Orc-brat

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Orc-brat

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Summary

Maevyn is only nine when her family is slaughtered by a band of Orcs. The Orc Grushak takes her with him as his captive, planning to amuse himself with her torment and murder, but a vengeful Maevyn has sworn to see him dead. A tale of Fourth Age Middle-earth.

Notes

While the protagonist is a young child, this story contains adult and sometimes unpleasant subject matter. Reader discretion is advised.
"Stupid Demmi!

Maevyn's brother laughed as he darted away from her. He was eight, far younger than her own respectable nine years of age, and always bothering her. The girl huffed her loose dark hair out of her face and went for him. If their mother were there to see she'd be telling Maevyn to halt her hoydenish behavior. Mama always yelled at her first. A little to do with being the older child, a little to do with being a girl and not supposed to cause such a fuss. A lot to do with the fact that Maevyn really was "a bit of a handful," truth be told, and always getting into trouble. So even though Demmi was the one who had begun the pestering this time, it would be she who got the talking-to.

But Mama wasn't there to see, was she? She was in the house with a good hour's worth of churning. She had made a brief attempt to set Maevyn to doing it for her. That ended when Demmi started being a nuisance and Maevyn nearly knocked the butter churn over and her mother had groaned and sent both of them out of the house where they wouldn't be a distraction.

Leaving Demmi free to tease and torment his sister. And leaving his sister free to retaliate as she chose.

Maevyn aimed a smack at him—Demmi dodged it and, grinning, swiped at her head. He didn't hit her but Maevyn shrieked as the ribbon in her hair ripped free with several dark strands still caught in it. Not only had that hurt, it was her nice ribbon, the one she liked that was shiny-red and smooth and that Mama had bought from the peddler. "Ow! Ow!"

He waved it tauntingly. "Yah, yah, can't catch me!"

"I'll catch you! Orc-brat!"

The boy's mouth made an "o" of shock that turned into a grin of utter delight. "You said a bad thing!" he exclaimed.

Maevyn's ears turned red but she too felt a naughty glee at her daring. "So you are, then, Demmi! So you are an Orc-brat!" she repeated, compounding the sin.

He giggled. "I'm gonna tell Mama you said that! I'm gonna tell her and she'll give you a thrashing!"

"I'll say I heard you say it before and she'll thrash you too!" That was a lie—she had just thought the name up herself, but it was a good threat. 'Orc' wasn't a word to use lightly. Grand-da and Grandmama had been killed by Orcs in the Great War, as had many of the folk in their village.

When grown men talked about the Orcs they scowled and spat, and women blanched in fear and disgust. If Mama heard them bandying the word about as an insult, she'd probably do more than thrash them. She'd probably send them to bed without any supper.

Maevyn's brother fell silent, clearly thinking about the repercussions if he tattled. Abruptly he changed tactics. "Want your ribbon back, Orc-brat?" he taunted, adopting the insult himself in a tacit indication that he wouldn't tell on her.

"Don't need you to give it back, I'll just take it!" she said, knowing that Demmi would make her chase him for it anyway. And so he did, round the tall oak tree and down the side of the hill, into the woods that began at the base.

When Demmi disappeared into the underbrush, laughing, Maevyn stopped abruptly at the outer-most
trees. It was not out of fear—they had played in these woods before on many occasions and their parents had never yelled at them for it. Well, Mama had told Maevyn she was too big to be running through them getting burrs on her clothes, but Maevyn didn't care about that either. She could pick the burrs off. What she wanted was to take a moment and guess at Demmi's next move. There was the beech tree nearby with the hollow place under the roots, but only she knew about that. There was the stream—the water was low this time of year and the sandy bed mostly exposed, but it would show his footprints. Then again, Demmi was pretty dumb and probably wouldn't think of that.

Maevyn made up her mind and entered the woods. Barely a few yards in, the trees were so thick that they had a buffering effect. She couldn't even hear birdsong, much less Demmi thrashing about wherever he'd gotten off too. Her own footsteps sounded loud in her ears but she knew they wouldn't to her brother. But all the trees meant he had plenty of places to hide behind and to watch for her, jump out as he chose in some dumb attempt to scare her or continue to hide behind and evade her. Little sneak.

She headed toward the ridge overlooking the stream bed and peered down, her eyes picking out his footprints almost immediately. They only went for a few yards though—then he must have scrambled back up the bank on the other side, from the looks of the loose soil. She followed his trail, easily stepping over the little trickle that was currently the stream and continuing in the direction he had gone. She knew where he was heading now and she muttered to herself under her breath. There was a clearing up ahead where the children sometimes played, but it was hard to get to: heavy creepers and thorny bushes, all manner of obstructive shrubbery. Demmi knew that it was harder for her to get through on account of her skirt. She scowled. He really was an Orc-brat.

When she got to the place where the underbrush got thicker, she groaned out loud. The vines and climbing things were broken where her brother must have gone through. So he had come this way. She had known it. "Demmi! Demmi, I'm gonna get you for this, Demmi!" she promised, not caring if he heard her. Determinedly she took the same way he had. At least him going through first had broken up a path a little for her, but it was still quite a struggle. Her skirt caught on thorns and they scratched her arms and legs. Plus the loose hair about her head was sticking to her face with sweat. She grumbled to herself. He was going to get it when she caught a hold of him.

When she burst out of the heavy gorse she pulled up short abruptly. Demmi was lying twisted up on the ground, and his head was all turned around-like. His eyes stared at her with a strange look, like the shiny glass beads on Mama's best dress. It was so confusing to Maevyn that her first instinct was to laugh. "Demmi, you stupid, what're you playing at?"

His eyes didn't blink. All around, the woods felt like it was holding its breath. Maevyn sucked air in, puffing out her chest, and let it out with a heavy sound. She could feel fear knocking within her but did not succumb, less from bravery than from a lack of understanding. She did not yet know what it was she had to fear. She cocked her head, looking at Demmi, and slowly walked towards him. "...Demmi?"

He didn't respond. A fly buzzed nearby. Maevyn swallowed. "Demmi? This isn't funny, Demmi," she whispered, nudging him with her foot to no effect. She bent down and pushed his shoulder determinedly and he fwumped over onto his back. Some of his insides were hanging out of a wide rip in the side of his stomach. He smelled like a gutted pig. The red ribbon was still clutched in his left hand.

Maevyn's hand shot to her mouth. She turned and retched hard into the grass. Spitting out the foul taste, she looked again only to see her little brother still like that; only to know without a doubt that this was no joke or pretence. It was too much. Her eyes filled up with tears. "Demmi?" she
whimpered softly. Mama, she thought to herself, get Mama, and her lungs filled up with the yell she was going to yell for her parents to come running.

No. Don't do that. The yell turned into a strangled gasp and she hugged herself abruptly, trembling all over her body, afraid that something might have heard. Maevyn, stupid girl! What did this? And where is it? Might be watching right now! She looked around, frightened, and that was when she noticed the heavy indentation in the grass. A footprint bigger than either she or Demmi could have made. A footprint bigger than a man's. It pointed away from Demmi and she looked where it pointed, to a place at the edge of the clearing where the grass was badly trampled. Whatever...it had been, it had not been alone.

