is also why I think the recruits need to be exposed to your talk on torture.”

“I think you know what my answer and counteroffer is going to be,” said Erestor. "There are a limited number of roles to be portrayed by someone with short hair."

Rog nodded. “I still believe it is a battle hazard, but I am not going to force you to cut your hair if you come back. I have more need for a good teacher than an obedient soldier, in this case.”

A smile played Erestor’s lips. “Then let me offer you this. When we get the summons from King Fingon to go to war, because I will not delude myself into thinking we will not, I will be the first in line at the barber.”

“I am going to hold you to that,” warned Rog, but his manner was much warmer than it had been earlier, and he and Erestor shook hands.

“Well?” Salgant thrust his hand out to Glorfindel again. “Do we have a deal, then?”

“Aye.” Glorfindel grasped Salgant’s hand. “Shall we meet tomorrow to discuss details?”

“If you like. Perhaps we should luncheon together after the council meeting. I will make arrangements for food to be brought here. You are both welcome to join us, of course,” said Salgant to Erestor and Rog. Salgant’s nose wrinkled as he looked past Rog, and he grumbled, “There are days when I begin to wonder if I should make this room invitation only.”

Glorfindel looked over his shoulder to see what had turned Salgant’s stomach. Standing in the doorway was Enerdhil, the master jeweler. There was an ellon beside him, his arms around the tall, muscular elf’s waist, but Glorfindel could not make out who it was.

“Ever since Fingon made his little changes to the rules, I have seen things I never wished to see.”
Salgant pulled a cloth from his pocket and dabbed his forehead with it. “Did you know, Egalmoth thought I was one of them?” He waved his handkerchief toward the door. “Now we get to watch Enerdhil and his nightly display. I certainly hope Gildor will go back to Doriath sometime in the near future.”

Having apparently heard his name, Gildor separated himself from Enerdhil and sauntered over to the group. “Good evening, m’lords.” Gildor came up to stand behind Glorfindel’s chair and placed his hand upon the blond’s shoulder. “We were hoping to hear you play, Salgant. It disappoints me to see you at rest instead of at your harp.”

Glorfindel shrugged off Gildor’s hand and Salgant gave Gildor a cold look. “Am I not entitled to rest as well?”

Gildor’s mouth drew into a fine line and he tilted his head a little. “If you like.” He gazed down at Glorfindel. “It would seem I am not so very welcome here, but perhaps you and I might speak in private, Glorfindel. I thought we might catch up a little.”

“I think I should be going.” Glorfindel stood up, but when he turned to Gildor, he surprised him by saying, “I will have to decline your offer, Lord Gildor. My wife is no doubt anticipating my arrival to bed.”

“I see. Good night, then.” The Noldo looked to Erestor, as if he might say more to him, but then wandered back to Enerdhil and clung to the jewelsmith while Glorfindel’s other companions stood up as well.

“Indeed, we should retire for the evening,” said Erestor. “Until tomorrow,” he said to Rog and Salgant, bowing slightly to each of them.

Salgant made a motion to the door with his hand. “I will accompany you to the hallway.” Rog gave an acknowledgement to Erestor’s obeisance before mingling into the crowd again.

At the doorway, Salgant shot another look of distaste at Enerdhil and the messenger following on his heels. “We all knew someone in the council was, but I never imagined it to be Enerdhil.” Salgant’s clear eyes met Glorfindel’s. “Truth be told, I always thought it was you. For that, I apologize. I owe the same to Egalmoth, now that I know the truth. I suppose we shall simply have to live with it now. Good evening.”

After offering their farewells and making it a fair distance from Salgant’s sanctuary, Erestor turned to Glorfindel. “Things are going to be different some day. They are going to change slowly, but they will change.”

“I know,” said Glorfindel, trying to sound positive, but his expression was too easily readable.
Glorfindel squinted in the dim light of the theatre. “Was that a rat?”

“No, that was a mouse.” Erestor took another step, then skittishly stepped back. “THAT one was a rat,” he confirmed.

“And still is.” Salgant pushed past Glorfindel and Erestor, with Duilin following behind him. “The first order of business will be to assess what needs to be done to renovate the theatre. I have no doubts that extermination of the rodents will be top of the list.”

Glorfindel frowned, looking up at the height of the massive building. “That is going to be expensive.”

“We can bring the cats over from the barn instead of hiring a rat catcher,” suggested Erestor.

“Good idea.” Duilin reached up and pulled down a thick mass of cobwebs that was in their path. “Most of the windows will need to be replaced. The glass shifted and the panes are ready to break. When there is a storm, the rattling is very annoying.”

“I will make a note of that.” Glorfindel had already noted a number of problems in his log book, and was rethinking the entire idea. Had it not been for Erestor’s sake, he likely would have given up without taking another step into the dilapidated building. He ducked as a few displeased bats screeched and flew overhead and out an open door.

The main curtain was hanging mostly off the beams and had a large rip across the front of it. Salgant rubbed his chin. “I wonder if we could mend the curtain I already have.”

“It would help save money,” agreed Glorfindel.

“There is another option,” suggested Erestor. “If you mend the curtain, it could be swapped with one of the ones hanging across the back part of the stage so that the repair would not be so visible.”

Glorfindel nodded and made a note of this as well.

“All of the seats will need cleaning,” said Salgant. “I would also suggest changing the candles in the chandeliers. Most of them have cracked due to age.”

As the group wandered through the theatre making comments on other items that needed to be cleaned or fixed, Glorfindel began to tally the amounts in his head. Just as he was about to call off the entire plan, Salgant put his arm around him unexpectedly and said, “So, if you pay for the materials for these renovations, I will pay the salaries of the cast and staff including the ushers, and the cost of labor to have the tasks completed. Once the theatre is in shape, you will only need to pay for the routine maintenance of the facilities. I just need to know what you were planning to produce so that I can budget for a large enough cast.”

“I had not considered which play to do yet,” said Glorfindel, but Erestor interrupted to answer the question.

“Have you heard of a play entitled ‘The Tears of Sirion’?”

Salgant smirked. “Trying to curry Duilin’s favor, Erestor? You know, he wrote that in about five days.”
“Actually, I think it is a brilliant play, if I do say so myself. And I do.” Duilin doubled back around from where he was standing examining the ladder that led into the orchestra pit and linked his arm with Erestor’s. “Which character were you planning to portray?”

“I was thinking that Umbereg might be the part I would be best for.” Erestor watched Duilin crinkle his nose in dismay. “Not a good idea?”

“I think you would be much better suited to play the part of Prince Gellin. I thought you wanted to play lead.”

"That would be most desirable,” said Erestor, "but the part is written for a tenor, and I cannot reach some of those notes."

"I happen to know a musician who could lower the register.” Duilin turned his head to acknowledge Salgant, who affirmed this with a nod and a wave. "Congratulations. Now to find the rest of the company." He and Erestor walked to the audience area and sat down to talk about their ideas in casting the roles, while Salgant brought out an abacus and led Glorfindel onto the stage, where there were some props set up from a previous play, including some rather comfortable chairs that were draped with dust covered sheets.

Salgant threw off one of the sheets, causing a cloud of dust to billow up and settle onto a broken harp. “Are you familiar with the play that Erestor and Duilin are discussing?” Glorfindel shook his head. “Well, I am. I had to listen to it being read over and over and over when he was writing it. We need a total of fourteen actors and three actresses, plus understudies. Then, you need a chorus.” The beads on the abacus began to be manipulated as he sat down on the uncovered chair. “At least twelve. Maybe twenty. I am going to assume that there will be dancers, too, for the intermissions?"

“I... I have no idea.”

“Duilin!” Salgant looked over to where the other two were sitting. “I need to know if you have dancers in that play!”

“I might.”

“How many?” insisted Salgant.

“Depends. How much are you willing to loosen your purse strings?”

“How willing are you to train my soldiers over the next few months so that I can be sure your play is not a flop come opening night?”

Duilin pantomimed firing an arrow at his friend. “Ten dancers and a chorus of twelve for singing.”

“I was going to have twenty in your chorus,” called out Salgant.

“Did I say twelve? I meant twenty.” Duilin resumed his private discussion with Erestor while Salgant moved beads further down on the abacus.

“We need a cleaning staff and stagehands and a number of other assistants as well,” said Salgant. “Will you need a personal assistant?”

“Why would I?”

Salgant shrugged. “I always do. Makes me feel important. Try it; see how you like it.” He flicked a few more beads.
“Are you sure you are going to be able to pay for the cost of the salaries for all of these people?” questioned Glorfindel. “I mean... you are going to need a fairly large staff for a theatre this big.”

“I am well aware of that. What you have to remember is that I used to pay out much more, since I used to maintain this theatre besides. Having a business partner who will be taking care of those costs will make things easier, and profitable, for both of us,” explained Salgant.

Glorfindel lowered his voice. “About that... may I make a suggestion? Instead of us having a formal agreement to be partners, would you mind terribly if instead you remained the owner and director, and I was simply the patron or some such thing?”

“A patron does not normally draw a profit,” said Salgant bluntly.

“I know. I was thinking... if you would be amiable to it, that the excess could be filtered into Erestor’s salary, perhaps a bonus or some such thing.”

Salgant’s eyebrows rose. “That seems highly irregular. It would be a very strange sort of arrangement to have.”

“It is because... well, you see, the reasons are quite selfish. If I make money on this, I will be greatly taxed by Turgon. The plan I had with Erestor was originally to have him claim the profits of the theatre I was to build.”

“Ah... yes, of course, since he is not a lord, not really, he does not have the same tax penalties for acquiring a large amount of wealth. Of course, if you are donating the money for the renovations, you will not be taxed on that either... so essentially, you are filtering your money through me in order for Erestor to obtain it and pay far less. I can follow the rest. It is a very clever plan, and one I wish I had thought of first.” Salgant nodded. “I agree to your terms, Glorfindel. Let us hope that Turgon does not catch on to your scheme.”

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Glorfindel and Erestor had lunch with Salgant and Duilin at the House of the Harp, after which, they sat down to make a listing of possible musicians, dancers, and actors who were in Salgant’s house that might be able to fill roles. “We can have an open casting call, but this way we will know ahead of time who to keep an eye on, and for what. Of course, Erestor, you will need to partake in the auditions so that it does not seem as if we just gave you the part,” said Salgant.

“Which is exactly what we are going to do,” laughed Duilin. “Are we going to need to have costumes made, or can we get by with what we have in storage?”

“I think for this play, we need to have new costumes made. No one expects a grand reopening with the same old things they saw eighteen years ago.” Salgant walked to a shelf in his study and brought forth a small book that contained a listing of various crafters he had dealings with. “I think we should see if the ones who did the costumes for the final production we had are still in business.”

“No, Salgant, remember how long it took them to finish? We ended up using something else for the chorus than we originally intended, because they never finished the costumes we ordered in time. We lost money on that production because we ended up altering all of those chorus costumes in the last few days right before we opened, and of course everyone could tell they were from the previous shows. No. We cannot use them again.”

Salgant scanned the pages of his book. “What about the couple that made the costumes for ‘Winter Song’. They did a good job. A little on the expensive side, but those really held up.”
“We still have them, actually. The costumes, not the designers,” clarified Duilin. “I believe they are still in the business of it.”

“Excellent. We should go to see them and find out if they can handle this project.”

Glorfindel cleared his throat and asked, “When are we planning to open?” Both he and Erestor had left most of the conversation to Salgant and Duilin, and a few times throughout, they exchanged uncertain looks unseen to their business partners.

“The repairs are going to take a couple of months, and the practices and such at least three more. Perhaps six months from now, to be sure that we need not move the date,” said Duilin.

“Or, we could hold the practices while the repairs are going on,” suggested Erestor. “If the repairs to the stage are done first to make sure that there are no safety issues, I am certain that we can work around the upholsterers and cleaners.”

“That might cut the time a little, but I think we should think in more practical terms. Even if everything was conducted at the same time, it would put us at four months. I think it would be hard to find a costumer who could come up with the full order in that time. Normally, we would have plays planned out two years in advance, so we were hiring for the jobs up to two or sometimes three years ahead of time,” Duilin explained. “That also means as soon as we cast this play, we should start thinking of what to do for the next one.”

Erestor nodded. “True. I guess I was just trying to come up with a quicker solution. I should be going, though. I need to stop at Rog’s training field on my way home.” He stood up, and Glorfindel and Duilin did the same. “Shall we meet again tomorrow?”

“I think we shall have to. There are still a number of things to go over. We can post the casting calls tomorrow as well.” Duilin clasped Erestor’s arm. “I am looking forward to your portrayal of Prince Gellin.”

“And I am looking forward to that challenge.” Erestor turned to Salgant, clasping his arm as well. “I hope that from now on the rest of our meetings will be this pleasant.”

“I suppose we both owe apologies to each other,” considered Salgant.

With a brief shake of his head, Erestor replied by saying, “We are better forgetting than trying to forgive.”

“In some strange way, I believe you are right about that.” Salgant nodded and smiled. “Good day to you, Erestor.”

“Good day to you as well, Salgant.” Erestor picked up his own notes from their discussions as Glorfindel gathered his. “There is no need for you to leave on account of me.”

“I thought I would go with you,” offered Glorfindel. “Unless you would rather that I not?”

“No, that would be fine.” Erestor waited for Glorfindel to say his farewells before they left Salgant’s house and made the trek across the lesser market and across the courtyard to get to the practice fields that Rog and Penlodh trained their soldiers on.

A group of fairly new recruits were lined up on the field, each of them looking worn out and apprehensive. Rog was pacing in front of them, and not looking very happy at all. “Shit,” muttered Erestor as he shoved his things into Glorfindel’s arms before jogging ahead to where Rog and the recruits were.
Glorfindel hastened his step in order to get there a little faster, and he caught a bit of the dialogue that Rog was having. “I care very little whether you are a new recruit or a seasoned officer,” he shouted at the line of fresh faced soldiers, “you will make sure that you appear in uniform, and on time. This,” he said, pointing at Erestor, who was standing at attention, mimicking the pose that the recruits were in, “is completely and utterly unacceptable. No uniform. No training boots. No weapons. Lack of punctuality. Lack of discipline. Do not strive for this.”

Without regard for the fact that he was intruding upon another lord’s domain, Glorfindel marched up to Rog and tapped him on his shoulder. “If you will excuse your Captain, he was with me this afternoon attending to matters of importance.”

“No, I will not excuse him,” countered Rog, who was not at all enthusiastic to see Glorfindel standing beside him. “However, I will take into consideration that you claim responsibility for this matter. Is this true?”

“Uhm... well... yes,” said Glorfindel carefully. “I asked him to attend a meeting with me, and then detained him when he made an attempt to leave.”

“Since he is unprepared to demonstrate battle techniques using blades, and since you are here, perhaps you might remedy the situation by aiding him in a display of hand-to-hand combat examples,” Rog suggested.

“I suppose I could do that.” Glorfindel looked down at the clothing he was wearing and at the papers and things he had been holding onto. “Just a moment while I find a suitable place to set these things.”

“Of course, of course. Take your time,” offered Rog.

Glorfindel noted the sarcasm in Rog’s voice as he passed by Erestor, who was giving him a look of trepidation. Ignoring it, Glorfindel set the items he had beside a rock, which he used to weigh them down. He removed the quilted jerkin and embroidered silk shirt he had worn to the meeting with Duilin and Salgant. Erestor still remained frozen in the position he had taken up since arriving as Glorfindel walked back over. “Where should we proceed?”

“Right here,” said Rog, motioning to the spot where Glorfindel and Erestor were standing. “Erestor, you should probably remove your tunic.”

“Yes, sir.” Now Erestor pulled his tunic over his head, dumping it off to the side. “Your command, sir?”

“Are you ready, Glorfindel?” Rog stepped away, off to the side. When Glorfindel nodded his head, taking up a stance with his legs a little more apart, his hands lifted up in front of him in a typical blocking position, Rog gave a nod. “Captain! Varda Two!”

Before Glorfindel could even think, his balance was taken from him and he was flat on his back. He could hear the recruits murmuring among themselves as Erestor looked down at him. “Sorry. I thought you would have seen that one coming.” He held out his hand to help him up.

“Soldier! No talking to the enemy!”

Erestor stepped back abruptly, back at attention. “Sir, yes, sir!”

“At ease.” Rog encircled the pair as Glorfindel slowly sat up. “It is vital to memorize certain verbal commands, and certain non-commands. Who can guess what Varda Two means?” Rog pointed to the recruit whose hand went up first.
“It means to use a low kick around, like he just did.”

“Step forward, son.” Rog took two paces closer to the recruit he had singled out. “This,” he said, suddenly grabbing the soldier around the chest and throwing him down, “is Varda Two. This,” he said, after helping the recruit up, “is also Varda Two.” Rog executed a roundhouse kick, knocking the recruit back down. “Does someone else want to tell me what Varda Two means?”

“Sir?” One of the other recruits was raising his hand as Glorfindel got back onto his feet. “I think it means to take down your opponent in any way possible.”

“Very close,” said Rog, and to the relief of the recruit, he did not give another example before the explanation. “It means to take down your opponent in one move.”

With a wicked look in his eyes, Rog glanced at Glorfindel, and then back at Erestor. “Captain! Varda Two!” This time, Glorfindel stood his ground better, making Erestor hesitate. “Remember, he needs to do it in one move, because that is the command he has been given,” explained Rog to the recruits as they waited for Erestor to do something.

Erestor snorted, and drew back his arm to throw a punch. Glorfindel raise his arm up to block, but the impact came against his sternum as Erestor tackled him down. “Close enough,” said Rog as Erestor stood back up, leaving Glorfindel coughing on the ground.

This time, Glorfindel sat up, but did not stand. “How much longer does this session go?” he asked. A few of the recruits snickered and one even dared laugh.

“Until nightfall,” said Rog as he offered his hand to help Glorfindel back up. “Do not worry. We have many, many more things to demonstrate.”

“I was afraid of that,” mumbled Glorfindel, rubbing the back of his head.

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“Glorfindel, I am so sorry. I had no idea he was going to involve you in the entire thing.” Erestor peeled back the chunk of raw meat that Aranel had placed on Glorfindel’s cheek and shook his head at the bruise that was forming.

“It was my own fault for stepping in like that. I should have just gone home.” Glorfindel winced as Aranel touched a particularly sensitive welt on his thigh. “I did not realize how out of shape I am.”

“From now on, I think I should go to teach Rog’s recruits on my own. I need to be sure I am on time in the future as well. It will be more than frowned upon if I am late again.”

Glorfindel fidgeted on the couch until he was in a more comfortable position. “Not having barracks or a training field or soldiers has really taken a toll. I need to figure something out, and fast, or I risk losing my house.” This sudden revelation made Glorfindel’s headache worse. “I have no idea what to do anymore.”
“I know what you did with my stallion.”

Glorfindel glanced warily over to the fence, where Ecthelion was standing and leaning on the wooden rails. “Uhhh... nice day for it,” Glorfindel tried, to which, Ecthelion laughed.

“Galdor pointed out that I may well have been thoughtless in how I approached you regarding the fields and barracks. It has been depressing without the companionship of Erestor and yourself. I apologize; I should have handled things better.” Ecthelion stuck out his hand through the fence. “Truce?”

“I guess...” Glorfindel walked around the fence to Ecthelion so that they could properly shake on it. Ecthelion turned to offer his hand again, and Glorfindel grasped his arm. This lasted only a moment, until Ecthelion was pulled into a hug. “I have missed you, you idiot.”

“Likewise.” Ecthelion patted Glorfindel’s back and straightened up again. “So, does this mean I can stop sending the gardener out every morning to clean out the fountain?”

“Perhaps. I have such a good stockpile of good skipping stones; whatever shall I do with them now?”

“I have another incentive for you to stop,” offered Ecthelion. He gave a whistle, and down the lane came a pair of horses, led by squires of the House of the Fountain. “Someone has been watching you and Erestor, and reported to the king what you have been doing. I do not want you to get into trouble with anyone, so I am offering you the use of two of my breeding mares. If your experiments work, it will mean a great deal. You can keep the first and third foals and so on, but if you are successful, I want the second and fourth and henceforth. I will have others in the future for you to borrow in the same manner as well. My stallions are at your disposal. If this works, I will speak in your favor to the other lords as well.”

Glorfindel nodded. “I think I can agree to that. If I might ask, who was the snitch?”

“Who else but Maeglin? Watch yourself, Glorfindel,” said Ecthelion as the gate was opened for the horses to be brought into the pasture. “He is looking to establish himself as a lord, and he is not too particular about who he displaces. If I had to choose, it would not be you, but he sees you as an opportunity. Do not give that to him.”

“I will be careful. Thank you for warning me.” Glorfindel was slightly put off, for he now knew that Ecthelion’s peace offering had an agenda attached. Keeping Glorfindel’s house strong was in Ecthelion’s best interest, if he did not wish Maeglin to rise in power. Further pleasantries were exchanged before Ecthelion headed back to his house, and Glorfindel went back to the tower to track down Erestor and share this news.

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“Erestor is looking for you,” Aranel informed Glorfindel when the blond entered the apartment. “He went to the stables to find you.”

“I just came from the stables.” Glorfindel frowned. “We must have walked right past each other without noticing it. Do you know why he was trying to find me?”

“Actually, Celebrimbor came looking for you, and Erestor said he would deliver the message.”
“Who?”

“Celebrimbor... Enerdhil’s apprentice. It had something to do with a project that you had approached Enerdhil about that he did not want to undertake. Apparently, Celebrimbor has some interest in it.” Aranel handed a cloth sack to Glorfindel as he began to leave. “Lunch, since I know the two of you will not make it back in time.”

“Thank you.” Glorfindel gave Aranel a quick kiss on the cheek. “Give this to Tauni for me,” he said, kissing her other cheek.

“That, and more,” promised Aranel with a wink. Glorfindel grinned and headed back down to the bottom of the tower.

As he began to pass through the courtyard, Glorfindel was stopped by Lord Galdor, who beckoned him to walk down the path that led to the Houses of the Fountain and the Tree. They fell into step together, and as they passed by the fountain of the old courtyard, Galdor said, “Laiqalasse has brought to my attention that you are in need of a practice arena.”

“Aye, until I am able to build something suitable, we are a little homeless, as it were.”

Galdor nodded. “I have a deal to make with you, if you are willing. My house is not so large as most, but we are strong. However, with the new decrees set forth by King Fingon, I have some worries about my soldiers. Laiqalasse has taken it upon himself to teach them the use of bow and arrows, but I need them to have instruction in fighting with blades. If you might lend to me three or four lieutenants to teach such things, I would allow you use of my arena until you are able to build yours.”