She turned and ran back the way she had come, as fast as she could go, not caring how the thorns ripped her clothing and scratched her body. Every second she was terrified that whatever they were, they were following her. She could hear the heavy footfalls behind, feel the hot breath on her neck. She ran faster, the air almost sobbing out of her. She knew in the back of her mind that this was foolishness, that she was sure to be spotted in the state she was in, but it was as though the fright had addled her brains. It was only when she broke through the last trees and into the open that she dared to look behind her, to see if she'd been followed.

That was when she heard the screaming. That was when she turned to run for home. And that was when she realized home was where the screaming was coming from.

-.-.-.-

The man came at him with a pitchfork, yelling, and Grushak cut him down, cleaving him where the man's neck met his shoulder. The man's whole body stiffened in a satisfying way, and his mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. Gouts of blood spurted against Grushak's arms and chest. His jagged blade sank low but caught at the base of the ribcage and the Orc cursed as he yanked it out again with a hard quick pull. Needed a fresh edge. No time to think of that. The man's carcass fell towards him and he sidestepped it neatly, whirling in an adroit fashion that belied his heavy frame.

He saw no one else but the man's screaming woman. She had been churning butter when he first shouldered his way into the house, and had knocked the churn over in her fright. As she made for flight he had slashed at the backs of her legs, neatly hamstringing her just before he was distracted by the arrival of the man and the man's crude weapon. It was only dragging herself that she was able to reach the shadows at the back of the house, away from this terrifying invader whose dark silhouette against the bright patch of the open doorway filled her vision. His blade had lapped at her skin, had tasted her blood and had butchered her mate before her eyes—now she looked at him with those same eyes and her pupils were dilated with a fear that was unspeakable.

His own keen cat-slit eyes, passing over the terrified woman for the moment, picked out the dark corners of the house with ease, looking and dismissing. No one else then. Good.

The Orc leaned over and ran a stubby forefinger through the half-churned cream that had spilt on the floor. Straightening as much as the natural slouch of his kind permitted, he licked it off in a deliberate fashion and leered at the woman with obscene promise before shouldering his way out of the house.

His strong nostrils flared as he stood and snuffed in the smell of carnage. He looked towards the rest of the houses that formed this little community of Men, where the rest of his party were going about their business of murder, theft and rapine. With great success, by the looks of things—all was clearly well in hand. His pointy ears warmed to the sounds of Mannish screams and the bleating of livestock. Unless he missed his guess, Shrah'rar would be putting the fear of the Dark Lord into
some goat even now. Snaga pervert.

"Arn. Arn, please. Arn, oh sweet Lady of Light, no! No, no, no, no!" Behind him, the woman was raising her voice in an increasingly higher-pitched keen.

Arn. Probably the name of her dead man.

Grushak turned slowly, a pleasant heat spreading in his lower belly. He walked towards her slowly, grinning at the way she drew back from his advance. She left a trail of blood as she did, pulling herself backwards, unable to take her eyes away from the Orc, dragging her useless legs until her back met the wall of the house and she could go no further. He continued towards her until he was looming over her, enjoying his feeling of power.

The woman's plea changed then. "Oh no, please no, get away from here. Get away!" she cried, her eyes still on him but no longer seeing him, as though her words were directed at someone else. "Demmi! Maevyn! Arn!" she screamed as the Orc knelt before her, resting his considerable weight on one knee.

He leaned forward, taking in the smell of her: Man-smell, and female musk, and blood and butter and fear. His breath quickened and his tongue passed over his wide lips. "Let me teach you a different name," Grushak purred as he reached for her.
Maevyn shuddered in the beech roots.

The tree was large and old and the first place she had turned to in her fright when she realized that home wasn’t safe. At the same time, it was very near the edge of the woods and so not far from the village. If she were to look out through the roots at the entrance of the little hollow under the tree and through the green ferns that shielded it from sight, she would have been able to see her house where it stood up on the hill. Hidden as she was from sight, she was still terrified of discovery. She could smell the sour stench of her own vomit from where she had been sick again in the grass, less than a few yards from her hiding place. She could only hope that the bad things that had killed Demmi wouldn’t smell it too and come looking for her.

There was a high thin scream up the hill. It could have been her mother. It could have been a neighbor. Maevyn put her hands over her ears to block out the sound. Whether she listened or didn’t listen, though, the scream went on. Maevyn scrunched back further into the root system under the tree. Dirt crumbled under the neck of her blouse and down her back. She closed her eyes tightly. A few errant tears squeezed out from under her eyelids and she felt the hot saline on her cheek. And as she sat there she became aware of something long and flat and hard pressing against her rump. She reached down and picked it up to see what it was.

It was a knife.

Maevyn squeaked and dropped it, scrabbling backwards further into the roots, continuing to scramble even when she was back as far as she could go and her fingers were only churning at soil. More dirt crumbled down her back. The roots around her seemed to twist and contort themselves into threatening shapes. The darkness became claustrophobic and choking. She had the terrifying notion that she was being buried alive. Buried alive.

Taking in a deep breath, she tried to get herself under control. She couldn’t let herself go crazy. If she kept scrambling around like this she would bring all of the dirt and stones overhead down on herself, or her struggles might be heard. Her heart was pounding. She needed to find something else to think about.

She focused on the knife. Slowly she forced herself to reach forward. Picking it up delicately, she examined it in the dim light. Her first thought had been that it belonged to one of the bad things. Now, though, as she squinted, she recognized the sharp blade, the small hilt with the strip of leather around the grip. It was the knife Da had given Demmi for his birthing day. But what was it doing here? Demmi must have left it. Then that meant Demmi must have been down here at some point too.

At any other time she would have been furious to discover that her little brother had invaded and co-opted her sanctuary and hidden his playthings inside of it. But Demmi was dead, and she was not. And the knife was here.

Maevyn’s lower lip trembled in the dark. She held the knife by its grip. She touched the tip of its blade lightly with a single finger. It didn’t break the skin, but as she rested her finger on the hard sharp point and felt the pricking sensation, she knew that only an increment of pressure would bring blood. That knowledge comforted her. The knife was sharp.

She crawled to the opening of the little hollow and looked out. Smoke was rising on the hill. The air brought her the smell of burning thatch. The bad things were up there, but she was down here. And
she had the knife.

Slowly she crawled out of the beech roots and started up the hill.

She didn’t know exactly what it was she was doing, but she did know that she had to get up there: had to see if her parents were alive. Deep down inside, she knew that they were. What else could they be? Not dead, surely. Da was probably fighting with the bad things, and Mama—Mama was frightened but she was holding her fear in check, trying to calm the other women. Mama never lost her head. She was always in control of the situation, no matter what. Or maybe they were tied up somewhere. Maybe all of the villagers were being kept somewhere, tied up with ropes and with no one to help them. Well, in that case they would need her, wouldn’t they, her and her little knife, to cut their bonds and to free them so they could escape or even stay and drive the bad things away.

The memory of Demmi dead in the woods whispered unbidden into her brain, and she pushed it away ruthlessly. Demmi wasn’t dead. He was unconscious, lying in the clearing. His slashed stomach, his hanging innards, they were just something she had somehow panicked and imagined. Demmi wasn’t dead. Maybe he wasn’t even in the woods at all. Maybe it had been a dream. Maybe all of this was a dream. Yes, that made sense. But it all felt so real!

Then again, she reasoned as she approached her house and saw that the door had been torn off its hinges, that was the way it always was in dreams, wasn’t it? Things felt so real that they were unreal. That was why everything felt so very intense right now. Why the smoldering houses nearby made her nose itch and her eyes water. Why her heart was beating so hard in her chest that it hurt. Why when the ragged endless screaming from inside her house broke off abruptly, the ensuing silence was the loudest thing she had ever heard in her young life.

The knife nearly slipped from her suddenly nerveless fingers but she swallowed and gripped it tighter. She stopped and looked at old Threnoch’s house, which was the house nearest theirs and the only one of which she had a direct view. She saw nothing moving, only the tendrils of soft gray smoke, the waves of heat that made the blue sky over it swim and wobble and shimmer. In front of her, the interior of the house was dark. Firming her resolve, Maevyn entered.

**Step one.** Da was laying on the ground, his body nearly cut in half. Maevyn had never seen so much blood in her life. She would have retched again except there was nothing left in her stomach. Her father was quite dead.

**Step two.** Mama lay in an odd position near the back of the hut. Her dress was ripped down the middle and her bared legs lolled open. The slash across her throat gaped like a second mouth, blood still gurgling out of it.

**Step three.** It was an Orc. What else could it be that stood near her mother? Maevyn had never seen an Orc before, but now suddenly the monsters from the stories she had heard all through childhood became real to her. It was as tall as a man, and that was only slouching. It was nearly half a man’s height in width, all muscle, and its massive shoulders were protected with iron-studded leather. A black curved scabbard hung on its broad back, and in that scabbard was a massive sword. It wasn’t pushed in all the way and a few menacing inches of exposed metal showed over the top of the scabbard. The Orc was facing away from Maevyn, going through the oak chest where Mama kept the bridal gifts from her handfasting with Da. It pulled out yards of the fine soft linen woven by Grandmama and great-Grandmama before Maevyn was born. Tossing aside the yellowed fabric like trash, the Orc grunted as it lifted up a bright silver cup.

Another step. A fifth. A sixth. And then she was charging, and there was a horrible sound coming out of her mouth, and the knife was raised in her hand, and the Orc had half-turned towards her, and she could see its yellow eyes—
Grushak heard the soft sound of the little running feet, the high, strangled cry, and he turned to see the enraged man’s child coming for him. Instinctively he held out the hand holding the cup. The blade glanced off the cup and gashed the back of his hand, provoking a roar of pain. The girl stumbled but continued forward under the power of her velocity, and he went on turning as she ran past him. She nearly hit the wall but twisted aside at the last moment, facing the Orc.

“Shit-fuck!” Grushak swore. Stunned that the little beast had scored him, he examined the damage to the back of his hand. The wound proved to be superficial, barely more than a scratch, although black blood oozed from where the skin was broken. The cup had dispelled most of the stab’s force and his tough hide had also helped to protect against the worst of the blade’s sharpness, or she might have actually severed the tendons in his sword hand. As it was, he hadn’t even dropped the cup. The vessel itself was dented, though, diminishing its value. Glaring, Grushak turned his eyes on the girl. “Man-brat,” he growled.

She was small and spry, and her dark hair fell loose around her head. What struck him most, though, was the look on her face. He felt the twisted grimace that turned his features into a horrifying mask of Orkish rage such as he often saw on his fellows. She didn’t quite have the teeth for it, but the rictus of her face was nearly a rival for his own. The familiarity of the expression took some of the edge off his anger. After all, she would be dead in a moment anyway.

He tossed the cup aside. “Give me the knife.”

She glowered at him, breathing heavily.

“Give me the knife,” he said again, his guttural voice dangerous but amused.

She shook her head no, raising her weapon a couple inches.

He took a step forward.

At this point she charged him again, knife held in a stabbing position. He dodged to one side and knocked it out of her hand. It flipped through the air end over end to land point-first in the wooden floor with a solid “thwock,” trembling where it struck. She started to dive for the knife and he kicked her legs out from under her. She hit the ground hard but continued to reach for the weapon. He walked around her complacently and kicked it out of her reach. Drawing his scimitar in an easy over-the-shoulder gesture, he slammed it into the floor inches from her reaching fingers, simultaneously barring her path to the knife and disarming himself. He didn’t care about that, though. What need did he have of a sword? The man-brat was small and easily dealt with. Besides, it was much more entertaining this way.

Absently he licked the gash on the back of his hand as he waited for the girl’s next move. Even after he had slaked his battle lust and spilled his seed in the dead man’s woman, the taste of his own blood excited him. He would enjoy toying with the man’s child before he killed her.

Maevyn stared at the Orc’s sword, which was sticking out of the floor in front of her. It was as tall as she was and stood between her and the knife. Her eyes flicked towards the Orc and she rolled to one side quickly. Scrambling to make it first to her knees and then to her feet, she stood with her shoulders hunkered forward and glared at the creature. It only watched, not making a move towards her. Maevyn thought it might be smiling but couldn’t tell: its wide mouth appeared misshapen by its large fangs and sharp teeth. She wanted to kill it. Knowing, though, that there was no way she
could reach the knife without the Orc grabbing her, she backed up a couple steps, then turned to run.

She had already discovered that the Orc was faster than it looked, but nothing could have prepared her for the immediacy of the grab. A huge hand fastened on her shoulder, yanking her backwards. She yowled, twisting and squirming violently, but was unable to break its grip. It pulled her roughly against its stomach, its arms, each thicker than her waist, holding her firmly. She strained until her whole body ached but she was pinned fast and unable to move at all, except for her legs and feet, which kicked fruitlessly an inch or so above the ground, and her head, which she pressed back against her captor’s hard chest in a vain attempt to push her body away.

The Orc’s response was to begin to clamp down on her in a slow squeeze. She couldn’t even gasp as she felt the air crush out of her, felt her face grow hot. She remembered once when she had innocently tormented a beetle in her younger years, pressing a twig against its back to keep it from moving so she could admire the shiny bronze wing cases. The beetle had tried to continue about its buggy business, its tiny legs churning in the dirt. She remembered how, fascinated, she had slowly borne down with the twig and how the bright shell began to split....

Her ribs were buckling under the pressure. She went limp. The squeezing stopped when she did so. Gradually the bear hug loosened until she was dangling, gasping, from the Orc’s arms.

Maevyn could hear its heavy breathing even over her own, could smell its rankness: blood, sweat and grime. She was quite still, rapidly turning over ideas for escape. The Orc stood still as well, its mental processes unknowable. Then it opened one arm slowly, still holding her tightly with the other. Heavy knuckles brushed against her cheek. She made a move to bite but the hand pulled away before she could do so. Abruptly, it cuffed her. The blow was a gentle one on the part of the Orc, which meant that Maevyn’s head was not concussed but only knocked violently sideways.

Waves of pain washed through her skull and she nearly passed out. She struggled to stay afloat rather than slip below the level of consciousness.

“The man-brat smells frightened,” came the Orc’s voice a short distance above her head. Its tone was as pleasant as one of its kind could sound. Still holding her, it turned and walked over to Demmi’s knife and picked it up. Maevyn stared at the knife, unable to take her eyes away as the Orc hefted it a number of times, testing the weapon’s balance with exaggerated care. Then she closed her eyes as the knife approached her face. Her jaw clenched as she felt the sharp tip prick her cheek.

She was trembling.