“I would offer one better to that. Let us, for now, combine our forces, and split the practice time. While my soldiers teach yours how to swordfight, yours can teach mine sling work. I would willingly pay rent to you for use of the arena until my fields are finished.”

“That seems fair, but I hardly need to beg rent from you. As an offer of goodwill, use my arena. It sits idle often.” Galdor raised his hand as Glorfindel began to protest. “If you attempt to argue the point, I shall retract my offer.”

“Then I accept your offer. It would be foolish for me to pretend I have a contingency plan.” He clasped Galdor’s arm. “I appreciate this, my friend.”

“Just wait until you see just how terrible my soldiers are with sharp pointy objects. You may rethink your appreciation.”

Shortly thereafter, Glorfindel made his way back to the stables, where he found Erestor sitting on the fence with a length of straw jutting from his mouth. “Stop chewing on that and come have lunch with me,” said the blond as he locked the gate and dangled the sack of food before heading to the stable. He dumped the contents of the sack out onto the desk and hummed to himself as he waited for Erestor to join him.

The straw was still dangling out of Erestor’s mouth when he appeared in the doorway. “I noticed we had more horses in the pasture than usual.”

“Those are Ecthelion’s. He brought them by this morning.”

“All eight?”

Glorfindel looked up and frowned. “Now, I know your math is inaccurate at times, but there should
only be two, not eight.”

“Then you might want to come out and count for yourself.”

“I can explain that,” said one of the young stable hands that Glorfindel employed to take care of the care, cleaning, and feeding of the horses. He had been passing by behind Erestor and doubled back when he heard the conversation. “Those were brought over by Lord Laiqalasse, but they are also from Lord Ecthelion’s House of the Fountain. He said it was worth it to try with all of them, if you were willing.”

“Oh. Thank you,” Glorfindel dismissed the hand, and then motioned for Erestor to sit. “Have something to eat. I am famished from chasing you all over the city this morning, and from what I understand, you should be likewise.”

Erestor pulled a stool over to the desk and settled onto it while Glorfindel unwrapped the bread and cheese that had been packed for them. “Celebrimbor was the one who was trying to find you. He managed to make a prototype of something you gave him the plans for and was very interested in another project that you had talked to Enerdhil about.” He pointed to a crate that Glorfindel had yet to notice. “Whatever it is, it is in there. And heavy.”

Glorfindel set the bread down on the cloth it had been wrapped in and approached the square wooden box. It bore the symbols of Enerdhil’s house upon it, and was sealed with wax. The design was one that Glorfindel was unfamiliar with.

“That is the device for Feanor’s house,” explained Erestor once Glorfindel had stared at it for a long enough time without admitting he was confused. “Celebrimbor made it; he is Feanor’s only grandchild.”

“Celebrimbor? Quiet little Celebrimbor?” mused Glorfindel incredulously as he broke the seal in order to remove the lid.

“Aye. He is Curufin’s son, but the rumors I have heard tell he was raised by his mother. Strange story, if you have the time for it.”

Glorfindel turned his head and nodded for Erestor to continue as he began to lift piece after piece of armor from the box. It was brilliantly damasked in gold, and curiosity brought Erestor to where it was to finish the tale.

“You have seen Celebrimbor, so you know how fair he is.”

“Aye.”

“Well, Curufin certainly was not. He was cross, therefore, when his son was presented to him with an amazingly fair complexion and blond hair. Immediately, he demanded to know from his wife who she had slept with. Since there were very few possible candidates, when she swore to him she had not, he started to look around. The only blond in the vicinity was his brother. When he confronted Celegorm, he replied that he did not know if he had slept with her or not.”

“Hold on... is that even possible?” interrupted Glorfindel. He was not sorting out the pieces as he unwrapped the cloth that was around them, carefully examining each of them as he did so.

Erestor shrugged. “Celegorm is a vile, perverse ellon. He has a nasty sense of humor, and a very dangerous attitude. I would not be surprised if he either thought it would be funny to say such a thing, or if he truly had no idea who he was bedding. He is greedy, and there were rumors in Valinor that he approached the wives of others, and sometimes, there was more than that.”
“But again, just rumors.”

To this comment, Erestor bristled. “More than rumors, then.”

“You saw it happening?” asked Glorfindel as he set one of the beautifully crafted pieces on his desk.

“It was told to me directly.”

Glorfindel could feel the anger flowing from Erestor. “I always thought it was Feanor you hated; you just dislike him. I can tell you hate Celegorm.”

For a little while, Erestor was silent as he decided how to respond. Finally, he answered with, “It should have been him who died on the ships and not Ambarussa Ambarto.”

“So... you REALLY hate this elf. Who did he try to proposition? It must have been someone you knew. Was it Artanis?” asked Glorfindel, keeping his voice low as he dared use Erestor’s former lover’s name.

“It was my mother,” answered Erestor darkly. “I was there when it happened. I nearly knocked him on his ass, but he caught himself, and I was not going to start a brawl in a library.”

“Oh... Oh my, that is perverted.” Glorfindel shook his head. “He propositioned your mother in a library. I would be pissed at him if he tried to do anything with my mother, too.”

“He did try to do something with your mother,” said Erestor. “Your father hit him so hard he flew into the wall. Then he laughed.”

“Who, my father?”

“No, Celegorm. I was there for that incident as well. It took both Orodreth and Finrod to hold your father back while Aegnor shoved Celegorm out of the room. Most of the time, I think he was drunk while he did it. He never tried anything with Artanis, though. I think he knew he stood a good chance of being hit by her if he went too far, and she would not have pulled punches.”

Glorfindel held up the breastplate, a smile spreading across his face. Instead of being one solid piece, it was multiplated in a herringbone design. Near the center, a sun was rising, with rays spreading out from it. “What did Curufin do to Celegorm when he told him he did not know if he had slept with his wife?”

“Nothing, really. Curufin exiled his wife for being unfaithful to him. His parting blow was to name his son as if he was Celegorm’s instead, wanting nothing to do with him.”

“He believed Celegorm over his wife?” asked Glorfindel. Erestor nodded. “That is just insane.”

“And now you know why they call the Feanorians mad.”

“Celebrimbor does not seem so,” argued Glorfindel as he stood and held up the armor. “I cannot believe Enerdhil told me it could not be done. Help me put this on; I want to test it.”

Erestor set the cheese he had been eating back onto the desk and dusted the crumbs from his hands before coming back over to help Glorfindel put the armor on. “We could do this after lunch, you know,” insisted Erestor after his stomach made a discontented noise.

“It will not take very long. I do not need all of it on. Here, take my sword.” Glorfindel handed the weapon to Erestor, who held it steady with the blade pointing to the ground while Glorfindel
checked over the plating. “I hate to scratch it up, but sometimes it is necessary to know it will work before commissioning more. Go on, then.”

“What?”

“Strike me. Try to pierce the armor.”

“Oh, no.” Erestor held the sword back out to Glorfindel. “With my luck, I will send you to the healer.”

“No, you will not. This is specially designed. No matter where you hit it, the blade will glide away or be caught. Give it a try,” insisted Glorfindel.

After a lengthy glare, Erestor said, “I am doing this under duress.”

“So noted. Now, strike me, or I will find a stableboy who will have no trouble doing so.”

Erestor lifted the weapon, and coming forward carefully, thrust it gently against the armor. The design caused it to slide to the left and away from Glorfindel, who rolled his eyes. “You did that like a girl.”

“I most certainly did not! I did that as a concerned friend,” countered Erestor. “I know a lot of girls... ladies,” he corrected himself, “who can fight harder than most Ellyn.” He drew the sword back again. “Ready?”

Glorfindel nodded, but he did not expect the blow to be so forceful. He stumbled back when the blade struck, but the point was unable to pierce the armor, though it had slid between two of the layers. “And Enerdhil said it was folly,” chuckled Glorfindel, removing the armor in order to check the spot where the impact had occurred. “Hardly a scratch.” He showed Erestor the plates, which, besides being interlaced, were actually folded, so that what appeared to be many layers was just one piece, folded and bent masterfully.

“Incredible. It seems awfully heavy, though,” worried Erestor.

“It is lighter than chain mail and allows more flexibility than ordinary plate armor.” Glorfindel picked up the piece that would attach to the right arm. “With chain mail, you are weighted down, and cannot fight as well. Standard plating only gives the stiff joints at the shoulder and elbow. With this, there is a fuller range of motion.” He showed Erestor how it not only bent, but twisted about in all the ways one’s arm normally did.

“Very impressive. Can we finish lunch now?” asked Erestor, who was already wandering back toward the desk. “I do not want you to think I am not awed by your talent and Celebrimbor’s skill, but I am at the moment famished.”

With a grin, Glorfindel set the armor down again and joined Erestor at the desk. “Now all we need to do is figure out exactly how to use the land we have to build all of the additional stables and barracks.”

“Barracks? I thought we were just breeding horses.”

“A little of both.” Glorfindel picked up a chunk of cheese and began to pull pieces from it. “I want to keep the soldiers that have stuck by me through the last year and did not pledge an allegiance to another house. I owe them that much. Plus, I had an idea for expanding the current troops.”

“What are you going to do, steal them from other houses like we did with the horses? Because if that
is the case, I have a plan for it.”

“No...” Glorfindel paused. “You really do have a criminal mind.”

“It was all of the years I spent hanging around Feanor.”

“But you were the elder... are you sure it did not rub off the other way instead?”

Erestor smirked and continued eating. “Well, go on, what is your idea?”

“I want to recruit from the valley.”

Erestor blinked. “You... you want to train the undesirables? Sorry, that came out badly. What I mean is, I am pleasantly shocked. How did you come to this decision?”

“Someone has to. Fingon’s edict is that every able male between fifty and three-hundred be trained. There are an awful lot of able males down there who have never held a sword before.”

“I know. No one wants to empower them like that. There has always been worry that they might decide to overthrow the upper class. There are many more of them than there are of us,” Erestor reminded Glorfindel.

“Yes, and that means I will be able to choose the cream of the crop. I want the strongest, most intelligent, bravest warriors for my cavalry. I expect I will recruit infantry as well. The cavalry is first, however. I need Turgon to see that he still needs me and that my house is a valuable part of the Gondolin forces and not just a twelfth house to keep the numbers lucky.”

“It sounds like a daunting task, but I applaud you for it. If you want to build stables and barracks enough to house an entire cavalry, then you absolutely need more land. Much more. You need pastures, breeding areas, training areas – we do not currently have that space.”

Fingertips strummed the table as Glorfindel chewed thoughtfully on a slice of bread. “Well, there is no way to build west, with the roads and marketplace. North is land owned by Egalmoth. His is facing the same trouble as we are.”

“What about building out into the forest? We could have some sort of flets up in the trees instead of traditional barracks,” Erestor suggested.

Glorfindel shook his head. “It would be disorganized and end up running deer and hares from the woods. With food shortages the way they are now, we do not need to press our luck in reducing the land where the wild game is living.”

“We really do not have any other choices.” Erestor sighed. “Unless we build up. Put the barracks on top of the stables.”

Glorfindel snapped his fingers. “I like that idea!”

“I was kidding,” answered Erestor flatly.

“No, that might work. I think it might, the more I dwell on it.” Glorfindel brushed off his hands and then the desk before pulling a clean sheet of paper from it. He began sketching out a few initial ideas as Erestor dug into the sack and pulled out some green plums. He rolled one across the desk to Glorfindel and bit into the other. The first plum hit Glorfindel’s wrist and rolled a few centimeters away as the blond kept scribbling on the paper. “This will be so much better than building in the forest. It is perfect.”
“What would be perfect is if we could get a hold of the land to the south.”

“I know,” said a wistful Glorfindel. “That would be perfect indeed. But Turgon will not sell it. We could see if there is land elsewhere that we could buy, though, and have the stables and barracks here and the training arena somewhere else.”

The plum pit was tossed in the direction of the trash bin at the door as Erestor frowned. “Having two locations would not be ideal. You are right about Turgon, though, he will not sell it. Maybe he would trade it if you had something he wanted that you would not sell, or would not be able to sell.”

Glorfindel tilted his head to the side as he looked across the desk at Erestor. “Such as?”

“This project that Celebrimbor has been working on. I think you could probably offer to share the plans or to provide new armor for his guards or something.”

“You want to sell him an idea?”

“Two ideas – that he gains a cavalry for the same cost he was paying for you and your ground troops, and the plans for the armor. He needs you. He needs the cavalry.”

Glorfindel set down the quill he had been using. “He has Salgant,” he reminded Erestor. “I have to be careful how I approach him. He could argue that he already has cavalry.”

“He needs a much bigger cavalry, especially if we do go to war as everyone seems to think we are going to.”

“Salgant could just recruit more riders.” Glorfindel reasoned.

“True... that means yours need to be different. Better than Salgant’s cavalry,” added Erestor.

“Not better,” warned Glorfindel. “If they are better, how would Salgant manage to keep his employed? I do not want to displace his cavalry, I just want to be back on Turgon’s payroll.”

Erestor nodded. “Different, then. We do not need to risk losing the alliance we seem to have with Salgant. If Salgant continues to keep his as light armored cavalry fighting with arrows, yours could be trained to fight with blades.”

“That means heavily armoring the horses.”

“No good?”

“Very expensive,” explained Glorfindel. “Possible, but not right now.”

“So we need a long range weapon instead.”

Eventually, Glorfindel nodded. “But not arrows.”

“Spears?” suggested Erestor.

“Maybe.” Glorfindel picked up the plum that had come to rest near his elbow and began to peel off the skin. “We would need excellent riders with a lot of strength and control. A lot of training.”

“So, technically, we are talking about not only different, but also better as well. A small contingency. If you use that as a selling point, that Turgon will not be financing such a huge cavalry, but instead a very elite cavalry, it might be enough to work without the armor.”
“No, I need to offer both. The cavalry is to get the money, and the armor idea is the solution to getting the land. The land is going to be tough to get.”

Erestor stretched his arms and yawned. “We could offer some of the new horses when they are born. He could have his choice of the new foals.”

“If we give him horses, we will be that many more behind for the cavalry. They are much too valuable.” Once the plum was skinless, juice running down his palm, Glorfindel began to nibble at the fruit. “We need to speak to Turgon about this today.”

“It might be difficult to get an audience with him so late in the day. He likes to conduct his business in the mornings, but it does not hurt to try. I need to meet with Rog yet today to set up the schedule for the next few months; you should probably let the stable hands know who should go where, because I know you had a very set idea on how you wanted the breeding to go and they seem a little overwhelmed.”

Glorfindel nodded. “I should probably hire a few more able stable hands. Hopefully, if Turgon agrees to things, I will have the funds to do so.”

“We should meet back home after we are done, and then go up to Turgon’s office together. I will be an hour or so,” said Erestor. Glorfindel nodded as Erestor left the office, and after cleaning up from their lunch, left the room to search for the stable hands.

It was almost two hours later when Glorfindel finally made it home, and another two hours until Erestor joined him. There was no explanation for his tardiness as Erestor put away a plain leather case that Glorfindel had never seen before. A note was left for Aranel and Tauniel before they left and ascended up to the next story.

Carynien, Turgon’s personal secretary, was sitting at the desk behind the double doors at the end of the stairway that led to the top of the tower. She was sorting through various documents and glanced up as the pair of lords approached. “What brings you here to the top of this stuffy old tower on such a fine day, m’dears?”

Erestor leaned on the high counter that had been built over part of the desk and smiled down at Carynien. Everyone in Gondolin knew that Turgon was king, but if you wanted to talk to the person who REALLY ran the hidden city, it was wise to befriend Carynien. Innocent flirting was not a bad idea, either. “Well, love, we were hoping his majesty might have time to see us this afternoon. Glorfindel has a spectacular proposal for him.”

“And your business, sir?” she teased as she pulled a black leather book used to schedule the king’s appointments out of a drawer of the desk.

“Just tagging along. It keeps me out of trouble,” he answered as Carynien opened to the correct page on the first try.

“Mmm... probably a good thing, then. It looks as if he is free, but Duilin is with him right now and he is having dinner with Duilin and Salgant in just a little while. Can I schedule you for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow... well, tomorrow is better than nothing at all,” said Erestor. “How does the morning look?”

“Bad. Pretty full, actually. Tomorrow after lunch?”

Erestor bit his lip and turned around to face Glorfindel. “Tomorrow afternoon I need to train Rog’s troops. Can you make the presentation without me?”
“I... can... try. I think so,” answered Glorfindel unsurely.

With a nod, Erestor turned back around and gave another to Carynien. “Thank you, love, as always, you are a doll.”

“Oh, I know,” she replied with a sigh as she wrote the note in the planner for the following day. “Have a good evening. Tell Aranel not to be a stranger. I hardly see her stop by anymore.”

“Will do. Good eve, Carynien.” Erestor waited until he and Glorfindel were back in the stairwell to slump his shoulders. “I hate having to put things off like this.”

“Me, too,” answered Glorfindel, but he said no more as they both heard the sound of someone walking up the steps. Moments later, Lady Idril came into view. Both bowed to her as she approached, stepping to either side of the landing for her to pass.

“Well, look who I have found!” she said. She paused at the top of the flight, barely winded by the climb. “Captain, are the rumors true that you will be performing at Salgant’s playhouse when it reopens next year?”

“Aye, that is correct, m’lady,” replied Erestor. “I am determined, against the odds, to have a career on stage.”

“That is good. I was disappointed that I was unable to make the performance you were previously in. Salgant has already been informed that I want a box the opening night of Tears of Sirion. It is one of my favorites.”

“I hope I shall not disappoint you, then, m’lady,” said Erestor with another bow.

Idril turned her attention to Glorfindel. “And what of your quiet companion? Lord Glorfindel, you really must stop allowing the captain to dominate every conversation.”

“My apologies, m’lady, but his tongue is silver, and he speaks with eloquence of which I can only dream.”

“Nonsense. You underestimate your own articulacy. I assume you are returning from meeting with my father. How is he today? I woke late and had already missed him by the time I made it to the dining room to break my fast.”

“Unfortunately, we do not have an answer for you. He is seeing Duilin at the moment, and we have been sent away until tomorrow,” explained Glorfindel.

“Which is doubly unfortunate, for it is another day until Glorfindel can tell your father of the marvelous ideas he has,” finished Erestor.

Idril kept her focus on Glorfindel. “Oh? What sort of ideas?”

“Military things,” replied Erestor. “Weapons and troops and such.”

“Oh.” Idril sighed. “More of that.”

“It is not exactly because I want to,” blurted out Glorfindel. “King Fingon is the one who came up with this decree about training. Granted, everyone should know how to defend themselves, but I hope with all my heart we never really need to use the skills. I just want to make sure that, if it comes to it, everyone stands an equal chance, and if that means giving the peasants weapons and teaching them to ride horses—“
“You want to arm the farmers?” interrupted Idril, her eyes wide.

Hesitantly, Glorfindel answered. “Yes, I—” He was almost thrown off balance as Idril threw her arms around him and gave him a fierce hug. “Uhm, I suppose you like that idea?”

“Finally! I have petitioned my father about this relentlessly!” Idril stepped back, but still kept hold of Glorfindel’s large, rough hands with her delicate gloved ones. “I have written letter after letter to my uncle, but I fear they are not being received. My father told me it was silly because no one was going to want that challenge of training them, and that my uncle’s intention was to arm the middle and upper class. Each time I speak of it, my father just pats my head and changes the topic. He said that no one would want to spend the resources and time, but I knew someone would. I just knew someone would be the champion of the people, for are not all the people of Gondolin part of this realm?”

“It will be a challenge, but it is necessary.” Glorfindel made his next move carefully, and asked, “Will you offer your support of the idea when I speak to your father tomorrow? I wish to meet with him to gain his financial support.”

“You do not need to go to him. I already told you that I think the idea is brilliant. Tell me what you need and I will provide the funds.”

Glorfindel blinked. “Really? You can do that?”

“Of course I can. He provides me with a very generous personal stipend, and when Aunt Aredhel left, he refused to touch any of the money she had, so I have that as well to do with as I please. Adar never told Maeglin about it, and as far as I am concerned, there is no reason for him to know. I also have investments, so do not worry, I believe I can support your plans.”

“It is going to be a very expensive venture;” admitted Glorfindel. “There are going to be building costs, salaries, training costs—“

Idril held up her hand. “I am going to give you a number. You tell me if you need more or less.” She glanced over her shoulder at Erestor, and then leaned forward and whispered something into Glorfindel’s ear that made his eyes bulge. “Too low?” she asked with a smirk.

“No, not at all! I would almost say far too generous! It will be more than enough for this year, and next year we can—“

“That is a monthly figure, Lord Glorfindel,” corrected Idril. Leaving Glorfindel speechless, she smiled and curtseyed before dismissing herself. “I need to ready for dinner. Good evening, and I will set up an appointment for us to speak more later, Lord Glorfindel.” Idril disappeared, the double doors swinging as she entered through them, until they slowed and stopped.

Erestor raised one brow, for Glorfindel had yet to say anything. “How much did she offer you?”

“I fear if I repeat it, I will wake up and find this all a dream.”

“I take it we are set for money, then. Which means, all you need to do tomorrow is convince Turgon to give you his land in trade for your ideas,” said Erestor. “Good luck with that.”

“I am going to need more than luck tomorrow,” answered Glorfindel. “I think I used up all my luck just now with Idril.”
Too nervous to eat lunch the next day, Glorfindel paced the sitting room until he could not stand to wait any longer. He bundled up one of the pieces of the armor – the piece that fit over the right arm – and then headed up to the king’s penthouse. Carynien smiled to him as he entered through the doors and approached the desk.

“You are a little early. The king has yet to return from lunch.”

“I know. I thought I would wait up here,” he said, nervously shifting about. Carynien motioned to the chairs in the waiting area, but Glorfindel shook his head. “Too jittery to sit.” He was sweating, too, but it was debatable whether it was from nerves or the heat wave that was causing the stuffy tower to be nearly unbearable despite the open windows.

“You probably should anyhow. Being fidgety in a chair is less obvious than bouncing up and down having a spasm in front of my desk.”

“Really? Alright.” Glorfindel wound his arms around the wrapped up piece of armor, but before he had the chance to sit down, the doors opened and Turgon casually entered.

The king was almost so distracted by whatever document he was reading that it took Carynien clearing her throat after he passed Glorfindel to make Turgon turn around. “Sire, you have a meeting this afternoon before your cabinet arrives.”

“Oh?” Turgon lowered the document and glanced first at Glorfindel, and then to the wrapped item he held. “Can we perhaps discuss whatever this is later?”

“Your next free appointment is a week from now, and I already rescheduled him,” said Carynien, winking over Turgon’s shoulder to Glorfindel. She picked up a small hand fan from the side of the desk and began to wave it towards her face. “If you want to put this off, though—“

“No, no.” Turgon sunk down in the seat next to the one Glorfindel was in. “You have five minutes. What is all this about?”