“Ve-ry frightened.” The blade moved downwards slowly, defining the shape of her jaw, stroking her throat: light as the flutter of a butterfly’s wing against her skin. She let out her breath as the knife left her throat, then caught it again as she felt it touch her left eyelid instead. Her eyes closed, she could nonetheless see an angry red dot where the tip of the blade was resting.

“Lovely lovely man-brat,” crooned the Orc as it held the knife to her eye.

That was when Maevyn knew she was going to die, and that she was going to die painfully.
Grushak was grinning as he tickled the girl’s eyelid with her own knife. He wanted to pierce the little ball of jelly beneath, to hear its owner squeal in disbelieving agony, but then, he didn’t really want to rush things either. Certainly there were occasions in the past when he had regretted being hasty. Savor the child or enjoy instant gratification? Decisions, decisions...

“What’s that you have there, Grushak?” came a reedy voice.

Decision made for him, for now. Grushak lowered the knife, feeling the girl relaxing the slightest iota under his arm. He gave her a small but nonetheless gut-wrenching squeeze to let her know that this wasn’t over before he turned his attention to the Uruk with the bloody dagger who hulked in the doorway and the smaller Orc standing slightly behind him. The second Orc, the one that had spoken, looked at the girl Grushak was holding curiously. “It’s a rabbit, Pryszrim,” said Grushak sardonically.

The Uruk chuckled. The smaller Orc only looked dubious. “It doesn’t look like a rabbit,” Pryszrim said, sounding uncertain but willing to be persuaded. At that, the Uruk gave a loud guffaw.

Grushak, for his part, rolled his eyes. “Ever hear of sarcasm, shit-wit?” Pryszrim started to open his mouth, but Grushak was already speaking to the Uruk. “Hrahragh, what about the others?”

“Good take.” Hrahragh’s eyes gleamed. “All dead. Lots of blood.” He lifted his bloody dagger with a smile and licked it.

Under Grushak’s arm, the girl shivered.

“That’s a good way to cut your tongue,” remarked Pryszrim.

Hrahragh shrugged. “Tastes good. I killed...” he trailed off, cocking his head in thought. “Eight of them. Old man, old man, old woman, young man, young man, young woman, young woman.” His eyes went lazy and half-lidded with remembered pleasure. “They were very good.”

“That’s only seven,” said Grushak.

“The boy from earlier,” Pryszrim reminded him.

“Ah.” Grushak didn’t say anything else. The boy had come as a surprise to them, bursting into the clearing where they had paused to reconnoiter before they hit the village. Hrahragh had been the first to act, and quickly, wrapping his long arm around the child’s neck and twisting as he slit the soft belly open with his dagger. The child, eyes bulging, had fallen without a sound or even the opportunity to struggle. It hadn’t seemed a proper kill at all, really.

“He barely counts,” Hrahragh agreed amiably with Grushak’s unspoken sentiment. “Maybe for half?”

“You win with seven anyway. I just took five: three outside, and then these last two.” Grushak nodded towards the corpses of the man and woman on the floor.

“Have six when you kill her,” Hrahragh pointed out.

“Mmm.” Grushak looked down at the girl, who was staring wide-eyed at the other Orcs. He took a hank of her hair between thumb and forefinger, pulling her head back to examine her face. There
was fear on her face, but there was also still anger, and something else, a cold calculating look as though she were studying his face with any number of guessable and not so guessable thoughts running through her head. Grushak’s upper lip curled over one fang. In deliberate Westron he said, “Think I’ll keep this one for an appetizer.”

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Maevyn, caught under the Orc’s arm, was very still. Her eyes flicked continuously back and forth between the other two. She didn’t understand what it was they were saying to each other—it wasn’t like any speech she had ever heard, and the hard plosives and flat, heavy vowels were harsh on her ears. She was also disgusted to see how spittle flew so when they talked. When the taller Orc licked its knife her blood went cold and hot at the same time. She wanted to hurt them. Wanted to kill.

She knew that most likely it would be she who was to be hurt and killed, but she was hoping that they might be distracted long enough for her to figure out some means of escape. When their attention shifted to back to her, that hope plummeted. The Orc holding her pulled her head roughly backwards, obliging her to look into its face. It looked down at her briefly, then its mouth opened and she was suddenly assaulted with the odor of blood and spoiled meat. “Think I’ll keep this one for an appetizer,” it said in its guttural voice.

After hearing them speak back and forth amongst themselves in their vile tongue, the implicit taunt in saying this so she could understand wasn’t lost on her. Rage made her stupid. “I’ll kill you,” she spat. “I’ll make you bleed—kick you, hit you, hurt you—make you scream and tell me to stop, but I won’t stop until you’re dead—”

The Orc threw back its head and roared with laughter. She gritted her teeth as the violence of its amusement caused it inadvertently to squeeze her tighter. Her ribcage was badly bruised from the abuse it had already undergone. “Little one,” said the Orc, shaking its head and chuckling, “I don’t think so.”

The other big Orc by the doorframe said something and laughed, and her captor nodded, responding in the same tongue. Still holding her, it stopped briefly to pick up the discarded silver cup, which it shoved under its belt before heading toward the entrance.

She closed her eyes involuntarily against the light outside after the house’s dark interior. The Orc holding her and the smaller Orc also drew back for a moment against the light, muttering to one another in a complaining tone. The biggest Orc, the one with the dagger, strode forward unconcernedly. He was shaped different: easily a foot taller than the tallest man she had ever seen, but his proportions were more Man-like than the other Orcs. He wasn’t quite so broad in the chest—relative to his height anyway—and he stood much straighter. His hair was long, black and snarled, and his hide was rust-brown in color. He was also wearing less than the other two, only a shirt of corroded chain-mail that hung very short on him and a sort of loincloth covering the crack of his buttocks and his privates. This bothered Maevyn. He was more Mannish in appearance than the others: it was easier to think of him as a man and that made the sparse covering on his body disturbing.

He turned his head to say something to the other two, and her sensibilities were further affronted by his multiple piercings. Only women ever wore earrings in Maevyn’s experience, and when they did it was a sedate single ring per ear. The Orc had five in one, eight in the other, in the fleshy lower part and all up the curving outer edges of his earlobes, and in each pointed tip was a black ball stud. One of his broad nostrils was also pierced, as was the flattened bridge of his nose, between his orange eyes. Maevyn stared at him with morbid fascination, wondering what it felt like to have those things put in. She wondered if it was done all at once or on successive occasions, and how much it
hurt.

The smaller Orc was squarely built in the shoulders and torso, but its arms and legs were skinny and it was probably only a few inches taller than she was. She supposed it was male—supposed they were all male since that was how they sounded in their low growling speech. He wore a sort of rough brown animal hide bundled about him with a belt of leather and on his head sat an incongruous pointed helmet with a low neckguard. The helmet looked far too big for him. Where the tall Orc strode, the small one almost scuttled.

Her own Orc moved in a gait that was something between a walk and a lumber. It was a purposeful movement and powerful. He only used one arm to carry her and it pressed uncomfortably against her body. Maevyn wiggled experimentally—his hold was tight, though, and there was no give to it. “You’ll stop that if you know what’s good for you, maggot,” her Orc muttered, not even breaking his stride. She subsided sullenly.

They had passed Threnoch’s house, and Benard’s. Benard was an older boy her brother had adored and whom she herself had often admired for how far he could throw a stone, how high he could climb a tree. Higher even than she could. Benard’s body was lying in front of his house. A few seconds later they passed his head, which was lying separately in a ditch. His eyes and open mouth were crawling with flies.