“Well, uhm...” Glorfindel fumbled to unwrap the piece of armor, which he held out to Turgon. “We had this idea... I mean, I had this idea... well, you see... do you know the land by the stream by the stables I have?”

“Yes,” answered Turgon carefully, his attention turning to the armor that he was now holding. “You mean the land that I own, next to the land I sold Erestor some years ago.”

“Right... well... you see, I have this idea,” said Glorfindel, stumbling terribly through his speech. “I want to build a series of stables and barracks, and I have plans to train cavalry. Really great cavalry. Mostly, I want to recruit from the valley and do a lot of horse breeding, and I need a lot of space for that.”

“Indeed, you would. I suspect you are lacking the total space you need to see your plan through.”

“Exactly. I was hoping that perhaps... well, I had this other idea, which you can see here.” Glorfindel leaned over and began to point out the features of his design. “This new armor is more mobile, more flexible, and lighter than most. It would be a great advantage to you to have your soldiers clad in this...”
“It is a very unique idea. How protective is it?”

“Very,” answered Glorfindel excitedly. “Erestor and I tested it yesterday.”

“You tested it yesterday?”

“Uh... yes.” Glorfindel squirmed a little as Turgon further scrutinized the armor.

The king fit the armor onto his own arm, bending and flexing his muscles to see for himself. “Am I correct in assuming that you want to trade this marvel you have constructed for the land I have along the banks near the forest.”

“There is more to it than just that piece. I have an entire suit made, and your guards would be the first to wear such armor.”

Turgon nodded thoughtfully before finally locking eyes with Glorfindel. For a moment, Glorfindel thought he had succeeded, but the longer he had to hold steady to Turgon’s hard gaze, the more he worried. “You want me to offer my support and thanks and grant you the land you desire in exchange for an idea.”

“I—“

“Did Erestor put you up to this?”

“No... I... this was our idea, not his alone.”

The armor was handed back, and Glorfindel looked down at it in a panic as Turgon stood up. The king towered over him, looking down upon him as Glorfindel sat in the chair, clutching the warm metal, uncomfortable in his grasp. “So your idea was to bribe me into letting you have the land. What will you do if I say no? Will you hold back your plans from me?”

“Well... I...” Glorfindel knew the answer. He could not deny something he knew would save the lives of so many.

And Turgon, it seemed, was able to read Glorfindel like a book. “What about the rest of Gondolin? Do you think they should continue to use inferior armor while your house and mine reap the benefits for your new design?”

“No... I mean...”

“Good. Then you will share these plans with everyone at the next assembly of the council. Good work, Glorfindel.” Turgon stepped over to Carynien’s desk as Glorfindel gave the armor a disheartened look before bundling it up again. As he was leaving, he overheard Turgon say to his secretary, “I need you to clear my calendar for tomorrow. My nephew and I are going to be touring the land I have out near the forest. He asked me yesterday at dinner if he could use it to build a forge, and if we are going to be remaking all of our armor, we are going to need more forges.”

Glorfindel’s feet took him far away from the tower, down to the land he did have. He spent the rest of the afternoon in his office, angrily sketching plans for building barracks on top of stables as Erestor had accidentally suggested. As the day went on, his anger ebbed away and his plans began to take better shape. A stable hand alerted him of the coming evening, and the growl from his stomach reminded him he had not eaten anything yet. He locked the papers in his desk before setting out for home.
When Erestor arrived home at dusk, he was surprised to see Celebrimbor waiting outside the door. “Good evening. Did no one offer to let you in?” he said by way of apology as he unlocked the door.

“Good evening, Captain Erestor. I knocked only a minute ago. I thought to try again and then seek Lord Glorfindel in one of the dining halls.”

Celebrimbor followed Erestor into the sitting room, where Erestor lit a few candles and found a note on the table. “It seems as if my wife and Glorfindel’s took up a dinner invitation, and with the heat, have decided to stay elsewhere for the evening. I cannot blame them. If Glorfindel already read this, then he may be in the dining hall. However, if I had to guess, I should think he has yet to return. His house shoes are still at the door and he left wearing boots this morning.”

“I see. I hate to be a burden, but I was hoping to speak to him this evening. Do you know if he had a chance to look at the armor yet?”

“Oh, yes, and he is in love with it,” said Erestor. Celebrimbor beamed at the compliment. “I think he will be coming back here before he goes to dinner, in any case. Can I offer you a drink while we wait?”

“If you have wine, I would be thankful. It was a long day today,” said Celebrimbor as he walked toward the settee and chairs that Erestor had motioned to. Something distracted him as he was about to sit down, and he stepped toward the desk instead. “You have a lot of pictures.”

“I like to sketch the people I care about. Looking at them helps to calm me as I am reading and writing things that would otherwise be unpleasant to deal with. There are some of my wife, and some of Glorfindel’s wife. His is the blond one,” Erestor said as he poured out wine for Celebrimbor and something else for himself.

“I know Tauniel. She used to hang about the forge when she was a child. I miss seeing her there.” Celebrimbor gave a low whistle. “Who is that?” he asked as he picked up one of the framed portraits on Erestor’s desk. “She looks nothing like Glorfindel’s wife.”

“Probably because she is not his wife. That is Artanis, daughter of Finarfin. She and I were betrothed in Valinor.” Erestor nodded when Celebrimbor flashed him a look of disbelief. “Yes, I was almost married, long ago. We practically were, actually. Unfortunately, she and I grew apart. It is probably not appropriate for me to even have that anymore, but I could not bring myself to destroy it.”

“She is gorgeous.” Celebrimbor set the portrait back down and took the glass of wine he was offered. “Is she still in Valinor, then?”

Erestor shook his head. “Doriath, last I heard.” He lifted the small frame and looked at the image smiling back at him. “She married a Sindarin elf by the name of Celeborn; she wanted someone who would be more agreeable to her ways and I do hope she found that.” He held the object out to Celebrimbor. “It is not necessary for me to keep this. I see her more than I wish in the recesses of my mind. If you think her beautiful, you should keep this instead. She is a distant relation to you, so it would make much more sense for you to have.”

“Well, I... I do not want to take that which is yours,” said Celebrimbor hesitantly.

Erestor took hold of Celebrimbor’s free hand and placed the framed picture into it. “She was never mine to begin with.”

It was on this part of the conversation that Glorfindel let himself into the room. When he spied
Celebrimbor, he adopted a false smile and joined them, pouring a rather large amount of wine into a glass for himself. A quick glance at Erestor told his friend that things had not gone well with the king and that more would be said later. “Celebrimbor, you outdid yourself. I am so very impressed by your work on the armor. I foresee accolades and many orders pouring in very soon.”

Celebrimbor was grinning broadly. “It was an honor to see your project through. However, I came not only to hear your thoughts, but also to speak to you about the weapons.”

“The weapons?”

“Remember the idea that you approached Enerdhil with? The one he said was silly and impractical and could never be done?” asked Celebrimbor.

Glorfindel nodded. “He often tells me how silly and impractical I am, but I think I know which one it is you speak of. It had to do with treating the blades to know if something was approaching, like a warg or a troll or something.”

“Right. I could not quite figure all of it out, but I did use the information you provided for us and came up with this.” Celebrimbor held out a long sword that looked very much like a typical long sword.

Erestor set his drink down on the desk so that he could examine the blade. It not only looked like any other sword, but felt like one as well. He handed it back to Celebrimbor. “What will it do?”

“That is the real trick,” explained Celebrimbor. “It glows in warning when there are orcs about. It was easier to figure out this than the rest, because your initial formula was based off of Elvenkind – a dangerous thing to have developed.”

“I know, but if the enemy is as cunning as we think, there is a good chance Morgoth already knows how to find us,” said Glorfindel.

“If he knew how to find us, he would be here already,” said Erestor quietly.

“True,” responded Glorfindel uncertainly.

“Let us hope he never discovers what you have. I was able to use the information you gave me, and modified it so that it detects orcs but is not thrown off by Elves. Now all we need is a real orc to show you how it works. Fortunately, I know where we can find one.”

“Really?” Glorfindel took the blade from the apprentice. “Can we go to test it now?”

“Right now, if you like,” offered Celebrimbor. “Follow me; they are kept in the dungeons.”

“Is that a wise idea?” wondered Glorfindel as he and Erestor trailed after Celebrimbor. They navigated the hallways into the deepest parts of Gondolin, where the temperature, sadly, did not feel much cooler. “Should we really keep orcs here, even if they are locked up?”

“There is only one,” said Erestor matter-of-factly, to Glorfindel’s surprise.

“What if he gets out?” Glorfindel asked.

“I do not foresee that happening anytime soon,” said Celebrimbor grimly. At the bottom of the last stairwell, there were six posted guards, who allowed the pair past after a quick check of their weapons and an explanation of their purpose. “No matter how many times I come through here, they always act as if this is the first time they are seeing me,” said Celebrimbor.
There were small cells with tiny windows in them on either side of the walkway. Most were uninhabited, but there were a few that each had an elf in them. “Watch now,” said Celebrimbor, pulling his sword from his sheath. “Watch the blade as we get closer.”

Glofindel kept his eyes on the metal, and with every step, was delighted to see it glow, first faintly, then more and more, until at last it was bright blue. “Amazing.”

“This is where the orc is kept.” Celebrimbor brought it up against a door of a cell that was marked ‘orc’ on the side. “Look how much more brilliant it becomes. Wait until you see it close to the creature.”

As Glofindel looked on and marveled, Celebrimbor motioned one of the guards to the door. Keys were produced from a long chain, and the door was opened. An escort of armed guards offered to accompany them into the small cell, but Erestor shook his head and entered first with his own sword drawn instead, and then beckoned Glofindel and Celebrimbor in behind him.

The odor was putrid, and Glofindel shielded his eyes from the blue glow. He caught movement and stepped to the side to see what was at the back of the cell, concerned over the fact an orc was actually being held in Gondolin.

The pathetic creature did not look like an orc. It was worse, missing both legs and an arm. There was a thick metal collar fastened around his neck and attached to the wall by a heavy chain. He said nothing, watching them with yellow eyes and breathing through slits where his nose should have been. A few long patches of hair had grown wild, but he was otherwise bald, the greenish skin contrasting the greasy silver strands. “Erestor, is that truly necessary?” asked Glofindel. The captain was crouched down just behind the wretched creature, holding his blade with his arm drawn back as if he was just waiting for the orc to give him a reason to react.

“You and Celebrimbor do what you have to do; someone has to be at the ready.”

“He hardly seems a threat in the condition he is in,” said Glofindel. “What is your name?” he asked the orc.

The orc seemed not to comprehend at first, but when Glofindel shrugged and began to step toward the door, the orc rolled his shoulders and tilted his head, causing the chain to clink against the cold, stone floor. “Before, or after?” came the croaky answer, and Glofindel turned back around as the orc laughed to himself.

“What do you mean, before or after? Before what?” asked Glofindel.

“Glofindel, you should not speak to it,” warned Erestor.

As Celebrimbor handed the glowing blade to Glofindel, the elf lord frowned. “What is he going to do, Erestor? Chase me down? Shoot me with arrows. He is harmless.” Glofindel crouched down closer, marveling at the bright glow.

The orc was shielding his eyes with his remaining appendage from the blue light. “If you lower that, I can think clearly and answer you.”

“Sorry.” Glofindel lowered the sword so that it was down at his side instead of right in front of him. “Is that better?”

“Yes,” hissed the orc, blinking, still displeased with the glow despite it being away from his face for the moment.
“Now, what did you mean about before or after?” Glorfindel pressed him.

“The name I had before this. The one I had before the dark one twisted me and my kin and made us like this. You and your friends forget that our roles could have easily been reversed. It might have been you chained to this wall, and I, still strong and fair standing before you. You all forget that.”

The orc’s words were clearly swaying Glorfindel, but neither Celebrimbor nor Erestor were as convinced. “Glorfindel, we should leave, if you are done here,” suggested Erestor. “The point has been proven.”

“Yes, Glorfindel, we should go. The guards do not like to have anyone interact with this thing,” Celebrimbor warned.

Whether Glorfindel actually heard them or was just ignoring them was uncertain as he placed his hand compassionately upon the dry curve of skin, his fingers brushing against the stump where there was once an arm. “What was your name?”

“Glorfindel, you must leave now,” announced Erestor loudly, as the orc said to the blond, “Closer, friend.”

Glorfindel bowed his head in, his hair sweeping down to block his sight at either side. The orc jerked forward suddenly and bit down hard on his nose. As Glorfindel let out a scream of surprise and grabbed for his face, he let go of the blade. The orc had it in his hand in a second, and drew it back, meaning to drive it straight into Glorfindel’s breast.

The next thing Glorfindel saw as he opened his eyes, besides his hands cupped over his nose and the blood smeared over his fingers, was the tip of a sword. It was not the blade he had dropped, however, it was the sword that Erestor had brought with him. The captain had thrust his sword into the orc, straight through the spine and out the other side so that it was protruding from the orc’s throat. Erestor used his foot to kick the glowing blade from the orc’s hand, and then as the orc gagged on his own blood, Erestor put his foot on the orc’s shoulder and twisted the blade full around with a grunt before yanking it back out. He spat on the ground as the orc fell to the side, choking for a few moments more before the glossy yellow eyes rolled back and his single arm became limp.

Meanwhile, Glorfindel had managed to stand up and was shaking, hands still covering his nose. Blood streamed down his cheeks and dripped off his chin. “That was so stupid... why did I do that? I should have known better,” he babbled as the sound of guards coming down the hallway echoed through the chambers.

Erestor looked up at Celebrimbor. “Let me do the talking,” he said as he gripped the chain that held the orc to the wall. Celebrimbor nodded as Erestor surveyed the links, and choosing the weakest one, slid his weapon between the two ends of it, widening the gap. With seconds left before the room was flooded with soldiers, he set his sword down and strained to pull the link apart enough to separate part of the chain away from the wall, then dropped the link and picked up his sword. He had only just stood up as the soldiers entered.

“What happened here?” demanded the chief guard. The scene spoke for itself, and he shook his head. “The king will not like this.”

“The king should have inspected this cell better, then,” replied Erestor. He kicked at the broken chain. “He might look weak, but this... thing... is stronger than you might think. He broke his bonds and attacked Lord Glorfindel. How will this look for you? Has anyone called for a healer?”

It was now that the guards took note of Glorfindel, and concern for his well-being allowed for
Celebrimbor to retrieve the sword with the blade whose glow was fast diminishing. “Someone should dispose of this as well,” demanded Erestor authoritatively. “It stinks already; just wait until they have been dead for a few hours.”

A rush of things began to happen, and Glorfindel was ushered up a few flights where the bite on his nose was cleaned and bandaged. Hollow reeds were inserted into his nostrils so that he could breathe through them with the bulky bandage that was required. As the final bits of linen were being applied, Glorfindel saw Erestor appear in the doorway and lean against it with a sigh. The healer finished and left after making Glorfindel promise to see him in the morning, and sooner if it began to bleed again. Erestor waited until the healer left before entering the room. “Turgon took the news much better than the guards seemed to think he would. I got the feeling he felt better with that thing dead than he did when it was alive.”

“Why did he have an orc down there in the first place?”

“Maeglin was the one who brought it in. When it first arrived, it was only missing the one arm, and there were three of them.”

“Should I even ask what happened to his legs, or the other two orcs?” wondered Glorfindel, touching the tip of his bandaged nose tenderly. It made him hiss, and touched one of the tubes in his nose, which was also quite uncomfortable. He finally opted to sit on his hands.

“The other two attacked him one day and ate his legs. So, Maeglin killed those and kept the one that was down there.” Erestor sat down on the healer’s stool next to a small counter and started to rearrange the jars of herbs lined on the shelf, placing them in alphabetical order.

“Thank you,” said Glorfindel suddenly. “Not only did you save my life, but you saved me from being the laughingstock of the city with my attempt at befriending an orc.”

Erestor stopped playing with the bottles and jars and moved the remaining ones back in one long row before standing up. He walked to the low table that Glorfindel was still sitting on and kissed the top of his head. “No, thank you,” he said as he turned to head out the door.

“For what?” wondered Glorfindel.

Erestor looked over his shoulder and replied, “For staying optimistic enough to try to befriend an orc. You are never going to realize how rare you are, my friend.”

Glorfindel smiled as he watched Erestor leave, thinking he meant to meet him back home later. After a moment, he heard the familiar voice in the hallway, addressing the healer.

“Is he able to leave, or should he stay the night?”

“Sorry, sir. Confidentiality dictates I can only speak to the patient and their family,” apologized the healer in the hallway.

“We are practically family, but I understand. Am I allowed to be in the room when you speak to him?”

Glorfindel did not wait to hear the reply. “You can tell him anything you intended to tell me!” he called out.

The healer stuck her head into the room, hand gripping the doorway. “Shh, this is a place of healing,” she scolded, and Glorfindel blushed. “You may return home. Come back immediately if the breathing tubes fall out. Sleep on your back tonight.” The healer disappeared from the doorway,
and said to Erestor, “He was told to return tomorrow; please be sure he does so. His nose is fractured, not just torn open. We need to take care that it does not collapse or heal crooked. Make sure he takes it easy for the next few days.”

Erestor returned to the room and looked Glorfindel over. “Can you walk or should I carry you?”

The offer was almost too good to pass up, but Glorfindel stood up immediately. This was followed by a sway and Glorfindel sitting down again. “Perhaps something in-between,” he said.

“Here. You are probably dehydrated.” Erestor poured a glass of water for Glorfindel and brought it to him. After giving Glorfindel time to empty the glass and rest a little more, Erestor sat down beside him. “Put your arm around me. Lean on me as you walk. We can get you back upstairs in no time, and then you can rest.”

Each floor required readjustments, and at the top of every stairway they paused. The last two sets of stairs were tackled in one go, which meant that they both collapsed in the sitting room once within their apartment. “This weather is brutal,” remarked Erestor when he finally managed to speak again.

“Maybe I should just sleep right here,” said Glorfindel. “I never thought I would say this, but I envy your short hair right now,” he said. “I am stuck to everything – clothes, hair, couch.”

“I doubt there is water enough for a bath, but perhaps we can do something.” Erestor forced himself to stand and went to see to the state of the bathing chamber. “There is a bucket and a half of clean water,” he called out.

“Great. If we were fish or otters, that is all we would need.”

“If we were fish or otters, we would be smart enough to stay out of a tall tower on a hot day.” Erestor returned and began to remove his clothing. “The ladies are not coming back this evening, I suggest, unless you are against it, that we lock the door, keep the lights low, and walk around as Eru intended after we attempt to cool down in the tub.”

“You said there was only a bucket and a half of water,” said Glorfindel, restating the obvious.

“Yes, but a rub down with a damp cloth can be refreshing and does not require much water. After that, we can just lie on the bed and complain together until sleep takes us.”

“That sounds glorious.” Glorfindel, who had been sprawled over the couch, now opened his eyes as he felt hands upon him, loosening his shirt. He was surprised to see that Erestor had wasted no time undressing to his undergarment. “Oh! Ulhm…”

“Sorry… just thought I would help,” Erestor said as he started to step back.

Glorfindel’s hand shot out and grabbed Erestor’s wrist. He could feel his pulse in his throat, almost choking him. “Uh… no… this is… fine.” Glorfindel let go and let his hand drop down. “You can… continue.”

“I do not want to make you uncomfortable,” said Erestor, voice sounding huskier than normal to Glorfindel.

“No. I mean, it does not.” He licked his lips. “Does it make you uncomfortable?”

Erestor’s gaze flitted about. “No,” he finally said as he reached back down to loosen the rest of the lacing of Glorfindel’s shirt before he eased him to sit up so that he could lift the shirt up and over his head without it catching on his nose. Once the shirt was removed, Erestor stared long at Glorfindel’s
bandaged face.

“Is something wrong?” asked Glorfindel. “Is it bleeding through?”

“No. The bandage looks fine,” Erestor assured him. “I just realized today that…” He looked down. “I could lose you. I mean, really lose you. Not just have you go off to spend time with other people. I never want to lose you.”

Glorfindel stretched forward to embrace Erestor. “The feeling is mutual.” After a few moments, Glorfindel pushed away. “But right now, you are sticky and smell bad,” he told Erestor.

“Then it is just as well that we have enough water to do something about it. Can you manage to remove the rest of your clothing?” Erestor asked.

‘I can, but I would rather you do it,’ was the response Glorfindel wanted to make. “Of course,” he answered, and after Erestor left the room, he looked down at his trousers, which were tenting slightly. “And you behave yourself,” he whispered.

Erestor popped back into the room. “What was that?”

“I said I would be fine by myself?”

Erestor cocked his head to the side. “Did you?”

Glorfindel slowly shifted one knee up in hopes it would hide what he hoped Erestor did not see. “I did?”

Erestor frowned. “It is the heat,” he decided. He went to the kitchen and retrieved the pitcher of drinking water as well as a bottle of wine. “The wine is warm, but it should suffice if we run out of water, which we likely will.” He poured a glass of water for Glorfindel and set it nearby. “I will have the tub ready in a moment.”

Erestor’s solution was to have a damp towel lining the tub, and to aid Glorfindel first in getting in. Once Glorfindel was reclined in the basin, Erestor used a damp cloth to rub away the dirt and sweat from Glorfindel’s skin. It served to cool him down and relax him, especially when the moisture on his skin was hit by cool streams of Erestor’s breath. What Glorfindel expected to be sensual he found soothing, and he had nearly fallen asleep when Erestor announced to him, “I am going to be just a moment while I change the linens on the bed.”

When Glorfindel next saw Erestor, he was being lifted from the tub. He could feel that his hair, while it remained unwashed, had been brushed and braided around his head like a crown, which kept it off of his neck and back. “Oh… did I…”

“You nodded off, but only for a few minutes. Those tubes in your nose are causing you to whistle while you breathe in your sleep,” Erestor said with a little smile. “I opened a few other windows and propped open doors so that we have a cross draft. I am going to bathe and then I will join you. The crier called out midnight just a few minutes ago.”

“Oh… I thought…” Glorfindel frowned as they approached the doorway, and his words caused Erestor to stop. “I thought I would help you, since you helped me.”

“You are injured,” Erestor reminded him. “You need to rest.”

“Ah, I know… but…” As Glorfindel pondered what to say, Erestor took another step forward. “I might have a concussion,” he blurted out.
Erestor lifted a brow. “Did the healer tell you that?”

“No, but when the orc lunged at me, our foreheads knocked together. It might have happened,” Glorfindel said. “Maybe I should stay in here with you just in case.”

“It makes me want to forgo my bathing if you are concerned,” admitted Erestor. “Perhaps I can wait until the morning.”

“Oh! No, no offense, Erestor, but… if the choice is between being in the room alone for a while or having you there without… you need a bath,” said Glorfindel as he cut to the chase.

Erestor chuckled. “Agreed. I will not be long. I promise.” Erestor carried Glorfindel to the bedroom and gently settled him on fresh, cool sheets. “I will be right back.”

Glorfindel had no concept of the time that passed, for it seemed moments later that Erestor was settling down beside him. “Either that did not take long, or I fell asleep again.”

“You fell asleep again,” said Erestor, and there was a hint of worry in his voice. “Here. Turn this way. Let me see your nose.”

“What happened with my nose?” Glorfindel instinctively reached for it, and winced. “Shit! What--”

“Shhh… let me see.” Erestor examined Glorfindel’s face and then helped him to settle down with an extra pillow behind his head. “Stay right here.”

Glorfindel nodded, and fidgeted his hands until Erestor came back with a tweezers. “What happened?” asked Glorfindel as Erestor pulled a chair near to the side of the bed.

“Just hold still a moment. One of these reeds is higher up than the other and I am going to pull it back into place.” Erestor held Glorfindel’s chin with one hand while he skillfully used the other to delicately pinch the end of the tube with the tweezers and pull it forward. “There,” he said once he completed the task. “You rolled onto your side in your sleep, and you must have shoved that in. I am just glad there was enough sticking out for my to gasp hold of. It is a long walk to get back to the healers.”

“Maybe I should try to sleep in a chair,” said Glorfindel.

“If you can sleep in there. The sitting room is stuffier than the other rooms in the house.” Erestor looked around the room. “That is a solution, though. I could tether you to the bed, but with the heat, that also seems like a bad idea.”

Glorfindel bent the leg that was closer to Erestor and silently said a prayer of thanks that Erestor had just turned around to take the tweezers back to where he found them. “How would that even work? If you used the bed posts, I would be in the middle, and you would have nowhere to go.” Not helping, Glorfindel realized after saying these words. He fought to bring up thoughts of very inane things, like wagon wheels and harps, and was thankful that this did relax him before Erestor returned.

“Good point. I could just stay up and watch to make sure you stay on your back,” said Erestor.

Glorfindel shook his head. “You worked hard today and need rest, too.”

Erestor tried to stifle a yawn from where he now leaned in the doorway, but it proved Glorfindel’s point. “Usually I stay pretty still when I sleep, and I would wake if you moved. I guess I could hold you so that you stay put. Then again, how will that help with this heat?”
Glorfindel wanted to ask why it sounded as if this suggestion was one that Erestor had thought of earlier, yet waited until the end to reveal. Mostly, he was tired and sore and his nose throbbed, and being in Erestor’s arms as he fell asleep truly felt like the only thing that would make the horrible day end well. “I think that is a great idea. I would not mind if we did that.”

The lengthy pause caused Glorfindel to think he had sounded too excited about the idea, and that Erestor would rescind it, until he heard him say, “I can either hold you, or I can kind of weigh you down on one side and that should keep you from tossing and turning.”

It was evident what it would not keep Glorfindel from doing as he shifted his leg up again. “Whichever. You pick. Surprise me.”

“If I lie on you, I might jostle something,” Erestor said. “Here. Let me try something.” He got back onto the bed and laid down on his back. “Now you lie on your back on top of me,” said Erestor.

Glorfindel carefully positioned himself as Erestor requested. Once he was there, Erestor twined his legs with Glorfindel’s and placed one arm firmly around Glorfindel’s chest. Since Erestor was taller, Glorfindel’s head was resting on Erestor’s chest. “This is… hmm.” Glorfindel was vaguely aware that while Erestor was not aroused, he was well endowed, and he could feel this endowment nestled against his backside.

“Not good?” asked Erestor. “Glorfindel?”

A little whistling noise came from Glorfindel’s nose. His head lolled to the side, but in his current position, there was no way this would dislodge or disturb the bandages or reeds.

“Perfect.” Erestor kissed the top of Glorfindel’s head before he drifted off to sleep soon after hearing the crier announce one in the morning.
The next afternoon, Glorfindel walked out onto the balcony, clad in just a towel that was wound loosely around his waist and the clean bandages that the healer had affixed over his nose earlier in the day. The wisps of breeze were blissful with the heat beating down from above. Inside, the air was thick and stuffy, and no amount of fanning off seemed to help. Both he and Erestor had promised Aranel and Tauniel that they would not walk around the balcony or the apartment in the nude (although there were others in the tower and who were doing just that, and in the hallways, Erestor had argued). Instead, they were taking turns sitting in the tub in the washroom with the candles unlit and windows open. It was Erestor’s turn, so Glorfindel came outside to try to find some relief.

He contemplated sitting down, but then the space behind his knees and between his legs would get sweaty. Another breeze rushed past, and Glorfindel took hold of the railing and leaned out as far as he dared to catch it. “O, Manwë, do not be so cruel!” Glorfindel sighed and bowed his head as the wind died down again. The ladies of the household had left early and gone into the shaded forest, where most of the women and children likely were, either enjoying the cooler shaded areas under the pines, or swimming in the ponds. When it was so hot that it affected the citizens, Turgon restricted certain areas for ellyth and elflings, posting the city’s few female guards to watch over such places, knowing for certain that skirts and bodices would be exchanged for bare skin, and it was the least he could offer to protect their modesty.

When Glorfindel looked up again, a small speck in the sky caught his eye. With barely any breeze, birds had been rare to see. The speck grew slightly larger, and Glorfindel saw that the tiny bird was struggling. There was no time to get to the ground to catch it in case it did not make its destination, so Glorfindel ran to the side of the balcony and held out his hand, his finger lifted like a perch. The thrush beat its tiny wings faster, continuing to struggle. Glorfindel stood on the tips of his toes and stretched his arms out, hands cupped together. As soon as the thrush was close enough, it made to land, but ended up dropping in exhaustion into Glorfindel’s palm.

“I have you, little one.” Glorfindel breathed a sigh of relief and went back into the apartment, losing his towel on the way. “Are you alright?” he asked, taking the bird to the kitchen. He took a teacup and dipped it into the bucket of water on the counter. The bird was yet too weak to stand, so Glorfindel dipped his finger in the water and held the bird upright. The thrush opened his beak and thankfully accepted the droplets offered.

The apartment was dark and quiet, but the gleam of metal somehow caught Glorfindel’s eye, and he carried the bird to the bookshelves once the little fellow had calmed down. “I seem to recall it being over here,” he said, more to himself than to the bird.

“Glorfindel? Who are you talking to?” Erestor’s voice carried through to Glorfindel, and the blond spied the metal rod that Erestor always used to remove the notes from the carrying tube.

For a moment, Glorfindel entertained the thought of looking at the note himself. It was a fleeting thought, and he mentally berated himself for considering such a despicable act. “Message for you from Doriath. I am trying to find the rod you use so that I can bring it to you with your little feathered friend.”

“I will come out. Just a moment,” said Erestor. Glorfindel retracted his hand away from the shelf and sat down with the thrush still in his palm. Erestor emerged with a towel around his waist and gave Glorfindel quite the look. “New fashion statement?” he queried as he walked to the shelf.
Glorfindel looked down at his lap and sheepishly grabbed for a pillow. “Sorry. There was a bit of excitement. Your friend nearly did not make it.” Glorfindel held out the bird as Erestor came by.

“Thank you for aiding him,” said Erestor as he sat down next to Glorfindel. He let the thrush hop onto his hand and extracted the note from the carrying tube. The bird hopped back onto Glorfindel’s arm as Erestor unrolled the note and chewed his lip. “Celegorm and Curufin are in Nargothrond.”

“You look worried,” remarked Glorfindel as Erestor stood up with brow furrowed and took the slip of paper to the desk.

“Celegorm and Curufin against Felagund and Orodreth is not something I had hoped to see. Felagund is wise and cunning, but Celegorm and Curufin are dangerous, especially if they still have that dog with them.”

“How is a dog of any consequence?” wondered Glorfindel. The thrush was exploring the couch, hopping from Glorfindel’s arm onto the fabric and back again.

Erestor sighed as he attempted to find the words he wanted to communicate back to Saeros. “It is a really big dog with intelligence far superior to common hounds. Also, it can talk.”

“Oh. Also, it can talk. You say it like a side note. ‘They have a dog, a really big dog. Oh, right, and the dog is a talking dog, you know, one of those breeds of the speaking variety.’”

The desk drawer was opened and then slammed back shut. “It is a side note. The dog is the size of a horse. You would understand if you saw him.”

“Alright, no need to snap at me. I would just think that the fact the dog can talk would be a fairly significant detail. Unless there is something else special about it. Does it dance? Sing? Juggle?”

“Huan once belonged to Oromë,” said Erestor finally. “Oromë gave Huan to Celegorm.”

“Ah ha!” exclaimed Glorfindel, pointing his finger at Erestor in triumph. This startled the thrush, who flew up to the perch on top of the bookshelf.

“What?”

“I thought you were upset at me, or your were irritated because of the heat, but that is not so! You are upset that your father gave this magical dog to someone you hate instead of giving the dog to you.”

“Hate? No. I do not hate Celegorm. I question his motives at times, but I do not hate him. And why do I care who my father gives his dog to?” muttered Erestor. This was followed moments later by, “I suppose it upsets me a little that—fine, I am mad about it. Damn mad about it! I loved that dog,” Erestor trailed off.

“Sorry. I would offer a hug or something, but the heat might not make that the best idea. I could go to the market and buy you the biggest puppy I can find, if it would help,” offered Glorfindel, but Erestor wrinkled his nose. “Alright. Do not say I did not offer.”

“I appreciate the thought. If you want to use the tub while I do my writing, you are more than welcome to,” said Erestor.

Glorfindel stood up, keeping in front of him the pillow that kept his modesty as he walked to the balcony to retrieve his towel. “I am going to drench myself, dry off really fast, and take a long nap.”
“That sounds lovely. Might have to join you on that.” Erestor whistled for the thrush as Glorfindel passed by and patted him on the head. “What was that for?”

“That was a ‘still sorry about your dog but still too hot to hug you’ head pat,” explained Glorfindel as he disappeared into the darker part of the suite, determined to build a device to counter the heat just as soon as it was cool enough to think of such things.

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Despite the heat, the show must go on. The next day found both Erestor and Glorfindel at Salgant’s theatre, which was quickly being put back into shape and was surprisingly cooler than expected. Salgant’s temper, however, was heating up with every mistake that was made.

“Mind your pitch, Erestor! Your words are clear, you are hitting the marks, but in-to-na-tion,” barked Salgant from his favorite spot in his theatre. He was in the upper balcony, keeping a watchful eye on the dancers behind Erestor as well. “Higher with those leg lifts, you there on the end! You look like you are having a spasm instead of dancing.”

Glorfindel was sitting a few chairs away, scribbling down numbers and crossing others out. Opening night was looming, and already they had sold out the boxes and the floor level seating, but in the balconies only a few tickets had been purchased. “We might need to cut the price of the balcony seats by half in order to make a profit.”

“How can you expect to make a profit by lowering the price? You will need to sell twice as many tickets; you need to sell only thirty more to break even,” answered Salgant before calling down to a young actress on stage, “I cannot hear you! Yes, you should sound sweet, like a nightingale, but pretend you are a gigantic nightingale with a loud voice!” To Glorfindel, he added, “What are you going to do, advertise to the peasants?”

“Now that just might work.” Glorfindel started to figure things out again, and nodded. “If we charged a third of the cost for the balconies, not only could we sell them out, but they would be affordable to anyone.”

“Why would you want to make it affordable to everyone? Can you just imagine the type of people you would have crawling around up here if you did that?” Salgant looked utterly appalled as he continued, “Why, they would be scratching themselves in public and spitting on the floors, not to mention they would probably bring their children and reek of goats and other smelly things.”

“I happen to like goats,” Glorfindel told him as he rewrote things on a clean sheet of paper. “I do not know what you care who comes in as long as we make money on this. Breaking even we could do, yes, but it hardly seems worth it for the effort put into fixing things up and getting the show written and running. Not to mention the costumes and the staff... it all adds up rather quickly.”

“And you thought you were going to do all of this on your own.” Salgant gave Glorfindel a haughty look and added, “Silly boy. You are a dreamer, ’tis true, but sometimes your dreams are much too wild for your own good. Erestor!” Salgant waved his handkerchief to acquire the attention of the chief actor, in case he did not hear the summons. “Come up here; we have something of import to discuss with you.”

Glorfindel sorted through his papers and pulled out the ones he wanted to show to make his point, while Salgant reached down onto a tray that had been placed on one of the seats and lifted up a satin pouch. He folded back the flaps to reveal a handful of roasted almonds and began to snack on them while he awaited Erestor to arrive. The tall ellon had to walk off stage, down the stairs, and all the way to the back of the theatre, then up three flights to reach the upper balcony. “You have a concern
Your fiscally frugal friend wishes to procure the peasantry population to bolster the numbers in the balconies.” Salant dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief. “I think the idea is rather short-sighted; it will be extra trouble to control them and to clean up after them.”

“If he wanted to bring sheep or cows up here, then yes, control and maintenance would be an issue. However, I am fairly certain that the peasants you are speaking of are still elves, are they not?”

Erestor took a seat in the row behind them, a little closer to Salgant than to Glorfindel. “What harm would there be in making these seats affordable to them? Perhaps it would help to better society, something which you are always speaking of in council.”

“And if something goes wrong? We have already sold a few of the seats up here.”

Erestor shifted a seat closer so that he was almost directly behind Salgant. Placing his hands on the shoulders of the portly fellow, he started to massage his shoulders, working out the tension that this new idea had brought forth. “Do not think of the problems, think of the solutions. This will surely sell out the theatre, and it will increase the amount of people who see the play. The more people who see it, the more people who tell their friends about it, the more potential we have for an audience.”

With jealous eyes, Glorfindel watched Erestor court Salgant’s favor, rubbing his sore muscles and retrieving a fallen almond from the tray for him. Suddenly he grabbed his notes and switched to the seat next to Salgant, shoving the papers between Erestor and Salgant. “As you can see, Erestor, this is an excellent opportunity.”

“Yes, I can see that. It is Salgant who seems unconvinced.” Erestor took the pages from Glorfindel, and while continuing to rub the back of Salgant’s neck with one hand, held the papers down for him to see. “It looks as if Glorfindel has it all figured out.”

“Erestor, I know for a fact that you would have no idea if Glorfindel was showing you the numbers for the theatre or the price of rum.” Salgant took the sheets and looked them over, and nodded at the last. “Alright. We shall try it. When Duilin arrives, I will see if he can pull together a campaign in the valley.”

“Word of mouth and the posters that were discarded due to a few misprinted words will do just fine. There is little reason to spend more money on advertising than we have to, if the idea is to use what we have.” Glorfindel tugged the pages back out of Salgant’s hands. “Thank you, Erestor, I do believe we are done here. You can get back to the stage.”

Erestor gave Glorfindel a surprised look, but stood up, his hands slipping away from Salgant. “Of course. I should really be down there.” He turned, and smiled. “Duilin, it is good to see you. We were actually just talking about you.”

“Were you?” Duilin, who had approached silently, was giving Salgant the same look Glorfindel had shot at Erestor earlier. “How charming.”

“Glorfindel has a plan to sell the tickets for the balconies to the poorer members of our city at a low enough price for them to afford.” Salgant set down his bag of nuts and dusted off his hands. “What are your thoughts on that?”

“I think we should have done a different play if you had planned to do that, but overall I think the idea has merit.” Duilin walked through the aisle and stood near to Salgant, his back to the stage. “What are you going to sell the tickets at?”
“Glorfindel has the numbers, and this is an idea he just came up with. Next time, we will choose a suitable play for it. If this idea works,” added Salgant as Duilin held out his hand and received the sheets from Glorfindel.

Erestor motioned toward the stage. “I am going to head back down, if that is alright.”

“You probably should. Your understudy is getting a little cocky on stage,” remarked Duilin as he read through each of the pages Glorfindel had written up. Erestor nodded and left the balcony area. As soon as the door closed behind him, Duilin looked over the top of the sheet, glaring at Salgant. “What was that all about?”

“Hmm? Oh, him touching me?”

“What the fuck do you think I was talking about? Yes, darling, his touching you.” Duilin tossed the sheets back in Glorfindel’s general direction with a brief, “Looks in order,” to him before staring at Salgant again. “Well?”

“You should sit down, Duilin, you are obviously worn out.” Salgant patted his knee, but Duilin simply narrowed his eyes more. “He was simply trying to curry my favor. I am not so blind as not to know his tricks. There is little for you to worry about.”

“I should hope so. I will kill him if he has any other intentions other than bending your mind to agree with his ideas. Still, that move was entirely unnecessary. Let him know he should not touch you with such familiarity any more if he wants to be able to keep playing violin. Actually, if he enjoys breathing, tell him to keep his hands off of you. I do not want to see him that close to you again. Ever.” Duilin glanced at Glorfindel and added, “I would expect you will keep what you are hearing confidential.”

“I... I doubt anyone would ever believe me if I tried to tell them what I was hearing,” admitted Glorfindel. He had stopped looking at them and was focusing on the stage, waiting for Erestor to rejoin the rest of the cast. “Besides, who would I tell?”

“Really, Duilin, sit down. Your anger is sweet, but I would much rather have you on my lap.” Salgant waved his hand at Glorfindel, that the other should move, and he did. After this, Duilin did reluctantly take a seat on Salgant’s knee, though he kept his arms crossed and his look contemptuous. “Do not tease about killing Erestor. I have spent far too much money training him to speak without his accent. His understudy is pretty to look at, but his voice grates upon me.”

Glorfindel slid his gaze to the left, taking in the sight of the two lords, Salgant rubbing Duilin’s thigh, his hand moving ever closer to his groin. “Are you not concerned that perhaps you should do that where others will not see you?”

“What others? The actors? The only one on that stage who might say something would be Erestor. The others?” Salgant’s hand slid down, and Duilin slapped it away. “Glorfindel, the only elf in this entire theatre who is not in hiding from the king is the dark haired one singing right now, and he is questionable.”

“Erestor is the gayest straight elf I have ever met,” Duilin mumbled, shaking his head. He twirled a lock of Salgant’s hair around his finger. “Please tell him not to touch you anymore.”

“Done, darling, I will tell him to keep his hands to himself.”

As the curtain was lowered for the second act, Glorfindel could not help but ask, “How long have the two of you been doing this?”
“Since Nevrast,” answered Duilin without hesitating. “Only back then, I was the big one, if you can imagine.” Salgant’s hand wandered again, and was slapped away once more.

“Huh.” Glorfindel concentrated so hard on watching the drawn curtain that Salgant began to laugh. “Did I say something amusing?”

“Did you think you were the only one with the ability to sneak around behind the king’s back? Do not look so surprised, Glorfindel. Many of us knew about you and Gildor. Speaking of, did you change your mind, or is there something going on between you and Erestor?” Salgant laughed harder as Glorfindel’s eyes widened. “Now you amuse without saying a word.”

“There is nothing at all going on between myself and Erestor. I am married, and so is he.”

“Ah.” Duilin smirked. “Is that why the two of you share a bedroom, and in fact, a bed, or is it because you both snore or something and your wives are irritated by this fact.”

“That... that is personal,” floundered Glorfindel. “I mean...”

Salgant smiled, both hands on Duilin’s thighs. “I think we know what you mean.”

“No! Erestor and I...” But Glorfindel could think of no way to explain it without explaining everything, and some things about Aranel and Tauniel he had promised not to share.

The curtain began to rise once more. As soon as the actors and musicians were skillfully focused upon their craft, Glorfindel asked without looking at the pair to his left, “How do you know that Erestor and I share the same bedroom?”

“We can see you from ours. Apparently, neither of you are acquainted with curtains,” Duilin answered.

Glorfindel mulled this information over, hardly paying any attention to the marks being missed below or the conductor deciding to start the current piece over. “I always assumed that, being that you live in separate houses, you would have separate bedrooms.”

“Technically we do. However, city planning is a marvelous thing. Did you know that there is a tunnel underneath the lesser market?” asked Salgant.

“I am aware of it now,” stated Glorfindel.

“Wonderful thing. It connects Duilin’s bedroom to my very own study.” Salgant smiled at the confusion that was washing over Glorfindel. “I know what you are thinking.”

“Oh really?”

“What you are thinking is easy to see. You are wondering why Duilin and I cast out Egalmoth from our circle of friends. Your belief, and his apparently, was that we did not want to associate with someone who was attracted to those of the same gender. Am I correct?” Salgant waited until Glorfindel nodded to continue. “You see, it is much plainer than that. I did not want to be in the midst of those who are liars. That is why I took issue with some of the things Erestor said and did.”

“Stupid question... should you not be upset with yourself for hiding your true identity?” wondered Glorfindel.

“No. This is a little different. This is a matter of survival. Look down there, Glorfindel. Look at all of the beautiful dancers. I have known many of them since my childhood. When they heard that Turgon
was going to lead them to a city of safety, do you know what they thought? They thought what we thought. That we would be safe. That we would not need to hide from people who looked down their noses at us.” Salgant shook his head. “That, we learned very quickly, was far from the truth.”

Duilin slid off of Salgant’s lap, onto the floor in front of him. Almost immediately, Salgant shifted forward and began to rub Duilin’s neck and shoulders. “We came with Turgon because we thought he intended to provide us with a home where we would all be welcome. Then came the rules, which were simple and precise, and made us outlaws. He deceived us first, so there is little reason we should not deceive him.”

“So you are saying that most of the members of your house are of the same mind as you are?” Glorfindel frowned when Salgant shook his head. “Most of them?”

“Some. How many? I do not know. I have a high regard for tolerance in my house, though, Glorfindel. I do not ask them of their private business. I expect that they will not question me of mine.” Salgant shouted further direction to the dancers, and settled back once again, still massaging Duilin’s back. “I cannot stand up against the king for them; he provides us with safety, and a home, and I will not slap him in the face for that. I will, however, protect my people, in whatever ways I can.”

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The practice did not end until very late into the evening, and Glorfindel and Erestor weaved through the valley in order to post the flyers regarding the discounted balcony seats and at the same time get dinner from one of the street side vendors. Glorfindel steered Erestor clear of the pubs along the way, getting them home in record time. Once safely inside, he revealed the details of his discussion with Salgant and Duilin, making certain that it was clearly understood that the two of them were much more than business partners.

“Sweet Eru, is there anyone in this city who is enamored with the fairer sex?” blurted out Erestor as he went to pour himself a drink.