Maevyn saw this. Maevyn saw everything. Maevyn kept her eyes open, barely blinking as she observed each new atrocity with a hundred-mile stare, noting every broken doorway, every smoking house, every dead body. She had created a little dark compartment inside her head and was methodically storing it all away within. None of this would be forgotten, and there would be a reprisal.

If she lived to make it.

-.-.-.

The village was centered about a communal stone well with a small roofed pulley, and there the four other Orcs who had gone on this little expedition were waiting. They hooted when they saw what Grushak was carrying. “Fuck, Grushak, that’s a little bint,” said Shrah’rar: rather ironically, since he was the smallest of their group and no bigger than the girl himself. “What can you even do with her?”

Rukshash, an old Orc who had survived fighting under Mordor during the War, picked his nose coolly. He was missing an ear, a slashing wound across the face had ruined his vision in one eye long ago, and his left hand was badly mangled. Glancing sidelong at the girl, he observed, “Man flesh makes good eating but you’ll split her good if you try to take her, friend. They don’t handle it so well when they’re that small.”

“They don’t always handle it so well when they’re bigger,” claimed Mushog. The Uruk was leaning back against one of the well posts with a very self-satisfied look on his face. “Of course, Grushak probably doesn’t have those kinds of problems. Not hung like the warhorse I am.”

“I don’t know about that, Mush-brain—I’ve seen my share of warhorses and I’ve seen your pisser, but I’ve never seen a warhorse hung that small.” Rukshash looked up from examining the big green booger on his knobby finger, grinning wickedly.

“Oh right. I’d forgotten how much time you spend eye-level with horse cock,” Mushog retorted.

Rukshash laughed. “Think you’re mixing me up with Shrah’rar, friend.”
“Hey!” protested the smaller Orc.

Grushak ignored the ribaldry. He tossed the girl roughly to the ground so that she landed on her hands and feet, then placed a foot on her back to push her down on her belly. “Shut up and give us some cord, eh?” Someone accommodated him and he knelt down, placing his knee against the small of her back to hold her still. Catching both her wrists in a one-handed clasp and holding them roughly over her head, he tied them tightly. Mushog played benefactor and gave him some more cord from his pack to bind her ankles.

Outside of Mushog’s gesture and the initial banter, the Orcs didn’t pay much attention to what Grushak was about. The practice of taking captives for torment after a raid or a massacre was not uncommon, though generally the preference was for a hardier sort of plaything that would give more substantial enjoyment. The girl was small to their eyes, and weak. It was doubtful she would survive long.

“This was an easy lot,” said Mushog dismissively, glancing around the surrounding houses. “They barely put up any fight at all.”

“A well-off lot, though. I took fine silver from the dead.” Grushak didn’t actually show them the cup when he said this. They had all been foot companions for some time and had developed a certain degree of trust, but only to a point. Grushak hadn’t lived this long without learning caution.

“I’m going back,” said Shrah’rar. “I found good leather in one of the storage rooms.”

“Was there cornmeal?” asked Pryszrim, sounding interested.

Shrah’rar gave him a disgusted look. “Sure, big bins of it—you want a little baggy?” he asked, sneering. Even though he was slightly shorter than Pryszrim and size played an important role in their kind’s hierarchy, Shrah’rar never bothered to hide his contempt for the other Orc and his often distinctly un-Orkish traits. Such as his preference for starches over good bloody meat.

And his spinelessness. Pryszrim didn’t take the bait, only grunted and looked away. “Fuck you, you little goat-suck,” he muttered. “Maybe I was just getting some for Squeaker, eh?”

Shrah’rar started to open his mouth for a withering retort but was interrupted by a low rumble from another Orc. Nazluk was below man size, about as tall as a human woman, but still big enough to tower over both of them. “Corn meal for Squeaker?” growled the Orc with the mismatched eyes: yellow and pale green. “Kurbag’s pet? That one can feed on goat shank with the rest of us and be glad of it. Miserable little thin-skin shouldn’t be with us in the first place. So that’s where we are now, eh? Special consideration for Kurbag’s pet? Special consideration, oh yes, yes, that’s how we’ve gotten to this point. Well, I won’t have it. Do you hear me, you little toad-lickers? I said I won’t have it—enough is enough. Kurbag can get his own cornmeal if he wants it so badly.”

Grushak straightened. “If you three fools would care to shut your face holes for just a bloody minute you might care remember that we are going to be leaving in the none-to-distant future. So quit your jawing at one another and go find what spoils there are to be had, or so help me, I’ll gut the lot of you and leave you for the bloody tarks to find!”

The smaller Orcs dispersed quickly as their larger fellows had already done. Grushak glanced down at the man child at his feet. He nudged her with his foot. Her face in the dirt, she made a soft, quiet sound but otherwise didn’t respond. He hadn’t tied her hands behind her back because he wanted her to make easy carrying, so she wasn’t really trussed as securely as she might be. Nonetheless, he knew her bonds would keep at least until the Orcs were ready to leave. He grunted in satisfaction, then left her there while he hunted out more booty.
Stupid Orc. Stupid, smelly, nasty, stinking...

Maevyn waited until his footsteps faded away before she made any attempt on her bonds. Pushing with her elbows and knees, she pulled her body into a fetal position, knees pressing into her chest. The cord was tight and rough on her skin. She felt with her fingers for the cord around her ankles but was unable to find where the knot ends were. Her nails scrabbled vainly, only causing the most minor fraying. Not enough to avail her any.

Maevyn whimpered with frustration. She didn’t know why the Orc hadn’t killed her, but she knew that it wasn’t out of charity. If she could only get loose, she knew what she would do. Run, run far away to where they couldn’t find her. She would still have vengeance, but vengeance could wait. Looking for Mama and Da had been a mistake, she knew that now. Even if they had been alive, what could she have done for them? Mama would have told her she was a little fool.

Don’t think about Mama. Don’t think about any of it.

But she told herself that in vain. The blood was in her mind, and the ripped dress. There was the grotesque wet sound coming out of her mother’s throat when Maevyn had entered the house, the low hissing rattle...

The girl gave up for the moment on the cord around her ankles. What she needed most was to get her hands free. She brought her bound wrists to her mouth and tried chewing the cord. It was thick and hard between her jaws, and its roughness cut her tongue and the corners of her mouth. Biting the rope didn’t help so she tried nibbling the outside of it. That was better. She could feel the little individual strands that formed the cord breaking under her teeth. Yes, that was the way: thorough and sure. Don’t bite off more than you can chew.

But it was so slow. So slow. And she was hot. The day was well into afternoon now, and the sun was directly overhead. Her mouth was dry and dusty. She stopped to spit grit out of her mouth and thought sadly about the well—only a few feet away from it, she was, and the clear cool water available from its stony gullet, deep within the earth. How she longed for a trickle to wet her parched throat: a mouthful to hold behind her teeth for a moment, pure and sweet and good, before she swallowed.

Time seemed unending as she worried at the rope with her teeth. She had barely nibbled a sixth of the way through it and was so involved in what she was doing that she didn’t even notice some of the Orcs had returned until there was a sudden whump immediately to her right. She froze, then slowly turned her head to see what it was. It was a young calf, its big pretty brown eyes glazed over, its pink tongue hanging out of its mouth.