Aranel raised her hand. “Me, too,” announced Tauniel, giving Aranel a loud kiss on the cheek.

Erestor rolled his eyes and took a crust of bread and a small saucer of water to the thrush, who was still perched atop the bookshelf. “Males enamored with the fairer sex.” He gave the bird a tiny pat with his fingertip before drifting toward the bar.

“That is hardly fair to say, Erestor. Look at Glorfindel. I dare say he is fairer than most females,” stated Tauniel. “Look at that hair, those long lashes. His skin is naturally pale and his cheeks carry just the hint of rose... most ladies would die for that sort of complexion.”

Glorfindel’s cheeks became more than rosy. “Stop that.”

“She has a point,” agreed Aranel. “You should really just give Glorfindel a try, Erestor. It should be easy enough to pretend he is the girl of your dreams. Besides, you already share a bedroom. Just keep the lights off, say nothing to one another, and do not worry about trying to grab anyone’s breasts. In the long run, it will prove pleasant for both of you, and neither of you will ever really have to think about it.” Both ladies started to giggle and twitter, while Glorfindel turned redder, from both embarrassment and anger.

Erestor set the glass he was pouring alcohol into down hard on the counter. “I am going to bed,” he said sternly, and left the room without further discussion, slamming the door of the bedroom behind him.
“He is certainly in a mood tonight,” remarked Aranel.

“We need to tie him up and let Glorfindel have his way with him again,” Tauniel suggested.

Glorfindel shot them an irritated look. “Hush, now, both of you. Can you not see how upset it makes him for you to joke about that? Leave me out of your plans. He is my friend, and I will not have either of you causing him torment.”

Tauniel looked put out. “I thought you wanted—“

“I want you to leave him alone!” Glorfindel walked to the bar and picked up the glass, and then took it to the bedroom. He knocked on the door before entering. “Erestor? I am coming in.” There was no response, so Glorfindel pushed the door open and stepped inside. The room was dim, and plunged into darkness when the door was closed again. “I brought your drink in.”

“Thank you. I do not think I need it, though.” Erestor’s voice was coming from the bed, and Glorfindel managed to make out his shape sprawled on his back.

The glass was set down on the table, and Glorfindel leaned one hand against the wall and looked down at Erestor. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No. I am not going to kick you out. This is your room, too. Besides, it was not you. It was the two of them. Why they do that, I have no idea.”

“Have they done this before?”

“Now and then. I do not think you have been around before, though. I am sure it irks you just as much as it does me.”

“I guess.”

Erestor rubbed his eyes, mumbling to himself. Glorfindel did not catch the words, and opted to change out of his clothes. “We need to be up early tomorrow,” he reminded Erestor.

“I know, I know.” Erestor rolled over onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow, and watched in the dimness as Glorfindel finished getting ready for bed.

Glorfindel paused as he lifted back the sheet. “Something the matter?”

“No. I was just... thinking about what they were saying.”

An unseen redness crept across Glorfindel’s cheeks. “About turning out the lights and...”

“No,” said Erestor gently, obviously wanting to keep his earlier anger under control. “They are right about you, though. I have known a lot of Elves in my life, male and female, and until I met you, I would have had a hard time naming the fairest.”

With a shy look directed toward the floor, Glorfindel crawled into bed and pulled up the sheet. By the time he worked up the courage to look at Erestor and offer his thanks for what was surely an idle compliment, Glorfindel saw even in the darkness that Erestor’s eyelids were closed and his breathing was steady. Leaning carefully over Erestor, Glorfindel hovered above the elder elf, watching the slow intake of air and the flawless features that Glorfindel had become so enamored with. “I think you are very beautiful, too,” whispered Glorfindel, thinking Erestor to be asleep.

To Glorfindel’s surprise, one brown eye suddenly opened and looked up at him. “Go to sleep,
Glorfindel.”

Glorfindel scrambled back to his spot, eyes wide and heart thumping in his chest. He hugged the sheet up to his chest, almost shaking until he heard Erestor’s final words on the matter.

“Good night, fair Findel. Now, go to sleep.”

With a grin plastered on his face, Glorfindel had no need for counting sheep or other barnyard animals as he dozed off, happily dreaming of an Elf he had once accepted as impossible who no longer seemed quite so unattainable. He could hardly know that merely a breath away with a smile of his own, that same Elf dreamed of him.
Summer sweltered on, and autumn arrived without much relief from the heat. The harvest was poor, with many crops being ruined in from the brutal sun. On a day when snow should have been falling, little more than a stagnant breeze was forecasted. Gondolin was in need of entertainment to take such worries from the minds of the people more now than ever.

At Salgant's playhouse, the company was hurrying to provide some of the much needed distraction. The first rehearsal for ‘Tears of Sirion’ was rushed through, on account of Erestor having other business to attend to. After a few minor changes were made with him present, he quickly gathered up his fiddle and jogged backstage to put things away.

By the time he had come out the exit of the theatre, dressed in his red and black uniform for the House of the Hammer, Glorfindel was waiting for him. “I thought maybe I would walk back with you,” he offered.

“I appreciate the gesture, but I have to run to make it on time. I need to go now.” Erestor gave Glorfindel a reassuring pat on the arm and sprinted off.

Glorfindel gave chase, catching up and matching speed. “Oh, I thought I would come along with you. Maybe help you out again, only this time, maybe I will not end up on my ass. I am back in practice, now that I have use of Galdor’s arena.”

“This is one I need to attend to myself,” answered Erestor with a small smile. He slowed a little due to the heat, for there was already sweat seeping through the front of his uniform. “You should stay back at the theatre and protect our interests. Make sure that Salgant does not change his mind and turn the production into a harper concert.”

“I would rather come with you.”

“No. You cannot.” Erestor stopped, and Glorfindel jogged a few steps ahead before he doubled back around. “Glorfindel, I am sorry, but this is a private training session.”

“Oh.” Glorfindel dug his hands into his pockets. “If you are teaching it out in the open, though, how can it be private?”

“It... I just think it is best for you not to come along,” explained Erestor.

“Is this the torture class Rog asked you to teach?” questioned Glorfindel. “Because... I did not want to say anything at the time, but I feel really uncomfortable with you doing that.”

Erestor laughed. “Glorfindel, do not worry. I will be fine. I am an expert in... are we still going to Ecthelion’s house for dinner?” he asked, changing the subject when he saw the worried expression on Glorfindel’s face.

“Yes.”

“I will see you there, then,” promised Erestor as he sped down the path. “Go back to the playhouse and distract my understudy!” he shouted just before rounding a grove of trees. “Make sure he does not do better than I did the first run-through!”
Later that evening, hours after the second rehearsal had wrapped up and Glorfindel had arrived at Ecthelion’s, the two lords were still sitting on Ecthelion’s balcony, awaiting their comrade’s arrival. Although a sudden burst of rain was cooling the air, both had unbuttoned their vests and loosened their collars some time ago. They now listened to the patter of droplets on parched ground and of the soil thirstily absorbing the rain. “I had hoped to speak of this to both you and Erestor,” said Ecthelion once conversation about weather and economics had waned, “but he will learn soon enough if he does not arrive. I have been spending a fair amount of time with Idril as of late.”

“Yes, I wondered what you were doing with yourself, now that Erestor and I have all of these other projects that are taking up our time,” admitted Glorfindel.

“I look around me, and I see the prosperity of Gondolin,” said Ecthelion. “I am at ease with the world beyond our gates, with Fingon proving himself a fair and conscientious king. In thinking to the future, my future, there is something missing, and I believe to have found that in Idril. I spoke to Turgon last week, and he seemed overjoyed—for Turgon—that I wished to formally court his daughter. We are taking our time, but I expect a wedding not too long from now.”

“My deepest congratulations to both of you,” replied Glorfindel. “You would make a handsome couple, and your children will be beautiful and well-loved. If you desire children, of course,” he hastily added.

“There is desire for them, yes, but necessity as well,” Ecthelion recognized. “One does not marry into the House of Finwê and sit idle. There are duties expected of them.”

“Of course,” agreed Glorfindel.

“Speaking of children…” Ecthelion waited until Glorfindel tilted his head in confusion and he laughed. “I mean you! A married man, a beautiful wife… have either of you given consideration?”

“Oh, well… I mean… maybe someday,” said Glorfindel. “In truth, there are times I still feel like a child myself.”

“There is no better way to grow up than to become a parent,” Ecthelion said sagely. “Surely a discussion about children was something the two of you had before marriage?”

Glorfindel scratched the back of his neck. “I guess I thought we would figure it out?”

“What of Erestor?” asked Ecthelion. “He always seemed to have an interest in children. Have he and Aranel spoken of it at all?”

“You think Erestor wants children?” concern washed over Glorfindel.

“Perhaps it would level his moods,” suggested Ecthelion. “He is a much better person since he joined the military. I think he wanted three or four, from what I recall. Speaking of Erestor,” added Ecthelion when Glorfindel remained silent, “are you sure he was going to meet you here?”

“That was what he told me this morning. He had some… things to teach Rog’s recruits, and then he was going to come over here.” Glorfindel shrugged. “Perhaps he needed to take a shower and get a change of clothing?”

“Or, he forgot. He forgets things sometimes, Glorfindel.” Ecthelion set down his empty goblet and considered opening the bottle of wine that was set aside for their dinner. “He is fairly old, Glorfindel. You need to keep that in mind. He promises to do things, and forgets. He says things, and forgets he
said them. When he gets drunk, which is not very difficult I have noticed, he is completely unaware of his actions."

"Tell me about it," muttered Glorfindel as the butler came onto the porch to announce Erestor’s arrival. Glorfindel waved his hand toward the interior of the house after the butler left, as if signaling that he knew all along that Erestor would eventually arrive.

Ecthelion picked up his goblet and sighed. "I wonder what his excuse is going to be."

"I am certain it is valid," replied Glorfindel as they came back inside to find the dining room empty. "He must yet be at the door." The pair walked through the dining room, and down the stairs into the vast foyer that held a fountain cut of crystal that sprayed water up three stories. The droplets fell back down like diamonds as they passed by. When they reached the hallway, they found Erestor sitting on a bench, removing his mud-caked boots as carefully as he could.

"Should I even ask?" pondered Ecthelion as he watched in amusement as Erestor struggled and failed miserably. There was a trail of mud leading into the house that a pair of maids were trying hard to clean up, as well as the specks of mud that were getting on the marble floor and carved stone statues every time Erestor pulled on his boot.

The look on Erestor’s face was grim. "It is raining outside," he announced rather tersely.

"I know. We were watching it from the balcony." Ecthelion snapped his fingers at the maids, and they scurried over to aid Erestor with his task. "Do not tell me the path to the house is flooded."

"No. I came from the stables." Erestor looked at Glorfindel, and holding his gaze, said, "We lost Canary Blue. The foal may not make it, either. Something went wrong and she went into labor early; the stable hand managed to find me first because I was out on the training field. I did what I could."

Glorfindel hung his head and nodded. "Damn. Pumpkin, and now this."

"You lost Pumpkin?" Ecthelion touched Glorfindel’s shoulder sympathetically when the younger elf nodded. "I am sorry. I know how much you loved that horse."

"He was old. It was time," was all Glorfindel said in answer, not mentioning it had been mere days earlier. He pinched the bridge of his nose to regain his composure before looking up again. "Dinner is getting cold. We should eat."

"I would understand if you wanted to go to the stables to see to things, Glorfindel," said Ecthelion.

"The stable hands are probably doing exactly what I would be doing." Glorfindel glanced at Erestor for confirmation, and Erestor nodded. "I think I could use another glass of wine, though."

Conversation at dinner centered around the opening of the play two nights later, and to how things were progressing with the stables, barracks, and arena that Glorfindel was building. "The weather has allowed us to progress much faster and further than we had hoped. I expect within a month to have all of the officers moved in, and the rest of the soldiers by the beginning of the year. After that I will begin actively recruiting from the valley."

"Good luck with that. I understand that Fingon is pleased to know that someone here is taking care to train the less fortunate members of our society."

"I guess I feel a kinship to them," replied Glorfindel thoughtfully. "When I came here, like most of them, I had nothing. I was lucky enough that you took me in, fed me, clothed me, trained me, and kept me out of trouble. The only reason I achieved what I have is because of my friends, yourself..."
and Erestor, and the others who have come to my aid in hard times, Galdor and Idril, and now, Salgant and Duilin. I think I owe it to others to give back some of that good fortune in whatever way I can."

The meal was hurried through, on account of Erestor’s tardiness and the long day that was ahead of all three of them the following morning. The rain had stopped, with puddles and a cool breeze being the welcomed after effects. Glorfindel insisted upon stopping at the stables while Erestor headed straight for the tower. Smoke was rising up from the small crematorium at the far end of Glorfindel’s land, and he knew Canary Blue’s body had already been taken there. It was probably for the best, he decided, as he entered the stables. Grieving over her corpse so soon after dealing with Pumpkin’s death wasn’t going to do him any good. Instead, he went to her old stall to find it empty. Signs of birth and death were evident, and with a sigh he sat down on a crate next to the gate of the pen.

One of the stable hands passed by a few minutes later, carrying a bucket of water. “If you came looking for the foal, m’lord, we moved her.”

Glorfindel looked up. “Is she still alive?”

The boy nodded. “ Barely, sir. We took her in with Sunshine, since she’s the only one nursing right now.”

“And Sunshine is letting her nurse? This I have to see,” replied Glorfindel as he stood. Recalling the incident much earlier in the year when Sunshine had almost run off her own foal, he was surprised when he approached her stall. There he found a very healthy little Lemondrop, now nearly a yearling, prancing about the stall in excitement over having this new adopted sibling, while Sunshine kept the tiny foal on her feet with gentle nudges as the newborn suckled between shivers. “It seems a little drafty here. Can we get those main doors closed or else move them to another stall?”

“We are planning to move them in the morning, m’lord, but Sunshine does not let us get near the little one. I think she knows how vital it is to feed her right now.”

With a nod, Glorfindel entered the stall, knowing that none of his horses would dare resist him entering. It looked as if he was going to be chased away as well, but Sunshine suddenly recognized her master and lowered her head. “Changed your mind about being a good nana, I see,” he said as he approached. She snorted. He spent some time in the stall calming Lemondrop and tending to Sunshine and the foal. Before leaving he gave instructions to the stable hands that he should be informed of any other incidents immediately and where he could be found.

By the time Glorfindel finally made it home, the first rays of the morning light were visible on the far-off horizon. He crawled into bed and fell asleep almost right away; it was only after he woke up that he realized that Erestor had not been there when he had come to bed. Assuming that Erestor had simply left very early, it was only after speaking to Tauniel at breakfast that he discovered that Erestor had not made it home the previous night.
“Let me ask Aranel,” suggested Tauniel after she and Glorfindel had finished their breakfast. They were lounging in the sitting room when Aranel returned from visiting with her mother. “Have you seen Erestor today?”

Aranel shook her head, and placed a basket with eggs and bread on the counter. “I do not seem to recall him even coming home last night,” she said with some concern. “I believe he was scheduled to train father’s troops in the morning, and then he has the dress rehearsal for the play in the evening.”

“Your poor husband is going to wear himself out by opening night. I hope he does not fall asleep on stage,” Tauniel added as Aranel joined them. She turned to Glorfindel and said, “Please tell me you have given him leave this week from tending to the horses.”

“I have, but that has not stopped him from it. In fact, I am wondering if that is where he was last night.”

“Last night?” asked Aranel.

“He never came home, as far as I could tell,” Glorfindel explained.

With a roll of her eyes, Aranel said, “Well, I hope he did not go drinking and pass out at the pub. Ada will be furious.”

“Maybe I should go down to the practice fields, make sure he made it there this morning,” decided Glorfindel, his announcement for no one in particular. Aranel took one of the loaves from the basket and wrapped it in a cloth for Glorfindel to take with him, but he shook his head and left after retrieving his sword and his copy of the script.

Many greeted him as he made his way to the foot of the tower, and many more as he navigated through the crowded midday market. When he reached the edge of the training grounds that Rog owned, he was easily able to see Erestor, and to hear him barking commands to the bedraggled warriors-in-training. Rog was nowhere in sight, but Glorfindel still kept his distance, walking the edge of the field instead of through it.

Erestor whistled sharply and the trainees fell in line. Two lieutenants held up a wooden board. Erestor spoke words that Glorfindel was too far away to hear, and then, after repositioning himself, struck the board with a high kick. The crack of the wood as it splintered in two made Glorfindel flinch, and he hoped no one had caught notice of him. Erestor directed his students to pair off as he pointed to a pile of boards nearby.

Not wanting to disrupt whatever Erestor was doing with his soldiers, Glorfindel decided to go directly to the playhouse and see how the preparations were coming along. It made sense for him to protect his investment, and Erestor had to come to the theatre eventually. On his way he checked on things at the stables, and after deeming the work being done there satisfactory, took up residence in the balcony of the theatre with Duilin.

“I had expected Salgant to be up here,” Glorfindel said as he settled into a seat.

Duilin smirked. “Not the day before. He has to go bustling around checking and double checking everything, giving advice that comes far too late to be taken all that seriously. It makes him feel as if
he is still in control when, at this point, all control is lost to him and now it is up to the individual
performers to band together as a team and make the audience love them. No words of
encouragement or threats of firing will do any good anymore.” He turned his head to regard his
fellow lord, seated a few chairs over. “When is your boyfriend getting here?”

“My...” Glorfindel rolled his eyes. “Look, Duilin, I have already explained this once. He and I are
not in a relationship.”

“And I only sleep with Salgant because he keeps my feet warm.”

“Well, maybe you do,” replied Glorfindel, pretending that he needed to concentrate now on the
moving of scenery on the stage below. He leaned forward a little, putting Duilin out of his view until
the other elf moved to the seat beside him. A few moments later, Duilin was leaned over the balcony
as well, elbows on the railing much in the same position as Glorfindel. The smirk on Duilin’s face
was annoying, as were the occasional sideways glances and nudges. Glorfindel shoved Duilin’s
shoulder back the third time. “There is nothing going on between Erestor and I.”

“You share a room, and you follow each other around like lost puppies. Even Salgant and I do not
spend as much time together as the two of you do.”

“Erestor is not interested in me whatsoever,” said Glorfindel.

Duilin rested his chin onto his hands and looked down at the rows and rows of seats on the floor
level. “But in the reverse, it seems you have certainly taken an interest in him. Salgant thinks it was
all some elaborate plan that Erestor constructed to hide the fact that Aranel and Tauniel have been
bound for years, and that Rog has been paying Erestor to keep things quiet.”

Torn between trying to keep the secret of the marriages and disputing Erestor’s motive, Glorfindel
finally decided on the latter. “I doubt very much that Erestor is being paid.”

“Ah.” Duilin settled back in his seat. Shortly thereafter, so did Glorfindel, looking weary as he
rubbed his forehead. “There is no need for you to worry. Have you ever played with dominoes, my
friend?”

“Sure, the game with the tiles, where you match the numbers up.”

“No. Have you ever set them up on end in a row and then pushed them over?”

“Oh, that. Sure. They all knock into each other.”

Duilin nodded. “Exactly. We all need to stick together, or else if one of us goes down, so will the
rest. That is why, much as Salgant and I dislike Gildor, we leave him be. As annoying as Enerdhil
has become, we leave him be. Despite the fact we can see into your bedroom window – well, used
to, nice curtains you put up, by the way – neither of us would ever mention it to the king.” He
scratched the back of his neck and shook his head. “I am still confused about Erestor, though.” He
began to tick of the items on his fingers as he went through them. “There is no monetary gain. There
is no additional power he is getting. He decreased his land by giving what he had to you, so there
was no gain there. He is allegedly interested in ellyth, and yet is condemning himself to sleeping in a
bed with you. Why?”

Glorfindel answered with silence.

“You keep saying there is nothing between the two of you, and I believe that. Like I said before, we
can – could – see your room from ours.” Duilin reminded Glorfindel. “It is the worst show in the
city. However, the question is still there. What is Erestor getting out of this?”
“Maybe he is just doing it to be nice,” suggested Glorfindel. “Is it so unheard of for someone to perform a random act of kindness?”

“A random act of kindness would be offering to look after someone’s elflings so that they can have a day of peace with their beloved, or fixing someone a meal after a hard day’s work and giving them a backrub. An elaborate plan that includes a fake marriage seems a little in the extreme.”

“Obviously you have some theory you would care to opine,” Glorfindel said, rubbing his closed eyelids and feeling very drained.

Duihin leaned his head back to stare up at the ceiling. “Maybe he saw this as an opportunity to get close to you in a way he could not admit he wanted to. Perhaps he has the same sort of feelings you have for him, but is too afraid to consider the possibility.”

Below, Salgant’s barking of orders brought the focus for both of them back to the stage. The plump Elven-lord was scolding a dancer who had forgotten her slippers, while the set builders struggled to repair a bit of scenery that had fallen over and cracked earlier in the day. “Where is my star cast?” rumbled Salgant, and one of the leading ladies peeked out from behind the curtain. She said something inaudible to the pair in the balcony, and Salgant threw his hands into the air before shooing her away. “Ten minute delay,” he announced to the rest of the company. “Our leading ellon just arrived and needs to get in costume.”

Glorfindel sighed in relief to know that Erestor had not been kept too late at the training fields. Duihin did not miss the reaction, and smiled knowingly. “You really must love him or something.” Glorfindel avoided answering by continuing to concentrate on the stage. “He might come around someday, you know.”

“Erestor? I doubt that,” replied Glorfindel, though he had to admit to himself that there was always the tiniest glimmer of hope. “I mean, you either are or you are not. He was probably stealing kisses from ellyth when he was a little boy, and when I was an elfling, had we been the same age and living in the same place, I likely would have tried to steal a kiss from him.”

Until the curtain was drawn in preparation for the rehearsal, Duihin watched the rushing about of the cast and crew. As they waited for the swell of the music and the opening of the curtain once again, Duihin said, “He could still change.”

“Doubtful.”

“I did.” Duihin settled into his seat and waited until he had Glorfindel’s full attention. “Salgant and I became friends because our parents thought it would be ideal for him to marry my sister. For a while, everyone seemed to like the idea. He courted her, she sighed and swooned over him, and I played chaperone to their outings as any respectable, concerned older brother should.”

“So, what happened? You and Salgant fell in love, obviously.”

“You are incorrect, sir. It was my sister who fell in love, but not with Salgant. She had become infatuated with the local blacksmith. On the night that Salgant proposed, she rejected him and admitted who her true love was. My parents were delighted, for blacksmiths are respectable and always in demand, and hardly gave the elf who had nearly joined our family, whom they had to that point treated as their own son, a second thought.”

The orchestra began to play, and the lights dimmed as the ushers hurried to put out most of the candles along the aisles. Glorfindel nodded to Duihin to continue, and he did so in hushed tones. “I sought him out, and found him distressed. We walked around Nevrast and talked for a while, ending
up on the back stoop of some abandoned house. He asked me to answer a question honestly, and then he asked me if I had ever thought that maybe, if someone had no want of children or of a wife, if I felt it was wrong for two males to love one another and live together. Of course, I have always considered myself fairly liberal in my judgments, so I answered that if there were in fact two males who were interested in such a thing, that I saw no harm in it.”

“Then he asked if I had aspirations to have a wife of my own, and a family, and I told him honestly that I had not really considered it, but that I probably should if I was to carry on the family line. You must remember—I was the Lord of Nevраст before Turgon showed up. I see him as an equal now in Turgon’s court, but at one time, I had duties and responsibilities to consider. He prodded me further—if I was just a peasant, without an impressive heritage and a duty to my family, would I still marry and raise children. And, honestly? I have a severe disdain of children. I am not sure I even liked myself as a child. So I told him this, and his mood brightened slightly.” Duilin lowered his voice further as the curtain rose up. “Then he asked me, was it something I would ever consider, if there was an ellon who thought I was attractive, if I would ever consider it. I shrugged and said, I supposed I would consider it.”

“And then?” asked Glorfindel. It seemed rude to talk through the opening scene, but he had seen it so many times that he could recite all of the parts from memory.

“And then he kissed me.”

“Ahh.”

“And then I ran away.”

“Ohh.”

Duilin ruefully smiled. “I think it was all too much for a single day. My sister’s announcement, her rejection of someone who had become such a good friend, and then the transition, that instead of Salgant being like my brother, that he wanted to be my lover. It took me a few weeks to come around to talking to him again, and then it was just a greeting here and there when we passed in the market or on the street. I think it was, maybe four years later, perhaps five... it was after his father died, I remember that much. It was actually at a play, oddly enough. We chanced to be seated next to one another, and with a sold out theatre, there was no opportunity for either of us to switch seats. It was during the curtain call, when everything was so loud from applause and cheers that I could hardly hear him, that he whispered an apology to me. It was so... heartbreaking and so sincere. I invited him back to my house to have a drink with me, and he accepted.

“I hardly recall how it happened, but as soon as we were inside, we were practically all over each other. He had gained a little weight by then, and became embarrassed by it when we disrobed. He had been eating his way through his depression. I remember telling him it had nothing to do with the physical, it was all about the spirit and the mind, and it was then that finally I understood as well. There should never be set boundaries to love.”

“The trouble I have with Erestor is that he already believes all of that, but he really wants a family. He would make a good father, too, and I would feel terrible trying to dissuade him from that,” Glorfindel admitted.

Duilin nodded. “Fair enough. Still, I think you stand a better chance with him than you are leading yourself to believe.”

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After the final rehearsal, Glorfindel rushed down from the balcony to make it backstage. His plan was to walk back with Erestor, but he did not find his friend with the rest of the cast. It was evident from the state of his dressing room that he had left in haste. Glorfindel jogged outside, but no matter which direction he looked in, there was no sign of Erestor anywhere.

Arriving home, it was the same story as the night before. Erestor had not returned, and when Glorfindel turned in for the night, he was alone for only the second time since moving into the apartment with Erestor and the ladies.

When Glorfindel woke the next day, it was to the sound of splashing water and light humming. He hastily pulled on a robe and entered the washroom to find Erestor taking a bath. “Where have you been?” questioned Glorfindel as he pulled the stool over to the tub. He yawned and rubbed his eyes as he waited for Erestor to answer.

“Is there a reason you entered without knocking?” asked Erestor back. He was sitting in the tub lathering his hair and looking quite harried.

“Because I have been worried about you,” answered Glorfindel as a knock came upon the main door.

“I appreciate it. Hand me that pitcher, will you?” Erestor motioned toward a pitcher of warm water sitting on the counter.

“Answer my question, and maybe I will.” The knock on the front door became more insistent, and Glorfindel wondered why neither Aranel or Tauniel was answering it.

Erestor leaned out of the tub managed to reach the pitcher on his own. “You had better get the door,” he said as someone switched to banging on the door instead of the polite knocking.

Glorfindel scowled and left the washroom, tying the belt of the robe so that it would not accidentally fall open. He yanked the door open, and one of the stable hands practically fell into the room. “Sir, you need to come at once! There was a pack of wolves and they managed to get into the stables before we chased them off. It was a nightmare!”

At once, Glorfindel held up his hand to silence the distressed lad, and then took quick, long strides into the bedroom to change into leggings and boots. He tied back his hair on his way out, motioning for the stable hand to come with him. When he reached the bottom of the tower, he entered the royal stables. Mounting Dragonsong without a saddle, Glorfindel pulled the stable hand up onto the horse with him, and then set off, racing across the city, hoping he was not too late.

The fastest path was through the greater market, and Glorfindel took the chance, shouting for people to clear the path. He almost knocked an elleth into a well, and had to leap clear over a baker who was concentrating more on the over-laden tray of bread he was carrying than with the horse that was galloping in his direction.

There was a crowd at the fence of the stables when Glorfindel arrived, and he could see Sunshine near the gate in obvious distress. Even with the crowd blocking a fair amount of the view, he could tell that something was terribly wrong. He leaped off of Dragonsong and approached, shoving the masses out of his way without much heed to who he might be offending.

“The wolves came right into the stables and scattered the horses in the pasture. They must be hungry to try that. We killed two of them, but I think the pack leader got away. Some of them leaped into the stall with Sunshine and the foals, so we opened the gate in hopes they would get out. Sunshine kicked at them while the babies made it out and we got them far off. By then, some of the wolves
were turning on us – it was a mess. Sunshine bolted when she had the chance, but she ran blindly and tried to leap the main fence. By then, the wolves were rounding back into the forest.”

Glorfindel cursed the fact he had never built a real fence on the side that bordered the woods. There was a knee-high stone wall, but nothing significant enough to keep out wolves or tigers. Neither had ever been a problem; the tigers tended to stay up in the mountains, and the wolves were never bold enough to come into the actual city.

Sunshine continued to struggle, but she weakened more as she did so. The foals, her own and the orphaned one she had taken to, were being restrained some distance away. Glorfindel motioned for them to be let go as he came close to Sunshine, the crowd parting for him.

The mare had attempted to leap the high fence, and whether she failed due to fear or something else, she had only made it halfway. Three of the ornate pickets had spiked through her, and she was caught on the fence. Every twist and turn only dug further into her, and Glorfindel reached out to touch her head and try to calm her. He looked down, the blood dripped down the fence and pooling beneath her. The horse wearily rested her neck over his shoulder and gave a tired huff. “You did good, sweetheart. You saved the little ones,” he said, disregarding the fact he was now crying openly in front of a hundred or more curious onlookers. “See? Both of them are right there. I promise we will take care of them for you, sweetheart. You did everything you could, but you deserve a rest now,” he said, stroking her mane. She wuffled against him as he sniffled and asked for the oldest of the stable hands to bring him a long knife.

“I was wrong about you, Sunshine,” he said as he waited and painstakingly tried to ease her pain the best he could. “You are a great mother.” As she gave a weak whinny in agreement, Glorfindel felt the knife being placed in his free hand. He stepped back slightly and kissed the mare on the forehead, and then did what he had to.
“What happened?”

Glorfindel closed the door behind him with his elbow, his hands still caked with blood. He shook his head as he pulled off his boots and dumped them at the entrance. When he left, he had neglected a tunic or shirt, so his chest was bloodied as well, and Tauniel began to check him for wounds while Aranel, pale and distressed, sat down on the sofa and fanned herself.

“None of the blood is my own,” assured Glorfindel as he walked away from Tauniel and went to the counter where Erestor would pour his nightly drinks. Glorfindel selected the darkest of the amber liquids and poured himself a half glass. He drank it like water, and coughed when he finished.

“Here; come to the kitchen and let me clean this up,” insisted Tauniel as she gently took the glass from her husband. He followed without fuss to the adjoining room, where she used a dishrag to wipe the splatter from his chest and shoulder, and then instructed him to wash his hands while she retrieved a round tin from one of the higher shelves. She lifted the cover and then a sheet of parchment and handed him a thin, round sort of biscuit. “Eat this. It will help soak up the alcohol. You cannot risk being inebriated opening night.”

A shrug was all he offered in thanks before taking the travel bread with him into the sitting room. He cracked it in half, and from first nibble knew it was stale, but it would serve its purpose all the same. It was just as well; he hardly felt like eating, but he had to have something and the wafer was bland and light, but was worth an entire day’s meals.

Erestor chose that moment for his arrival, exiting their shared room and dressed in loose clothing, obviously meaning to relax before the grand event that evening. He glanced at the ladies, and then took a deep breath at made his way to Glorfindel, sitting down beside him. “I take it things did not go so well.”

A piece of the dry bread crumbled and fell as dust onto the floor as the wafer was broken in half. Glorfindel explained the circumstances and the outcome as briefly as possible. Tinier and tinier pieces were broken off, and Glorfindel ate these little bits while staring towards the window, avoiding all eye contact since he had arrived. “It was a lot harder than I thought.”

“It always is,” agreed Erestor, but Glorfindel shook his head.

“I never killed anything before. I know I had to, she was in so much pain, but I... I never thought I would really have to.”

“You have gone hunting before, though,” said Erestor. “I know it is far harder when the animal is your own, but I myself have felt no less remorse shooting a deer than I do when I ease a horse with his or her misery.”

The last morsel of bread was eaten before Glorfindel revealed, “I go to the market and I buy whatever it is I need. I never go hunting.”

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“But, we have gone hunting together,” argued Erestor. “There were a number of times, especially when we were searching for Aredhel, and—“ Erestor paused. “And you stood back. It was always Gildor or myself who made the kill.”

Glorfindel nodded, still unable to look at Erestor, choosing to focus now on the empty chair at the desk. “My father once forced me to kill a doe, so I suppose I should take some responsibility there.
However, this was the first time it was my hand willingly on the knife.”

In a comforting gesture, Erestor put his arm around Glorfindel and pulled him a little closer. “As soon as this play is over, I am going to request a break from the playhouse and from training and you and I are going to spend a week in the woods behind the stables.”

Thankful for the friendly hug, Glorfindel shamelessly snuggled against Erestor, his head resting on Erestor’s shoulder. “You are probably going to make me go shoot something.”

“We are going to reverse the damage your father did and the negative feelings you have about hunting. You eat meat, and you should know how to catch and prepare it yourself instead of relying on someone else to do that part. It does not mean you should always hunt for everything, but if you are going to eat it you should know how it gets from the forest to your plate. We might have to start with fishing; I am far better at that than I am tracking creatures that can run away.”

Glorfindel squirmed slightly, but nodded his head against Erestor. He hated the idea of killing anything, but Erestor’s explanation was sound and logical, and it meant time spent alone with him. Time alone with Erestor was going to be rare to nonexistent in the coming months, especially if the play was a success. With this thought, Glorfindel melted into the moment, enjoying the rare closeness to Erestor until time brought with it reality and forced each of them to tend to certain tasks before the evening arrived.

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There was hardly a reason to worry about the play, Glorfindel learned hours later. Laughter erupted exactly when it should, and cheers at all the right places. A chase scene brought forth the only error – water from the previous act had not been cleaned up, and Erestor slid on the unseen obstacle. His flailing of his arms and stumbles to keep himself upright only added to the comedy of it, and as Salgant wiped mirthful tears from his eyes, he said to Glorfindel through the din of the theatre, “I wonder if we can plan that for every show!”

Now standing in the receiving line between Salgant and Duilin, Glorfindel had a grin permanently plastered on his face. The compliments rained down so fast as the audience passed them on their way out of the theatre that the lobby was virtually flooded before the balcony even began to empty. Lines had formed at the ticket booths, and an usher had been snagged to mark off shows as sold out as the number of reservations increased.

Duilin glanced down to the other end of the line, where four of the five principle players were busily signing autographs, hugging fans, shaking hands, and accepting bouquets and other small gifts, as well as making apologies for the missing cast member. During a very short lull, Duilin nudged Glorfindel and whispered through his teeth, “Where is your boyfriend hiding?”

“He is not my...” Glorfindel looked around and frowned. “He should be here.”

“Mmmhmm.” Duilin gently pushed Glorfindel out of the line and said, “Go find him before we have a riot.”

The first place Glorfindel headed was back through the backstage area and into the hidden corridors that lead to the dressing rooms. He knocked on the door of Erestor’s dressing room when he reached it, and pushed it open to find a pair of ellin – neither of whom was Erestor – engaged in something more than acting. “Beg pardon,” muttered Glorfindel as he shut the door hastily and continued to search the rooms. An usher directed him to the rear doors, saying that Erestor had left with a petite elleth with dark hair soon after the play ended.
“Ah, yes, his wife,” said Glorfindel with a nod.

The usher furrowed his brow. “She did not look like his wife. Then again, it is dark back here.”

Glorfindel paused, shook the thought from his head, and climbed the stairs that took him to the exit. The streets were dark, for a heavy fog had set in that hindered the hanging street lanterns from doing their duty. It made it difficult to make out who was who of those walking down the misty paths.

Just as Glorfindel was about to walk the perimeter to search for Erestor, he spied a couple standing beneath one of the street lights. Even in the darkness, there was something quite familiar about the ellon, and Glorfindel took a step back into the shadows as he recognized that it was Erestor, standing beside a lady Glorfindel had never seen before.

Perhaps Glorfindel was not aware of who she was, but obviously Erestor was acquainted. The elleth placed her hand on his chest as she whispered something to him, and he casually put his arm around her shoulder. As Glorfindel looked on, Erestor took the lady into his arms and held her close as she sobbed against him. The first emotion Glorfindel felt was anxiety, and he looked this way and that to be sure no one else was on this part of the street. Second, he was hit with such jealousy and anger that he felt his fists clenching on their own accord as he glared, unseen, at the pair.

Erestor whispered words of comfort as he rubbed the elleth’s back. They embraced again as she calmed, but did not let go for what Glorfindel considered an unreasonable amount of time. Eventually, Erestor straightened himself up. They shared a lingering smile, and then the lady drew the hood of her cloak up over her head and hurried away into the night. Erestor leaned against the light post and gave a sigh. He closed his eyes after she disappeared from sight and smiled to himself.

“Is that what you have been doing instead of coming home at night?” Glorfindel’s voice cut crisply through the night.

Erestor turned abruptly, blinking in an attempt to make out Glorfindel from the shadows. The blond stepped forward, a hard and sour look on his face. Erestor sucked in his breath. “Let me explain,” he began, but Glorfindel cut him off immediately.

“I hardly think you need to. I am not blind, though I almost wish I was. Duilin wants you inside. You have been keeping most of your admirers waiting, although I am certain he will understand when he finds out you were taking good care of one of them.”

“Glorfindel,” attempted Erestor again, but Glorfindel was already on his way toward the front entrance. “Glorfindel, it is not what it looks like!” shouted Erestor, sounding more like he did when barking orders on the field than he normally did at home.

With a dramatic pause, Glorfindel gave Erestor and icy look over his shoulder. “You can explain just what that was when we get home. I am sure your WIFE will want to hear what you have to say about this. Right now, I expect you to return to the lobby, where, as I said, your arrival has been anticipated.”

Erestor shook his head and rolled his eyes but complied without further argument. They both arrived back in the lobby at approximately the same time, though Erestor made sure to keep himself just a few steps behind Glorfindel and not to address his friend directly. There was indeed a small crowd awaiting the star actor’s arrival, and for the next hour Glorfindel nearly forgot about the incident outside as he was introduced to various theatre critics and donors by Salgant, while Duilin kept the line moving and the actors corralled.

“There is a cast party at Salgant’s house. You are invited, of course, if you want to come,” said
Duilin to Glorfindel as they locked the front doors after the last of the audience members had left. Duilin looked over his shoulder at Erestor and added, “Both of you, that is.”

Instead of answering, Erestor looked at Glorfindel, who glared hard and then said, “Thank you, but we need to get home. It is late.”

“I am certain your ‘wives’ would not mind if you were out another hour,” said Duilin, having missed Glorfindel’s expression.

“Thank you, but it is late.”

Erestor cleared his throat and said with some amount of uncertainty, “Perhaps we should go. Just for a little while, so as not to be rude.”

Glorfindel sat down in one of the large, plush chairs of the lobby and leaned back in it, his arms stretched over the arms of the chair. “Do you need to change before we go home?” he asked, stressing the last word.

“I probably should,” answered Erestor meekly before taking a step in the direction of the doors that would lead to the backstage area.

“You have five minutes, and then I shall come after you. It would behoove you NOT to have me come after you.”

Erestor considered Glorfindel’s threat for a moment, but merely nodded. He jogged to the doors and disappeared past them.

“Well then.” Duilin sat down next to Glorfindel, perching himself on the edge of the chair. “I suppose I will not be seeing you or your boyfriend at the party.”

Duilin found himself on the receiving end of a very defiant stare. “He is not my boyfriend,” ground out Glorfindel.

“Alright, fine, whatever you say,” answered Duilin, though clearly from his tone of voice and smirk, he hardly believed this. “Whatever he is to you, he certainly did or said something to offend you enough to focus all sorts of anger on him.”

“Mmm.” Glorfindel dropped the gaze, focusing a softer look on the doors in anticipation of Erestor coming back.

Duilin nudged Glorfindel’s elbow. “So?”

“What?”

“What did he do? One minute you were sunshine and happiness, and the next you come back and look like you want to tear off his head and piss down his throat.”

Glorfindel ran his hands through his hair and stared up at the ceiling. “I have no idea.”

With a dignified chuckle, Duilin repeated, “You have no idea? You have no idea what he did, or you have no idea why you are so upset?”

“Either... both,” admitted Glorfindel in a tired voice.

“Are you positively certain the two of you are not a couple?” asked Duilin, continuing to laugh as Erestor emerged from the backstage area. “Good luck, Lord Glorfindel, though I cannot say I am
certain what I am sending you well wishes for!" To Erestor, Duilin simply said good night before wandering away to usher home any stray performers or workers still in the theatre.
The apartment was dark when Glorfindel and Erestor arrived. Neither had spoken to the other on the long walk home. The former fumbled to light a few candles, only to find that Tauniel and Aranel had made themselves quite comfortable on the couch in their absence. “You have a room for that,” scolded Glorfindel as they hastily scrambled to cover each other with the throw that was on the back of the sofa. Erestor’s gaze lingered on them even after they had managed to hide most of their nudity.

“Sorry!” Aranel huddled closer to Tauniel and yanked the blanket over her bare legs. “We thought you would stay and go off to the party.”

Glorfindel practically threw himself down into a chair, much like a small elfling in the midst of a tantrum while Erestor shut and locked the door. He took up a position between the chair and the couch, waiting for Glorfindel to say something in explanation to the ladies. When nothing was said, Erestor sighed. “After the performance tonight—”

“Erestor was with another elleth,” blurted out Glorfindel. “I saw it with my own two—“

“If you would let me explain—“

“Who cares?” Tauniel was stroking the hair on Aranel’s head to calm her down. “No one ever said he had to stay celibate.”

“If I could explain,” shouted Erestor, and the boom of his deep voice made all three of them cower back slightly. He gave Glorfindel the sort of long, hard look that had been given to him earlier and proceeded to speak. “I would like to preface this by saying I have been very, very open about most aspects of my life with all three of you, except those items which I foresaw no need for you to know or that I had sworn to others not to speak of. This is one of the latter.”

He took himself to the bar, poured a glass of wine, but took only a sip as he returned. “King Fingon’s decrees have affected a fair number of our folk. We have seen increases in all of the armies because of his initiatives. Many artisans and laborers have been uprooted from trades they have perfected, in some cases for centuries, and have been forced to callous their hands with blades and bows. The lady Glorfindel saw me with tonight is the wife of one such ellon.”

“And I thought the fact you were cheating was bad enough,” mumbled Glorfindel. “With a married elleth, no less.”

“But who is he cheating on?” wondered Aranel. “Certainly not me. I have no quarrel if he chooses to spend time with another lady.”

“Ai! You are certainly dense at times!” exclaimed Tauniel. “You might think it matters not, but who knows the character of this girl, and what if her husband were to find out? If she talks, it could mean all of our necks!”

“Hold, now,” pleaded Erestor half-heartedly. “Your tales rival those of the court loremaster! Hear me
“out, children,” he said, quite sternly, reminding them without doubt of the vast difference in their ages to his. “The lady is the wife of a soldier in my training, in Rog’s army. She is not my lover,” he said rather pointedly, as if this might help to cease the discussion.

“She and her husband have two adorable children at home, twin daughters of only four years. Imagine their shock when he was told he was expected to leave his employment as a jeweler and take a job paying barely a quarter of his previous wages. They were forced to dismiss the nanny and their maid, and to give up their horses to his brother, for they could not afford to feed them and their children. He barely made it into Rog’s latest group of trainees, for it is more and more difficult than it used to be to be accepted.”

Erestor took a longer drink from the goblet and said, “He turned out to be terrible. I doubt I was even so bad. The first day Rog saw him, he looked him up and down, broke his bow in half and told him to go home.” Wearily, Erestor rubbed his eyes. “My sleepless nights as of late have been spent at his home, sparring with him in his yard. Short of working a miracle, I accomplished in two weeks, especially in these last few days, what normally takes months of training. His wife came to thank me tonight; he went to see Rog this afternoon and was restored into the current group of trainees, so all is well in their small world now, and all appears to be rotten in mine.”

“I apologize, Erestor,” said Glorfindel numbly. “I thought I knew what I was seeing.”

“Ask next time, Glorfindel. Just ask me! Have I not earned enough of your trust for at least that much?” Erestor’s expression masked his emotion, but his voice belied the hurt he felt. Glorfindel dropped his head in shame. “Your imagination turned a kind act into a scandalous affair. I hope you will have enough sense in the future not to jump to conclusions.”

Glorfindel nodded his head, daring not to look up until Erestor came over and crouched down in front of his chair in order to make eye contact. “Sorry,” offered Glorfindel again.

“Just... trust me. And ask next time. And stop pouting,” he added. “Now, I am going to go to the party that Salgant is throwing, if it is not too late. I think, as producer, you should really come along.”

“Yes, please do take him with you,” insisted Aranel.

“Indeed,” agreed Tauniel, giggling slightly. “She and I still need to make it through the second act!”

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Again the walk was silent, but this time there was much less animosity in the looks that were exchanged. They had to meander through the lesser market to get to Salgant’s house. The empty stalls and darkened tents created an eerie sight. A foraging mouse dashed across their path; a tattered old black cat gave chase. In the distance, a wolf howled, and soon after, they heard the party before they saw it.