There was another whump to her left. A large ewe, white rims of the dead eyes exposed.

Whump. A brood sow. Whump. Another ewe. Dead animals were being dropped on the ground all around her. Maevyn wanted to scream: she managed to choke it back, but she could feel her body shaking uncontrollably.

The words, distorted but still recognizable Westron, caught her attention. “Sweet meat, good to eat, eat the head and eat the feet, hmm, hmm, bones to crack, hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm...” It was the smallest Orc, singing to itself, its voice high and grating. There was a squelching sound as it opened a long cut in the dead calf, peeling back the hide.

“Bones to crack and flesh to tear, rip into it anywhere...” One of the bigger Orcs.
Another Orc joined in: this time the words were unintelligible to her but by the intonation of its voice it too was singing. And then they all were, in their snarling, cruel tongue, as they cut and quartered lambs and kids and ewes and goats and pigs and calves—all dead, all dead. They were carving up the flesh and packing it into the hides they had stripped from the bodies, binding them up with cord and fouler things.

If nothing else good could be said of the Orcs, they were certainly efficient.

The smell of blood was heavy in the air, making Maevyn’s head swim. A tuft of loose fleece tickled her nose. She lay helpless, not daring to move lest she attract attention, as the butchery continued all around her. Dully she thought to herself that maybe this was what she had been kept alive for. It made sense after that “appetizer” remark. Soon one of Orcs would turn her onto her back and slit her open, lifting out her insides and carving up her flesh to pack in bloody animal hide with the rest of the meat. And then where would all her work with the cord have gotten her? Her tongue prodded the slivers of hemp caught between her front teeth almost dreamily. If only she could have a drink...

One of the Orcs interrupted the singing peremptorily as it rose and went to the well. She could hear the pulley turning smoothly, hear the sound of water sloshing as the Orc lifted out the bucket. One by one the Orcs all finished the animals they were working on and went to drink. They drank long, longer than she could have thought possible, as she listened to the pulley rise and fall, the sound of long, steady gulps. She almost wanted to ask for a drink, even a sip, but she wouldn’t let herself do it. She would ask them for nothing.

Two feet in front of her. Skinny legs, crude boots of burlap, hairy taloned toes exposed. Maevyn shrieked involuntarily as she was suddenly hauled up by her hair. It was the smaller Orc with the oversized helmet. He kept lifting until she was practically on tip-toe. Then he gripped her shoulder, dirty nails digging into her arm, holding her upright and forcing her to hop over to the well. He leaned her roughly against the well’s stone side and started winding the pulley, bringing the bucket up one final time.

Her wrists were tied but her hands could have held the bucket—rather than handing it to her he caught her by the hair again instead, forcing her head backwards so that he could pour the contents of the bucket into her mouth. Water gushed over her face, soaking her hair and head and blouse, going up her nose and making her sputter and making the watching Orcs roar with merriment. Some of the water actually got in her mouth, though, and down her throat—what didn’t go down the wrong way and half drown her appeased the worst of her thirst.

She coughed up water, gagging, as the Orc with the big helmet released her, and nearly fell before she was caught by the first Orc, the big one that had captured her. He lifted her up onto his back, sliding her arms down around his thick neck so that her bound hands prevented her from slipping. She hung against him, shivering. Her wrists hurt, the tightness of her bonds as she dangled cutting off circulation. Her fingertips tingled for lack of blood.

Around them, the others were lifting up the bloodily packaged meat and other things: knives and belts, packs and sacks and tools, some furtive gold and silver. They worked quickly, bundling their spoils and securing them on muscular shoulders and backs. The Orcs were clearly preparing to leave, and they were taking her with them.

Suddenly her Orc grunted. “You’re dead weight, man-brat. You have to support some of it.”

“I—” she coughed and half-whispered, “I can’t, you stupid...tied my legs...”

“Motherfucker,” growled the Orc. “Mushog!” She assumed this was some kind of insult or curse, but another Orc turned his head and came over. Maybe it was his name. Her Orc said something to
him and the second Orc came around behind them. She felt thick fingers fumbling against her ankles and the cord binding them parted suddenly and fell away. Her Orc hefted her up higher onto his back and she unconsciously put her legs around him as much as her skirt would allow, gripping with her knees and heels. This alleviated the strain on her wrists considerably and the Orc grunted again.

Emboldened by the exchange, she asked, “Where are you going?”

“Want to know where I’m taking you, huh? Maybe you don’t want to know, meat-bag.”

“Should’ve...killed me when you had the chance.”

He laughed. “Would you listen to her tough talk? Gonna kill you yet, little one. But I believe in saving my fun for later.”

She shivered at the cruel good humor in his voice.

Suddenly one of the other Orcs shouted and her Orc turned. The tallest Orc, the one with all the piercings, had picked up a disemboweled nanny goat and was dangling her over the well. Horrifically, even with her guts hanging out the animal was still alive: one leg kicked and she bleated feebly. He let her go and she fell. There was a resonant splash deep within the well. The other Orcs laughed uproariously. They all began picking up animal carcasses and discarded entrails to throw in. Maevyn’s gorge rose at the sight of the Orcs deliberately fouling the village well. Her disgust manifested itself in a sickly hiccup. She tasted bile at the back of her throat.

The Orc that she thought was called Mushog raised his fist suddenly and bellowed. The others stopped what they were doing and bellowed back. They followed as he turned and began to run. Her Orc started to run as well, entering an easy lope. Each heavy footfall sent a powerful jolt through her body: metal studs dug into her chest and the cord binding her wrists rubbed her skin painfully. She clung tighter with her legs and the crooks of her arms and shut her eyes with the effort. Her Orc was snarling and slavering under his breath, and she could hear all of the others doing the same, keeping up a steady accompaniment to their pounding footfalls as they left the village behind.
Evening was nigh and the sky was flushed with mauve, ebbing to molten gold on the Western horizon. The sun had just disappeared behind the mountains. A flock of starlings wheeled blackly across the sky, flashing and dazzling the air with their turning. She watched them silently, smiling a little in spite of herself. They were beautiful and just watching them made her whole body feel lighter. At moments like this she felt almost at peace.

A popping sound from the fire broke the spell. A log crumbled and shifted, causing another log resting on it to fall off. She turned and prodded the second log lightly with a stick so that the unburned part might catch flame.

She heard them coming before she saw them, of course, her keen ears picking up the sound of their heavy running from a distance, the outcries of the earth beneath their feet. Even as her stomach rumbled excitedly, knowing that with them came food, her heart was oppressed. With the Orcs also came the chaos they carried with them: their noise and stench and violence and vulgarity—further vexation to a spirit already heavily burdened.

"Little friends, if only I could fly like you. I watch you, and I wonder how long it will be. Oh Elbereth, how long must this continue? Surely I have endured enough, and there may be an end of it. But such is my cowardice, I fear…I do not…I cannot…"

She looked to the sky for the birds again, but didn’t see them. The starlings had gone to roost.

“Ahhhhh…” She heard the long exhalation behind her but didn’t turn around. He was coming out of his nap, stretching into wakefulness. Doubtless he too had heard the arrival of his fellows in his sleep: his ears were as pointed as her own. Shortly thereafter her thoughts were confirmed as the large half-Uruk prowled up with an oddly feline grace to stand beside her. One large hand clasped her shoulder. Once she would have shuddered at his proximity, much less his touch. Now there was only dull recognition dimly felt, a bare shifting of her body in acknowledgement that he was there. Fear, disgust, loathing—these required energy which she had in short supply. Above all else, she simply felt weary.