The participants had spilled out into the front lawn and back gardens, and some were even making merry on the balconies and sitting on the roof. The pair managed to squeeze their way into the grand foyer, where Salgant played harp at the center beneath a crystal chandelier. Wine was plentiful, and Duilin was masterfully playing host to the vast amount of guests mingling with one another.

Duilin spotted Erestor almost immediately (for hiding when you stand inches above most other elves is never a feat accomplished without slouching, and Erestor never slouches), and waved to Glorfindel moments later. After excusing himself from the actress he was talking to, Duilin arrived between them, an arm around the shoulder of each. “I had hoped you might change your minds. Let me show you to the party,” he offered as he guided them up a curving staircase, which soon gave
them a bird’s-eye-view of the chandelier and Salgant beneath it.

“I thought this was the party,” said Glorfindel when they reached the landing, two stories higher than
the ground level.

“This way,” said Duilin quietly as they made their way through the sea of guests on the upper floor. They took another flight of stairs up and reached the fifth or sixth level by Glorfindel’s accounting before another corridor and another long stairway brought them into one of the towers of the house. “We always have two parties,” he explained now that there was no one else around to hear them. “One for the cast and their families and friends, and one for our leads and persons we would want joining us in a more intimate setting.”

The doors were pushed open to reveal a small, cozy space. There was a long, padded bench along
one wall with a few tables positioned here and there and some chairs, round tables near to the parallel wall with chairs as well, and a wall of tall windows between them with thickly padded comfortable chairs and small tables with lanterns grouped along that side. The middle area was not very wide, and contained a long, high table laden with wine and bowls of bite-sized pieces of fruit and nuts. “I will return as soon as I track down the caterer and drag Salgant away from his harp,” promised Duilin as he deposited them in the room and then closed the doors as he left.

Nearly every seat was taken, and there were even a few ellon standing or leaning against walls. The room was abuzz about the play, as well as life in general. Two of the windows had been opened to allow a breeze and so that the music on the lawn below played by two violinists and a harper would travel up into this sanctuary. Erestor nodded to a small part of the bench and a lady who was motioning them over. Erestor squeezed onto the bench, while Glorfindel managed to find a nearby chair that was unoccupied.

“Salgant said you were not going to make it,” said the lady who had beckoned them to her table. “I am ever so glad you changed your mind.” She was fluttering a wispy feathered fan in order to give herself a bit of extra breeze in the somewhat stuffy room.

Erestor grinned and rolled up his sleeves. “I just had to stop home and see to the missus. Have we missed much?”

“Hardly; only Alaguil making a fool of himself for the fun of us all.” The lady swatted Erestor with her fan and said, “How rude you are, sir, not to introduce me to your handsome friend.”


“Charming to meet you,” said the lady, offering her hand to Glorfindel. It was gloved in pale silk to match her dress, and Glorfindel took hold delicately and bowed his head to kiss the back of her hand. “So, Erestor, darling,” she said, her attention right back on her co-star, “did you hear the idea that Magros had for the next play?”

“I cannot say I have, exactly. I do know he had spoken to Eilien about going over some dialogue he was writing,” admitted Erestor.

Sidheliel smiled demurely, her fan aflutter again. “Darling, it is just the most interesting, innovative idea I have ever heard. A single first act, a single second act, and multiple third acts. Magros has concocted a romantic mystery that can end any one of a dozen ways. Either we change the ending every few weeks, or, we learn multiple endings and surprise the audience each time.”

“That is a brilliant idea,” agreed Erestor. “Do you know if it would be done for the next season?”
“I swear, he told me it was already finished.” Sidheliel scanned the room. “Ah, there he is, sitting there with Ithildir and Aegion. Let us do a bit of polite eavesdropping, darling,” she suggested, offering her arm in a prompt to get Erestor to offer her his, which he did. As Glorfindel began to stand up in an effort to follow them, the lady said, “We shall return as soon as we are able. Thank you ever so for staying and watching the table for us.”

Not one to go where he was uninvited, Glorfindel nodded as the pair made their way across the room to join in the camaraderie of their fellow cast members. He looked to his left, and found the closest three with their backs to him, deeply in humorous conversation. To his right, a couple was sitting at the next table. They had extinguished the candle that would have been between them and were leaned in close, their foreheads touching as they whispered endearments to one another. When he caught himself staring too long, Glorfindel scanned the room briefly before changing to sit at the bench. At least he could people-watch from the new vantage point, even if he could not join.

Some shifting began to occur when Duilin returned, for it seemed the way to drag Salgant up to join them was to drag the harp, or a harp of some sort at least, up with him. As the instrument was positioned near the doorway, those who were displaced scrambled to find other seats. Glorfindel found himself wedged tighter on the bench as others squished onto it, and the chair that he had sat on when he and Erestor first arrived was taken up by a lithe young ellon with a cheerfully contagious shy smile. “Good evening. May I sit here?” he asked, hovering just above the seat. Glorfindel motioned that he should take the spot, and the elf sat. “Thank you. I seem to have lost my chair to a harp. Then again, to tell the truth, I really should not be here in the first place,” he added, and bit his lip, perhaps thinking he had said too much.

“If you can keep a secret, I very much doubt I should be here, either,” admitted Glorfindel. “Except from a financial standpoint, I had very little to do with this production. I cannot even tell the principles from the understudies.”

“Oh! So this is my chance to make you think I really **AM** supposed to be here!” The youthful ellon smiled and held out his hand. “Sadly, I am one of the humble understudies, and a grateful member of the cast all the same. Faelion, at your service, m’lord.”

“And why would you be at my service?” asked Glorfindel amusedly before shaking hands with the younger elf.

Faelion shrugged. “Why not? You are the patron, after all.”

“I suppose.” Glorfindel rubbed his chin. “I recall seeing you before, now that I think of it, but I cannot think where.”

“It was when your friend was fulfilling his training duties,” explained Faelion. “I am Lord Erestor’s understudy.”

“Oh, yes, that is where it was,” nodded Glorfindel. “Perhaps in the next production you will earn a spot in the regular cast.”

“Technically, I am in the regular cast,” said Faelion. He laughed and shook his head. “I only have the one line, though. ‘Sir, your carriage awaits’.” Faelion laughed again. “It would be nice to have a name on the program instead of ‘Footman Number Two’, but, I take what I can get.”

“Was that all they had you do for this play?” Glorfindel asked.

Faelion shook his head swiftly, which caused his light brown hair to appear to disagree with the statement as well. “I was part of the group of dancers. Originally I had no lines, but Footman
Number One was unable to change costumes in enough time between the scenes, so they invented my part after hearing me speak through Lord Erestor’s part enough times. I have been fortunate; this was my first play.”

“Oh, well then, you have the potential to eventually star in productions in the future.” Glorfindel sat back as far as the bench allowed and appraised the young ellon’s appearance. “You have that sort of ‘special’ look about you... that ‘star-quality’ everyone seems to be after.” It was true, even among a race who was primarily known for their fairness. “You should have no trouble with your voice, and if you keep up the confidence, your nerves should not bother you.”

The contagious, shy smile returned. “That was why I did not earn a part right away. I froze up at my audition. I seem to be alright when I am with a group, but by myself, the stage frightens me. Although, I will have some time to overcome that later. I doubt you will see me on stage for the next few years.”

“Why not?” questioned Glorfindel.

“The edicts,” said Faelion with a sigh. “My uncle, who is also my guardian, has insisted that I train now while I am young. That means missing at least the next two audition calls.”

Glorfindel frowned. “Why not do both?”

“Uncle wants me to concentrate on the army first. He believes it is best to dedicate yourself to one thing at a time and do one task very well instead of completing a number of tasks and not doing a very good job with any of them.”

Their conversation was cut off abruptly when Salgant announced that the tables were being removed to give everyone a little more elbow room. There was a idle threat of being dismissed if mingling did not occur, and after the tables were taken away, Duilin engaged the group in a series of parlor games that kept everyone in stitches for the duration of the party.

By the time Erestor and Glorfindel were making their way home, the vast majority of the city was either fast asleep or just beginning to wake in anticipation of pre-dawn business activities. Bakers were sleepily lighting their hearths and a few early risers were already setting up their goods in the market as Glorfindel ushered Erestor through. Erestor had not had very much to drink, but the combination of alcohol with lack of rest was a dangerous one with a late matinee planned for the following day.

Once they made the climb up the tower, it did not take long before Erestor was dozing in bed. Glorfindel took a little longer to make it to the bedroom. He paused in the sitting room to straighten the pillows and throws on the couch, and to take the used glasses from the bar to the kitchen to be washed in the morning. Sleep, once he settled into bed, eluded him. Boredom set in after staring for several minutes at the ceiling, and several more at the wall.

Glorfindel carefully climbed out of the bed and walked to the window. He pushed the curtain aside slightly and looked up at the stars that twinkled above. A sudden movement a little lower caught his eye, and he saw from some ways off, a dim light in Salgant’s bedroom. The harper’s house was built on a hill, bringing the windows of the sixth floor in alignment with almost the top of the high tower Glorfindel lived in.

Practically the entire room was visible, from the thick, high mattress to the grand harp in the corner with pearl and ebony inlay. Salgant was reclining on the bed, either talking to himself or to someone not in the room but close by. When Duilin entered the room, he answered whatever it was that was Salgant had asked as he towed off his hair. Something was mumbled back, and Duilin laughed and
threw his towel at Salgant, hitting him on the knee.

Glorfindel smiled and let go of the curtain, leaving it to drop back into place. Oddly enough, Salgant and Duilin made a fairly cute couple. He turned, frowned, and sighed. It was more than he could say for himself, he thought as he watched Erestor sleep peacefully for a while.

Still too awake, Glorfindel peeked through the break between the curtains. The view he had into Salgant’s house was changed. The door of the room had been closed, and Duilin was knelt on the bed beside Salgant, one hand disappeared between the musician’s legs while the other balanced the archer above his lover as they kissed slowly.

Biting his lip, Glorfindel felt his face flush as Duilin scooted down and bowed his head. Salgant was talking to him, his eyes closed and hips thrusting upwards gently. On his back, Salgant did not look quite so plump as he normally did. It was Duilin, whoever, who caught Glorfindel’s eye. The archer had pulled back his hair, twisting it up in a knot to keep it out of the way. It also served to display rather interesting art that appeared to be painted directly onto his body. As Duilin rose up onto his knees in order to stretch to reach a jar on a nearby shelf, the sight of his perfectly toned muscles practically made Glorfindel salivate.

He knew he should look away, but there was an extreme curiosity that took hold of Glorfindel. Pleasures of the oral sort were nothing new, but he had never partaken in... the other, as he thought of it. It certainly seemed crude to call it what it really was, at least in Glorfindel’s mind.

On the other hand, to say that Salgant and Duilin were fucking looked to be appropriate. Duilin had massaged Salgant with oil before discarding the jar over his shoulder. He swung one taut, muscled limb over Salgant and began to roll his hips, undulating to some private, familiar rhythm as Salgant squeezed his thighs. Duilin arched his back as he raised himself into an odd position. Salgant’s hands slid up and gripped his pelvis firmly. There was a moment’s hesitation before Salgant pulled Duilin back down, and Glorfindel swallowed hard as Salgant’s entire length was enveloped.

It was surreal for Glorfindel as he continued to watch the show (which, he admitted, was far more entertaining than whatever Salgant and Duilin might have viewed looking into his window). The experience raised more questions than it answered. Did everyone look that funny when they were fucking? Duilin seemed to have his mouth hanging open almost the entire time. Did he ever drool on Salgant accidentally? Then, there was the stamina. The few times Gildor had brought him to climax with his mouth, and the single secret encounter he had had with Erestor had all been short, yet, Salgant pounded away for over an hour. And was it pounding if you were on the bottom? It certainly seemed as if Duilin was letting Salgant do most of the work, but it was a little hard to tell at this distance without his glasses. And why did Duilin have metal rings pierced through his skin? At first, Glorfindel thought he had imagined that one, but it soon became one of Salgant favorite things to grab. Every time it looked like Duilin was getting tired, Salgant would reach up and twist the rings embedded in Duilin’s small nipples. Watching that made Glorfindel cringe and shiver with delight simultaneously each time.

It appeared that they reached their climax at the same time, although Glorfindel could not be entirely sure. There was a tender moment when Duilin collapsed on top of Salgant and they rubbed their noses together. Salgant rubbed Duilin’s back and whispered something to him, and the smile returned to Glorfindel’s face. “Never in an age would anyone imagine those fellows together,” he mumbled to himself. “But then, love is a strange and unpredictable master.” Unintentionally, he glanced over his shoulder at Erestor, still asleep in bed.

By the time he looked back, Duilin was playfully teasing Salgant, while Salgant handed the previously discarded towel to his lover. There were some directions giving and a shooing motion
made. Duilin slung the towel over his shoulder, stuck out his tongue, and waggled his butt at Salgant before leaving the room. The rotund Elf-lord on the bed threw back his head, and though Glorfindel heard nothing, Salgant was evidently laughing loud and hard.

*If you cannot sleep, maybe you should come over and have a drink with us.*

Glorfindel stared through the slit in the curtains in wide-eyed disbelief. Certainly, he was tired and imagining things.

*If we had wanted privacy, we would have shut the curtains. Salgant made a bet that you would not watch the entire time if we did not draw them. I won. So, come have a drink so that I have someone to gloat to.*

With a shake of his head to clear it, Glorfindel scanned the room. It still appeared that only Salgant was there, but it seemed as if it was Duilin who was farspeaking to Glorfindel. The ellon in question entered back into the room, laughing. Then he pointed at the windows, and past the panes of glass, across the market and courtyard, right through the slits in the curtains, directly at Glorfindel.

*Come on, you. Bring yourself over here,* said the impatient whisper in Glorfindel’s mind. To accentuate the point, Duilin made a beckoning motion with his hand before walking to the curtains and dramatically pulling them shut. *End Act One. If you want Act Two, you have to come here. We will expect you to arrive after this brief intermission.*
“The masters are awaiting you upstairs, sir,” was the greeting that Glorfindel received from the butler as the doors to Salgant’s home were opened for him. The lights of the chandelier in the foyer were dim compared to how they had been earlier when the party was filling every inch of the residence; the tables which hours ago held food and drink had been cleared away. Everything was shining and spotless, so that he saw himself mirrored clearly in the black marble floor as he walked to the stairway. At the center, the grand harp still stood, a proud reminder of whose house he was in.

Upon further direction from a maid who had just finished polishing the brass handles and doorknobs on the second floor, Glorfindel continued up to the tower where Duilin had played host to the elite. It, too, was much emptier than it had been. The remaining tables were spread out and the doors of the room had actually been removed, and it seemed this was the usual way. Duilin was perched on the back part of one of the two lounge chairs, wearing naught but some sort of knee-length skirt-type garment belted at the waist. He looked over his shoulder only long enough to acknowledge Glorfindel and wave him forward. In the corner near the door, opposite to where the harp had been, a young ellon was hunched over many papers and open books. Glorfindel made eye contact with him briefly, and recognized him as the youth he had met earlier that night. The young one bowed his head back down to concentrate on his work.

“I hope I did not imagine the invitation,” said Glorfindel as he approached Duilin and stood behind him. The image on the other elf’s skin was clear to him now, despite having his spectacles hidden away in his pocket. It was a tiger, and not the regular sort, but the vicious, burly kind that hunted and haunted the rocky cliffs surrounding the city. The orange and black contrasted one another starkly, and as Duilin’s muscles moved, so too did the sinew of the tattooed beast ripple. The eyes, green and gold, were so lifelike that Glorfindel held his breath a moment, waiting for the feline to leap off Duilin’s back and sink the bared white teeth into his throat.

Duilin shook his head. “I am so glad the heat spell broke. This breeze has been longed for by me for some months now.” He swung his legs around and slid down onto the chair, and once there, made a slow deliberate motion to the chair beside him. “Sit. Stay a while.”

Glorfindel did as told, the feel of the cool leather making him shiver as he settled his arms across the rests. “Is Salgant abed?”

“No, he just wanted to take a bath before entertaining again.”

“I did not mean to cause a fuss,” apologized Glorfindel.

A small smile appeared on Duilin’s face, and he spoke softly. “Nay, nay, I would have made him do so anyhow. When you are as... copious as he is, certain activities require a higher frequency of bathing.” A little louder, he called to the quiet elf near the door, “How is your assignment coming along, Faelion?”

“Well enough,” he answered. “At least it will be done soon.”

Duilin shook his head, and gave a roll of his eyes for Glorfindel to see. “If you take the time to do something, you may as well do it correctly. Is it worth taking the time to throw a pot if you neglect to fire it and it turns back to muddy clay at first use?”

“No,” sighed Faelion, crumbling up a sheet of paper he had been writing on.
“Bring it here, child, let me see it.” Duilin motioned sternly, and Faelion grabbed the crinkled up sheet. He muttered to himself as he stomped over to Duilin, and slapped the wadded paper into his hand.

“So polite, the youth these days,” said Duilin to Glorfindel as Faelion went back to his table and sat down so hard in his chair that it jerked back and scraped the floor. “That floor was just waxed yesterday, Faelion. If you want to redo it yourself, go ahead and scratch it up.”

“I do not know how to wax a floor,” argued Faelion back.

“Then I would suggest you stop throwing a fit with the chairs. And bring yourself back over here; I cannot explain your mistake to you if you are a kilometer away from me.”

“I am NOT that far. Twelve meters at most.” But Faelion came back over anyhow, avoiding eye contact with Glorfindel.

“At least you have an aptitude for mathematical reasoning.” Duilin read through the page, nodding often. “This part is wrong. You need to go and look at your books again.”

“But Finwë WAS the first king of the Noldor,” disputed Faelion.

Duilin handed the paper back. “He was the first king of the Noldor in Valinor; the question directs you to think of the first king of the Noldor after they returned to Middle-earth. That is why it is an essay question and not simply a blank to be filled in. Some will argue it was Fëanor, and some say it was one of his sons, either Maedhros or Maglor. There are others who believe that truly it was not until Fingolfin was chosen that there was a king of the Noldor in Middle-earth. You must choose one, research your answer, and offer your proof. And do not forget Tata; some will say he is king still.”

“Fine.” Faelion grabbed the paper and went back to his seat, and was much more careful this time not to scrape the floor.

Glorfindel tried not to look too confused or curious as to just what was going on. He was beginning to wonder exactly what the relationship was between Faelion and Duilin, but opted not to ask. The butler who had greeted him appeared in the doorway, and after bowing to them, asked, “Will there be three instead of two, sir?”

Duilin nodded, and as Faelion glanced up with a hurt look on his face, Duilin sighed and said, “Make it four, Thrangorn. The bratling intends to stay up past his bedtime.” Faelion stuck his tongue out at Duilin while the butler simply bowed and left. “Would you rather I sent you to bed without supper?”

Faelion shrugged and went back to his work.

In answer, Duilin laughed. “Ah, youth,” was all he said before turning his attention back to Glorfindel. “Did you hear about Maeglin?”

“Recently, I have heard very little,” admitted Glorfindel. “Then again, I have been busying myself with the stables and the play.”

“True... well, I think you should like to know that he decided to sell the gift that his uncle offered him. The land that is near the woods,” he added when he realized Glorfindel was not quite following him. “That wolf attack has had everyone talking. He did not want to take the risk, so he is selling that land in order to pay for a piece of Enerdhil's land.”
“Really?” Glorfindel rubbed his chin. “Do you know how much he is asking for it?”

“Yes; and I know who made him the offer.”

Glorfindel looked alarmed. “It is not going to auction?”

Duilin shook his head. “No, it was going to, but I will tell you, you would not have managed to purchase it. Someone else would have bought it instead. Land is far too scarce, even with the threat of wolves, and your resources are spread far too thin. Maeglin was only interested in liquid assets and not taking anything on credit.”

“So who is my new neighbor?” asked Glorfindel cautiously.

“Salgant, although, technically, it was my money that paid for it. Not something that Maeglin ever has to know. Salgant has invested most of his money in the playhouse and other entertainments of his.” Duilin looked up to see Faelion staring at them, listening intently. “None of this is to be shared with your friends, Faelion,” he warned.

“Who would I tell?” questioned the youth, looking somewhat hurt as he returned to his work.

Food was brought in and between the butler and two maids a few of the tables were rearranged and lowered to a height consistent with the lounge chairs. Other tables and chairs were carried aside to make room for two more lounge chairs to be positioned facing the ones that Glorfindel and Duilin were sitting in. Individual trays with salad, bread, and sliced meat and cheese were placed on the tables that had been arranged at the center of the lounges. “Master Salgant said he will be a few minutes, but that you should begin without him,” announced the butler before he left.

“He knows I am going to wait for him anyhow,” Duilin said to Glorfindel. “Tell me, what were you going to do with the land if you had acquired it?”

“Stable expansion and more training fields. I have a backup plan to build one on top of the other, though, and as far as neighbors go... what is Salgant going to do with the land?”

“Greenhouses. He and I are both foreseeing a shortage in the food supply, and we need a more controlled environment. If we can have summers as unpredictable as this one, that would go for winters, too. The greenhouses would be multilevel. Of course, I think that there might be some ways for the two of you to work together,” said Duilin.

“How so?”

“Just as he does not need all of that land for greenhouses, you do not need all of the horse manure that you are going to be producing when your herd increases in numbers.”

There was still hope, Glorfindel suddenly realized, and he smiled in spite of himself.

“The two of you can talk business later. Tomorrow. Next week. Not tonight. Tonight, I am declaring a no-business zone while we eat,” Duilin said quickly as Salgant entered.

“Tonight? Dearest, it is morning already.” Salgant entered, wearing a long robe that was untied and a pair of loose pants, and purposely waddled to Faelion, ruffling his hair and giving him a kiss on the top of his mussed head before continuing on to join Duilin and Glorfindel. He sidled up next to Duilin’s chair and leaned over, brushing his cheek with a kiss. “Did you order dessert?” he asked as he sat down.

“No, I thought you did. Should I call Thrangorn back?”
As he sat down, Salgant looked over the number of places set. “Faelion, are you eating with us?”

“In a minute,” he mumbled. “I just need to finish looking over this essay. My eyes are hurting, though.”

“If you bring it here, I can look it over for you,” offered Salgant.

Faelion practically jumped out of his chair, bringing his paper with him. “I think I picked the right one, but it just seems really boring.”

“What is this for? Oh, political history... well, I can understand that, most of it is a lot of the same, over and over.” Salgant read through the paper as Duilin poured wine for all four of them. Glorfindel continued to sit quietly, still wondering about the young ellon with the light brown hair who was slouched next to Salgant. “What is this word?” asked Salgant with a jolly smile.