“They were gone a long time,” said Kurbag, fingers flexing against her flesh. He lifted his angular tusked face, snuffed the air. “Can’t smell them yet.”

She seldom responded to anything save for direct questions, but Kurbag often talked to her nonetheless: a litany of thought and observation and reminisce more for himself than for her. He spoke to her most freely when the others weren’t around, and his tone was rarely ill natured. Once she had thought that his talkativeness might indicate a kindly temperament—that he might be persuaded to free her, or at least to stop subjecting her to…to indignities. She knew now, though, that this had been foolish naivety on her part. There could be no appealing to higher ideals with Kurbag. He had none. He was an Orc, and an Orc he always would be.

“Hey Squeaker, fire’s going down. Build it up,” he said now, squeezing her shoulder.

Whether he meant it to or not, his grip hurt. “There is very little kindling left,” she replied quietly.

“Mm.” He released her and walked away to the edge of their temporary camp where a scruffy little
sapling grew, only slightly taller than him. He seized it and uprooted it in a single slow motion, grunting as it came free. She flinched at the sound of the tree’s anguish and tried to ignore it even as it knotted her up inside. Kurbag strode over with the sapling and began to bend and twist it off into manageable portions. When he handed piece by piece to her the sap was sticky on her hands. She fed them to the fire, waiting for each piece to catch before she put in the next. Green wood, still living. The fire would burn low, but it would also burn steadily and hot, slowly conquering the dying resistance.


Thought recoiled at the reference. Her loins still ached horribly. Answer his question. “He went into the woods.”

“Wanted Grymawk to do a sighting, eh?” Kurbag paced along the perimeter of the fire. “Well, I guess that makes sense. Coming near the mountains now. Good rock there: caves and crevices. Get out of all this bloody greenery. I tell you, I mislike trees, Squeaker. Make me think of your folk out there, watching.”

She bent her head to peer at the red embers, her eyes watering. My folk.

The sound of the Orcs approaching was very loud now. “There they are,” said Kurbag.

They had run hard, and they had run long. Exploring and playing on her own, Maevyn had never been far from her village before, but as the Orcs covered vast stretches of territory she quickly found herself borne beyond any recognizable landmarks. Despite the pain she was in, jouncing against her captor’s back, she started off watching her changing surroundings eagerly. Aside from natural curiosity about places she had never seen, she wanted to watch where they were going and how they were going there. If—when she escaped, she would be able to find her way back.

But as they ran, gently rolling hill land gave way to flat. For a time they ran along a stream, but then they left that behind as well. There were no more trees after a time, and Maevyn’s world became a world of only long grass below and sky over head, and the shoulders and back of the head of the Orc carrying her, and the creases in the tough olive-colored hide at the back of his broad short neck. If she were really brave she would bite him, but she knew that had to be her stupidest idea yet. He would not hesitate to kill her if she did.

The long grass as the Orcs whipped through it sent up a swishing sound. One hour turned into another until time no longer had any meaning. The sun, which had reached its zenith, began to drop slowly in the sky.

And Maevyn, even though she was awake, began to dream. Her body was still there, clinging awkwardly, holding tight, but her mind was going off somewhere else. She had strange, nonsensical flights of fancy in which the scenery would shift from grasslands to the oak tree behind her house, or she thought she heard people talking to her.

Suddenly one familiar voice distinguished itself from the others.

“Maevyn, dear heart. Hold on, my love. We aren’t far.”

Maevyn was confused. “Hold on to what? Mama?”

She was clinging to her father’s shoulders, and he was giving her a piggyback ride. She was
giggling as he bounced her lightly. How funny. She was too old for Da to be playing with her like this. Even Demmi didn’t like piggyback rides anymore—hadn’t for some years. Demmi, where was Demmi?

There was a strange roaring sound like some kind of animal right next to her but when she looked she saw nothing. She was on her own two feet, and she was standing in front of the woods at the base of the hill.

“Maevyn?” It was her brother’s voice.

“Demmi? Hey, where’ve you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.” She put her hands on her hips, very much annoyed with her brother.

“Maevyn?”

“You little stupid! Where are you at?” She looked and saw the beech tree. It looked bigger, and there was a door in its trunk. The door was slightly ajar. She went over and touched it gingerly. On the other side she could hear the sound of someone breathing. She pulled the door open.

“Demmi?”

Her eyes flickered open with a start. The first thing she realized was that they had stopped running. The second was that the light had grown very dim. How long was I asleep? She didn't have much time to think about that because just then her Orc lifted her off his back and dropped her.

Luckily the ground was fairly soft but without her arms free to brace herself the fall left her winded. She flopped over onto her side, gasping a little. Around her, the other Orcs were taking off their own packs and bundles, dropping them with loud growls of relief. Her own Orc, sparing her barely a glance, went over to another Orc and they started talking together in their gruff speech.

Maevyn, trying to work herself into a more upright position, rolled over onto her stomach again. Pressing her palms against the ground she tried to push herself up. Her skirt was caught under her knees and that made it difficult but finally she was able to struggle into a kneeling position. Looking down at her wrists, she winced to see how the cords bit into her skin. They had been hurting all along but seeing it made it worse. What had become a dull ache turned now into a wild, burning rawness.

"Im..."

Maevyn lifted her head abruptly at the sound of the voice and found herself looking into the most beautiful face she had ever seen. It belonged to an adolescent girl with fair skin and hair that shone like liquid moonlight, even in the burgeoning dark. Her eyes were a breath-taking pale blue and as Maevyn stared, transfixed by the sudden appearance of this apparition, they filled with tears. The girl raised a pale hand to Maevyn's cheek, touching it in a questioning way. "Mae govannen, mellon-nin," she whispered. She turned her head to the side, blinking away the crystalline droplets in her eyes. As she did, Maevyn saw the slender tip of a pointed ear.

Maevyn's first words were perceptive, albeit highly unimaginative. "You're an Elf," she said, gawking a little.

The girl nodded, then slowly faced her again. "I am sorry," she said in curiously accented Westron. "I did not...it has been long since... Greetings to you, my friend."

Maevyn looked her up and down. "I've never seen an Elf before." She frowned and looked around her. "I never saw Orcs before, either." Then she looked back at the Elf girl, realizing something.
"You're not tied up."

"No, they...they know that I will not try to leave." Her face flushed a little and she lowered her eyes as though she were ashamed.

Maevyn was puzzled by this reaction. Granted, she herself planned to escape at the first possible opportunity, but the Orcs were scary—she could understand being too frightened to try. "Are there any more like us here? I mean, people like you and me?"

"No. There has only been myself, and now you. Oh, but you are hurting," she exclaimed suddenly, taking Maevyn's bound hands in hers. Her touch was cool and comforting—nonetheless, Maevyn winced as delicate fingers traced the cords around her wrists. "Your skin is very tender." She found where the cord was knotted and began to untie it.

"Oi oi oi!" Maevyn's Orc came back in a hurry, followed by the Orc he had been talking to. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, Squeaker?!"

"These bonds are too tight," said the Elf girl. "They are hurting her."

"Good." He grinned evilly. "Let them."

"The skin is inflamed," she insisted. "Her wrists are swollen. If they are not untied she could lose the use of her hands."