Frustration twisted Faelion’s mouth. “White birch,” he answered cautiously

“Then it should be Nimbrethil, not Nimpbrethil. Consider, you would say ‘Nimloth’ not ‘Nimploth’.”

“Ooooooooh...” Faelion nodded his head to the side of the little, contemplating. “Yes, that makes sense. It sounds far better that way.”

Salgant handed the paper back. “You can finish the rest in the morning. I detect the scent of dessert wafting up the stairs. Organize your things and then join us.” Faelion nodded in relief and was very quick about clearing his mess into two near piles of books and papers. “Duilin, you did not need to disturb Thrangorn.”

“I wanted to bother him before he turned in for the night,” replied Duilin. “Besides, I want my dessert before I eat dinner.”

Supper was more elegant that what Glorfindel had been accustomed to as of late. His many tasks had led to a lot of lembas and very few actual meals. Despite feeling full for weeks, his stomach had been empty for so long he found it hard to eat very much. Not wanting to seem rude, he concentrated on eating slowly and making conversation. “Are you studying a particular field, Faelion?”

“Not exactly,” he said, pushing his salad around on his plate.

Salgant reached over and patted Faelion’s knee. “He is working on finishing up the remainder of his general studies. His concentration on dance caused a lapse in his learning of other topics. I want to be sure he has the basics covered before he starts his military training.”

Faelion gave an irritated sigh, and shoved his plate away. “May I be excused?”

Duilin and Salgant exchanged a hard look with one another before Salgant looked back at Faelion and nodded. “Make sure you take care of your essay first thing in the morning,” Salgant reminded him. Faelion nodded and left the room quietly, taking two of the books from the corner table with him.

After Faelion had gone, Salgant and Duilin relaxed a little more, and more wine was poured. “As soon as he gets it over with, Salgant, he will be back to normal again,” assured Duilin.

“No... being in the service always changes a person.” Salgant pushed his own plate away with a deep sigh. “I think it is going to be harder for me to let him go than it will be for him to actually go and complete the training.”
“Three years is really not a very long time,” added Duilin. “Unless you think he should take up Rog’s offer.”

To this, Salgant looked very torn. “If I sent him over there, he... I cannot do that to him. I know it would be just five months, but it would change him too much. Besides, I think he needs me and needs to be able to come home at night much more than he needs someone to adjust his attitude.”

“Either way, it is a hard choice to make,” said Duilin. “Better you than me; I think he could use a good ass kicking from Rog. I know he has had a tough time, but really, he is an adult who acts like a child.”

“With good reason,” countered Salgant, but his response lacked conviction. He swirled his wine and looked to Glorfindel. “If he was your nephew, what would you do?”

“I guess I am lacking a little information, but let me see if I can put together a basic idea. Faelion has come of age and needs to be trained per Fingon’s orders, and instead of training him with either of your companies, you want him to train with one of the other houses,” said Glorfindel.

Salgant nodded. “He needs to be trained elsewhere. I cannot take the risk that I would coddle him, and with Duilin—”

“There is no way I would be able to control him,” interrupted Duilin. “He would put at jeopardy all of the other recruits in his group with his attitude.”

Glorfindel drummed his fingers on the side of his chair. “Where are you thinking of having him go?”

“Only Galdor and Rog were able to accommodate him in their next rounds of recruits. I just want Faelion to get this out of the way. His depression continues to get worse, because he knows that one way or another his lifestyle is going to change for that time.” Salgant rubbed his forehead. “Either he does his training quickly with Rog, which will be a five month nightmare, or Galdor trains him, and we deal with three years of whining every night until this is over.”

Glorfindel poked at his chocolate cake with a spoon. He chewed at his bottom lip as he watched Salgant stare miserably out the window. “What if I could suggest a third option?”
By the time Glorfindel was walking back home, the sun was already heralding the day. He climbed the stairs high up into the tower with relative ease even having missed a night of rest: Glorfindel, by Elven standards, was still in his youth, and even older, less energetic Elves could forgo weeks of sleep if necessary with few ill effects. On his way, he made a request for water to be brought to the apartment.

When Erestor found Glorfindel, it was little less than an hour later. The tall ellon came into the washroom and leaned his shoulder against the doorway, his robe tied loosely at his waist. “Just where were you last night?” he demanded of the blond, who had one knee bent so he could wash between his toes while singing a cheerful song, inserting his own lyrics as he saw fit.

“Do you always enter without knocking?” questioned Glorfindel at the end of the erroneous verse. The cake of soap slipped from his hands, sinking into the water with a ‘splook’.

Erestor rolled his eyes and turned, his back against the doorway now. “I woke up a number of times through the night. You were not there, and I was concerned.”

“Your concern is noted.” Glorfindel fished around blindly, the fluff of the soap bubbles on the surface impeding his search. “Can you hand me the soap next to the wash basin? Mine seems to be uninterested in being helpful.”

“Tell me where you were and I will,” prodded Erestor.

A smirk pulled at Glorfindel’s mouth. “Not so much fun the other way around, is it?”

“What?”

“Never mind.” Glorfindel stretched and retrieved the soap himself, ignoring the water he dribbled onto the floor. “I had a meeting of sorts. We are getting a chunk of that land we wanted, and all it is costing me is a little time and effort.”

“Really? Who gave it to you? What did you have to do?” Erestor asked.

“Salgant did. We should end up getting about half of the lot.”

Erestor considered this news thoughtfully. “That would be great, considering we anticipated getting none of it. We still have ample supplies for building, considering we acquired enough to put up a theatre. With the wood, we can expand the stables. We are going to need the extra room soon. We should consider fencing off some areas to keep the mares and foals away from the stallions. I want to start housing Dragonsong with the others so that he understands that he is part of the herd and not just a rogue warhorse.”

Glorfindel nodded. “That sounds like a good idea. I want to finish the barracks first, though. My priority right now is having things ready in order to move the remaining officers and soldiers onto the land in a month, and to start a large group of recruits, two if possible, on my land before the year is out.”

“So, what did you have to do to get the land? You must have made some hefty promises.”

“Not much, really. His nephew needs to be trained, and I offered—“
“You offered to train Faelion?”

Glorfindel finished washing, and pulled up a towel sitting on the stool as he stood. “...why?”

“Good luck. He might be of age, and look of age, but he still acts as if he’s twenty. The operative word being, acts. He can be overly dramatic at times, if it will offer the attention he craves.”

“I noticed that. Still, I think the exchange is more than fair,” said Glorfindel as he wrapped the towel around his waist and picked up another for his long hair.

“Like I said, good luck.”

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Six weeks later, a new play had been chosen. Practices for the new one began even as ‘Tears of Sirion’ extended its run another month. When finally the last curtain closed on the debut play, Glorfindel made the decision to lessen his presence in the playhouse in order to concentrate on strengthening his military power once again. Duilin promised to provide weekly updates, and his growing friendship with both Duilin and Salgant was sure to lead to the occasional late night gathering and business meeting.

Cool breezes now dominated, and the warmth of the sun dwindled. Harvest had been meager, but adequate. Wind whipped past the captain, tugging his hair behind him. Braids would have been a better choice for the day, thought Glorfindel ruefully, but it was much too late for that sort of thing now.

The recruits were practicing with long wooden staffs, still learning basic fighting principles. It was almost painfully boring for Glorfindel to watch, for he had soon learned that his skills, rusty as they were, far dominated those of the ragtag group charging one another in the newly opened practice arena. The arena was not quite finished, but in the state it was in was suitable for practice. One of the staffs flew from the hands of its owner, and though some of the recruits ducked away or crouched down upon hearing the outcry, Glorfindel took three strides forward and easily caught the weapon as it spun back down. “Try not to do that again,” he said sternly as he handed the weapon back, and upon seeing that it was Faelion, added, “Shouting like a girl if it does happen is not very soldier-like, either.”

Glorfindel walked away amid snickers from some of the other recruits. Privately, he berated himself in his mind for saying something so insensitive, and then had to rebuke his conscience, reminding himself that he was preparing them for war, not teaching a group of children a game. Passing by one future soldier who had stopped practice to laugh at what had happened, Glorfindel yanked away the staff, and with one swing used it to knock the offender on his rear. “You think this is a joke?”

“N-no, sir!”

Glorfindel spun the staff around with one hand as he walked back to the front of the group. “I want everyone in a line, starting here,” he said, using the staff to draw a line in the sand. There was a moment of hesitation from the group. “NOW!” barked Glorfindel, and the recruits rushed to line up, often bumping into one another and shoving for a place. With a growl of frustration, Glorfindel turned to one of the officers and said, “Fix that.”

“Attention!” The lieutenant looked aghast at the sloppy attempt that the group made to fall in and present themselves properly. “What the fuck was that?! What is this? What do you think you—give me that!” He went down the line, faulting each one for something, and some for multiple offenses. “You are the worst soldiers I have ever seen in my entire career! You can all forget about sleeping
tonight. We are going to be working on this after the captain is done with all of you, and mark my words, you will not sleep until you have it right. If it takes days, so be it!”

The veins on the lieutenant’s forehead were threatening to explode, so Glorfindel placed his hand on the officer’s shoulder for a moment. Then he walked back to the front of the line, giving himself a little room between the first one and himself. “If you want a chance to see your bunk tonight, this is your chance to redeem yourself. First one who manages to knock me down gets dismissed for the night. Those who cannot, your ass belongs to Lieutenant Beredir. You first,” he said, pointing the staff he had taken earlier at the first recruit.

Without breaking a sweat, Glorfindel took down the first eight. The next seven proved to be a little more challenging, for the ninth had discovered Glorfindel to be a weaker fighter on his right side. The sixteenth hesitated and was easy, while number seventeen was too rash and after a number of hard blows, none of which connected, he was taken down just as forcefully as he had tried to take Glorfindel down. A few more lasted less than a minute, and then it was Faelion’s turn.

The youth stood back, holding his staff firmly in white-knuckled hands. Glorfindel motioned for him to come forward and attack, but Faelion stood in his spot and started to shake. As Glorfindel angrily approached, Faelion flinched and fell to his knees, trembling. Glorfindel stopped his advance. “What are you doing, soldier?”

Faelion whimpered something inaudible, and Glorfindel looked at the lieutenant, who was closer to Faelion, for clarification.

“He says, ‘Please, sir, do not hurt me’.”

Glorfindel rolled his eyes. “Wrong place for that,” he announced, and though a few of the recruits showed amusement in their eyes, none of them dared make a sound or let a smile escape. “Get up. Get up!” Glorfindel stepped forward and grabbed Faelion by the back of his collar, hoisting him up onto his feet. “Pick up your weapon!”

Faelion fumbled to retrieve the staff. By the time he had it again, tears were running down his face. Glorfindel took three steps back and motioned again. “Now, attack me!”

Instead of running forward or taking a defensive stance, Faelion took one small step after another, skittish as a wild animal. He raised the staff up, hands still shaking, but as soon as Glorfindel had repositioned his, Faelion dropped back down again, cowering and holding up his arms to block any blows.

“This is ridiculous. And, a waste of my time, and their time,” shouted Glorfindel. “Get up, and get off of my training field. Go! Now!”

Choking on his tears, Faelion stumbled away slowly. He let his hair drape down as he hung his head, and shamefully made his way to the other end of the arena. Glorfindel watched him for a few moments before motioning the next recruit forward.

Handily, Glorfindel took out the next handful, but his glances toward the retreating Faelion eventually cost him. One of the older recruits, an average-built ellon named Galdereth, circled around Glorfindel twice before backing up while facing the captain. He adjusted his grip on the staff, and Glorfindel’s eyes flicked toward the corner of the arena. That was when Galdereth charged, and then used the staff to vault over the captain. As he was landing, Galdereth reached out with one hand and grabbed for the long blond tresses, tangling his fingers in them. Glorfindel landed on his back with a thud. As he groaned and reached for his throbbing head, a blurred double vision of Galdereth appeared above him and said with a grin, “I guess I get the rest of the night off, sir.”
When the barracks were built, Glorfindel had insisted on having a small area built for his own personal use for days when he did not want to return back to the tower, or on occasions when there was need to stay because of the horses. This area was located as a sort of lower level, essentially built underground. The idea had been sound, allowing for a multipurpose room that easily converted between sitting room and bedroom, with counters and shelves and a closet for keeping wine and preserved foods cold. There was also a washroom with a strange mechanism that intrigued Glorfindel. He had read about the idea, and wanted to test it, and in an underground area where no one would see its failings seemed ideal. It was like an indoor waterfall, with the water coming through from the ceiling and draining down a sort of trench that flowed down a closed corridor and absorbed eventually into the ground.

It was fascinating to look at the pictures, and it was even better than he could have imagined when he stepped into the room to try the contraption out. A rope from the ceiling had to be pulled down to release the water, but it was efficient. It was slightly uncomfortable to have to soap up completely before pulling the rope again for more water, but overall, it worked. Efficiency was becoming key in this busier life he now had, and the new water shower, though prohibitive in cost for most residents, was a small luxury for Glorfindel.

Washing his hair, however, was another story. The floor of the room sloped to the center where the drain was, and the drain was covered with a sort of metal grid that had been nailed to the wooden floorboards. Normally, this would not likely have been an issue, but as Glorfindel attempted to lift up his hair to wash it, he was met with resistance. The ends of his hair, tangled by the wind, were now wrapped around the grating. With mobility limited, Glorfindel knelt down and worked to free his hair, patiently at first, and then with frustration, for getting closer caused some of it to tangle further up.

Finally freed, he went to the corner of the chamber where his clothes had been discarded in a pile on a bench. The wind, water, and now the grating had created knots and snarls from the waist down, and despite his vanity, practicality won the argument. With the aid of a knife, he reduced the length of his hair drastically, though it still reached past his elbows when he finished. He left the heap of golden hair on the floor as he tossed his knife back onto the pile of clothes, and then returned to the center of the room to finish showering.

Upon leaving the bathing chamber, newly woven towels draped around him, he discovered he was not alone. Faelion was seated on the couch, biting at his nails and nervously staring at the floor. When Glorfindel stepped into the room, Faelion dropped his hands into his lap and swallowed hard, but said nothing until the elf lord came forward with a puzzled look. “I am sorry to disturb you, sir, but I... please do not cast me out!” And from then, Faelion fell to his knees, sobbing and begging, most of it incoherent, until Glorfindel pulled him back up onto the sofa.

“Faelion, it is not that I want to have you go,” began Glorfindel with a sigh. “It is that you do not yet seem ready for this. Come back in a few years; you have a little time before you need the training. Go and do another play or two, and when you are ready--“

“But I am ready! I am ready! I am! I am!” Faelion grabbed hold of Glorfindel’s arm. “Please, sir, I have to stay here, and I have to train now!”

“And this is the reason why you are not,” said Glorfindel calmly, loosening the grip that Faelion had on his arm. “We are starting a new group every six months. If you are ready by the next go, you are more than welcome to join those recruits.”

“But... please, you do not understand! If you kick me out right now, my uncle will make me join
another army. Probably Rog’s, or Ecthelion’s. I... I want to stay here.”

“Because it would be easier to train here?” asked Glorfindel dryly.

Faelion drew his fist across his cheeks in an attempt to conceal his tears. “No. I love horses. I have been taking care of my uncle’s horses since I was tall enough to muck out the stalls. This would be a great opportunity for me. Please, sir, I need to stay.”

“If I let you stay,” said Glorfindel after several thoughtful minutes, “I expect you to act like the rest of the recruits. If I see another display like the one I did earlier, you will be out, and you will not have another chance later. Understood?” Faelion nodded. “Good. Now get out of here.”

With another nod, Faelion stood up and shuffled to the door. Glorfindel sighed and closed his eyes. “Out of curiosity,” he said as he heard the door being opened, “were you acting just now, or when you were out on the field earlier?”

“H-how d-did you know?” stuttered the young ellon.

Glorfindel shook his head. “Let me make this perfectly clear. My training field is not a stage. This is not a play; this is not a game. If you plan to treat it as such, do not bother showing up tomorrow. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Faelion hurried out of the room, closing the door behind him.
It pleased Glorfindel the next morning to see Faelion on the field with the other recruits, and more so when he was close enough to see the concentrated look on the young elf’s face. The dramatics appeared to have passed for the time being. Orders were given to the officers, and after leading the training until the afternoon break, Glorfindel left his second in command in charge, taking the rest of the day off. There was still a matter of keeping up appearances, and he had not seen his wife in nearly a week.

As he entered the apartment, he heard all three – Tauniel, Aranel, and Erestor – enjoying lunch on the balcony. A narrow table had been moved out to join the chairs, and Glorfindel dragged a fourth chair to the doorway, peering around it with a hopeful look. “Might I impose?”

“Well, look who apparently still lives here!” Tauniel stood up and helped situate Glorfindel while Aranel ladled soup into a bowl for him and broke off a chunk of bread from a large crusty loaf for the warrior to eat. “I just asked Erestor this morning when he thought we might see you again. It was a relief when he said you were going to try to make it home for lunch. I was beginning to wonder if we had caused you to run away.”

“Just busy training.” Glorfindel returned the smile Aranel gave him, and then looked across the table at Erestor, who seemed to be trying to look around him. “Something wrong?”

“You cut your hair... is it shorter than mine? I think it is,” Erestor half-mumbled. He took a moment to size up the length of Glorfindel’s compared to his own. “Shit, Glorfindel, Rog is going to be a pain in my ass over this.” His tone was joking, but Glorfindel frowned apologetically nonetheless.

“It got caught on something. However,” he cautioned the others at the table, “my official stance is that it was getting too hot during practice. No one is to speak of the fact I also got my ass handed to me by a recruit who yanked me down to the ground by it.”

Erestor had settled back into his chair and chewed on his bread thoughtfully, pulling small parts from the whole instead of biting into it directly. “Oh, right, Ecthelion will end up giving you shit for it otherwise. I heard his recruits are doing a piss poor job with their horsemanship since your departure from sharing training space.”

“That strangely makes me feel a little better,” said Glorfindel. “How badly are they fucking things up?”

“One of them came racing through, clinging to the neck of the warhorse he presumably was trying to ride, legs flapping behind him like a flag. He nearly knocked over two of my trainees, and ended up being bucked off into a bale of hay. I had a little fun with it; I made my recruits practice an interrogation maneuver we have been working on, just a little something for when we catch an enemy.”

“Oh, I hope you did not hurt the poor dear,” said Tauniel.

“Hurt, no. Embarrassed, yes. He ended up pissing himself before they discovered any pertinent information as to his house or position, but Ecthelion saved him before they could do anything to him.”

“What would you have done?” asked Glorfindel out of morbid curiosity.

“I wanted to have them string him up by his feet and have him dangle upside down from the tree.
Alas, his master saved him, and that was when I discovered the difficult time that Ecthelion has been having.”

“So he told you himself that his recruits are not doing well with horses,” surmised Glorfindel.

Erestor shook his head. “He shook his head, he groaned, he rolled his eyes at me, he acted quite frustrated. He can say a lot without saying a word. Besides, it is obvious that his soldiers are fucked when it comes to riding. They are having to share horses for training, and they have shit for instructors, because Ecthelion cannot train them in everything. If war was to come here tomorrow, they would have their asses handed to them.” As Aranel loudly cleared her throat, Erestor glanced sideways to her. “What?”

“Could we possibly tone down the battlefield language during mealtime?” she asked in her sweet voice that really meant she was very close to being not-so-sweet if the behavior continued.

“Sure.” Erestor rolled his eyes as soon as Aranel focused hers away from him. He was given a slightly disappointed look from Tauniel, while Glorfindel decided a subject change might help the situation.

“Faelion has been quite a challenge, but I think I finally have him on the right path,” Glorfindel declared as he poured wine for himself from the carafe.

Erestor crumbled the rest of his bread crust into his soup. “Good for you. Is he staying in the barracks or is he still at Rog’s house?”

“Good question. I never considered looking at what his arrangements were. With the barracks still unfinished, I just assumed the option of having some of them live in their current homes was going to work well for everyone concerned.”

“Even if you do that for the new groups, when you get to the second level, if I were you I would make them stay in the barracks,” suggested Erestor. “They will gain a better sense of fellowship if they are all living under the same roof.”

“I know. I just have no idea where to put them all.”

“When the barracks are finished, there should be no worries about that, though, right?” asked Aranel.

Glorfindel nodded. “Right.” He rolled his neck back one way and around the other. “I promised myself I was not going to worry about that today, though. I took the afternoon and evening off, and unless something happens where I am needed I am taking a week for myself.”


With a mischievous smile, Erestor picked up his glass of wine. “Really? A vacation? What do you have planned?”

“Uh... nothing,” answered Glorfindel before realizing this was the wrong answer.

“Well, it just so happens I have the next four days off.” The mischief was making Erestor’s eyes sparkle now. “Do you know where we are going to go?”

“Uhm... the... stables?” he guessed.

“No.”
“No?”

“No,” Erestor gulped down the rest of his wine and then stood up and patted Glorfindel’s shoulder. “Go change into something comfortable and find your bow. Pack your bedroll, too, if you can find it.”

“I know where it is!” answered Tauniel cheerfully. She pushed back her chair and edged her way around and back into the apartment past Erestor.

Erestor reached down the table and grabbed the rest of the bread loaf. “I think we should take this along just in case we do not manage to get anything tonight. Suppose I should get ready, then, too,” he said to no one in particular as he left the balcony.

Glorfindel scrambled after Erestor. “I was thinking I might spend a few days here. Sleep, read a book or two. You still like books, right? We could sit on the porch, read a few books, drink a little wine. I know you still like wine,” Glorfindel argued unsuccessfully as his bow was taken out of the closet by Erestor and handed to him.

“I think I know where the arrows are. You had better go pack a few things,” Erestor suggested as he walked to their shared room, passing Tauniel coming from the room as he went.

Tauniel could not wipe the grin from her face as she handed a bulging sack to Glorfindel. “Here you are! I placed clothing for you on the bed, and you have everything else you need to take along in there, except your bedroll, which I am going to retrieve from the linen closet right now—oh, never mind, Aranel beat me to it.”

“If I did not know any better, I would say the two of you were trying to get rid of us,” muttered Glorfindel as he snatched the satchel from Tauniel and stomped toward his bedroom.

“Who, us?” asked Aranel with a wink as he walked by, scowling best he could. Could he blame them for wanting time alone? Not really. Was he looking forward to time alone with Erestor? Did he really need to answer that question? It was the thought of what the true purpose of the excursion was that put him on edge, and he said a little prayer that all of the creatures of the forest would keep hidden over the next few days.

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