"She's not going to need them for long."

"Not even long enough to make your own work easier?" She looked around at the skin bundles lying on the ground.

He opened his mouth but was interrupted by the second Orc, who suddenly spoke up. "Why not?" he asked. "She might as well be useful, Grushak."

Grushak scowled and said something in Orkish to which the second Orc responded in kind. Grushak turned to Maevyn, catching her roughly by her bound wrists with one hand and hauling her upright. With the other hand he pulled Demmi's knife out of his belt. She started to yank away but his grip was firm as he slid the blade between her hands and sawed upwards, cutting the cord through. She clasped one freed wrist against the stinging night air and stared at him.

He pointed with the knife at the bundles. "Go open those." He didn't stay to watch her, instead turning and lumbering away, muttering to the other Orc as he did so.

Quickly the Elf girl touched her shoulder. "Come, come and help me. Do as he says. Come!"

Maevyn only hesitated a moment. It galled her to obey the Orc, but obedience would gain her time. Besides, the older girl seemed so anxious already and Maevyn didn't want to make her more so. "I'm Maevyn. How about you? That big Orc called you Squeaker. That's not really your name, is it?" she asked dubiously as she followed the Elf's graceful steps. She was proud that she only stumbled a little as she did so, although her legs were cramped and sore.

Squeaker. That doesn't sound like the names in the stories.

Then again, she had never met a real Elf before to know what was true and what wasn't.

"They do not try to pronounce my real name. It is Eleluleniel." The Elf girl picked up a bundle.
"Pretty name!" exclaimed Maevyn, delighted by the sequence of lilting vowels. This girl was like the Elves in the stories! "But I'm not sure I can say it. Lelelu—"

"EH-leh-lu," she corrected. "Eleluleniel." She smiled. "My smallest sister, she could not say my name when she was little. She used to call me Leni, and my other sisters called me that too."

"LEN-nee. I can say that. That's easy." Maevyn tried to pick up a bundle but dropped it. She tried again but fumbled badly. "My fingers aren't working."

"Your hands were tied for a long time," said Leni. She set her bundle down and took Maevyn's wrists in her hands. "I am sorry," she said as the younger girl flinched but nonetheless chafed them gently. "The ropes tore the skin," she said, and shook her head. "They are cruel, these Orcs. You are not accustomed to their cruelty as I am."

Maevyn's hands felt warm, even though the Elf's own hands were cool as she rubbed them. Though the pain was still there, it subsided somewhat under Leni's administrations. "How old are you?"

Maevyn asked as she would any other girl or boy she had just met.

"I am thirty-three," said Leni.

"Oh—" Maevyn had been just beginning to feel comfortable with the Elf and was sad to hear her new friend tell such a patent falsehood. She pulled her hands away. "You shouldn't lie. You can't be more than a few years older than me."

Leni laughed, and her laughter was like the tinkling of little bells. "But I am not lying, Maevyn. My race ages differently from yours—we grow more slowly than Men do."

"Really?"

"Yes. How old are you now?"

"I'm nine," said Maevyn, a little chagrined. Nine, to the Elf girl's thirty-three. She must seem like such a baby.

"Here, pick this up," said Leni, handing Maevyn the bundle she had put down before picking up the one Maevyn had dropped, as well as a third. "Let us take this over to the fire—they will be wanting us to cook it. When I was nine, Maevyn, do you know how tall I was? Why, I barely reached your waist. I was twenty-four by the time I finally reached your height." She looked understandingly at Maevyn's downcast expression. "And do you know, a few years shall see you passing me?"

Maevyn looked up and Leni gave her an encouraging smile. "When you have grown to womanhood, it will take me another ten years to catch up."

Maevyn cocked her head. "So long?" she said, and from feeling childish next to the Elf girl's maturity she went to feeling sorry for her instead. Time passed slowly enough without another ten years added on. "That's too bad. I can't wait to grow up. No one will be able to push me around then."

"Hey! I'm fuckin' starving here," came a cross voice from behind them.

"That is Rukshash," said Leni. "We can take his straight to him. He does not care to have his meat cooked."

"You mean he likes it raw? That's yucky!" exclaimed Maevyn.

Leni shrugged. "He is old," she said as her fingers nimbly undid the cord binding the hide together.
She lifted a bloody woolen haunch. “Go take it to him.”

Maevyn took it squeamishly. It was heavier than she had expected it to be and the sheep’s hoof was still attached. “Which—”

“He is the old Orc. The one with the big scar on his face. Go, he will not hurt you. He is tired from the day and will just want his dinner.”

Maevyn turned and saw the Orc sitting against a large boulder. She steeled herself up and walked over to him. “Uh—”

“Garn, Squeaker, you take long enough.” Rukshash glanced at her in annoyance, then blinked. “Shit, you’re not the Elven bint! You’re Grushak’s brat.” She held out the leg of mutton dumbly and he took it from her with a dark clawed hand, still peering at her, his good eye narrowed. “Put you to work, have they? That’ll be her doing, no doubt,” he said, looking past Maevyn. He chuckled softly and malignantly as he eyed the Elf girl. “Oh, I’m sharp, I am—I see how it goes. Lonely, that one is. Wants to keep you alive. Selfish, that one—more merciful to gut you now.” His eye turned back to Maevyn appraisingly. “Haven’t had man flesh in a while. Tastes like pork. You’re a young’un too.” A slow, disturbing smile revealed decaying black teeth. “Ought to be tender.”

She backed away from his hungry grin. It took every fiber of her being to keep from running away. Instead, she forced herself to turn around and walk back rapidly to the fire.

Leni was kneeling besides the fire. She had pushed a number of stones into the fire and was using a sharp stick to lay raw and bloody meat on them. “You bring bundles to me and undo them,” she said to Maevyn. “I will cook the meat.” Maevyn did as Leni said, bringing bundles one by one until the other girl told her to stop. “The others can be left for later,” she said. “The meat will spoil quickly, but that does not bother them.”

“Where’s the grub? Bloody starving here!” By now the Orcs had come hulking around them, rudely demanding their food. Leni offered them the first haunches of goat and pig: charred and blackened on the outside, bloody-rare within. Maevyn, shrinking at Leni’s side, stared at the way the Orcs sank their teeth into the meat and tore it away with violent swings of their heads.

Leni saw her looking and murmured quietly, “They do not care that it is not cooked all the way through. They just want their meat kissed with flame. Do not eat any of the pork—I cannot be sure of cooking it thoroughly and it will make both of us sick. They can eat it, though. Their stomachs are lined with iron.” She pointed at a number of smaller scraps of meat that she had torn away with her fingers, laying on a stone at the periphery of the flames. “These are pieces of lamb. Will you share them with me?”

Maevyn started to shake her head. Bloody memories of the butchering made her stomach churn, but it also growled to be fed. Her hunger was not to be denied. “When will they be ready?” she asked a bit miserably. She cringed, aware that she was whining.

Leni didn’t seem to notice. “Another ten minutes. It takes them longer to cook this way, but it will be more thorough without being burnt.”

She was as good as her word. When she judged the lamb to be done she took her stick and speared a chunk, holding it towards Maevyn. Maevyn looked timidly at the meat Leni proffered but took it delicately. When she bit into it her eyes widened. She ate every scrap that the Elf gave her and licked the dripping fat from her fingers. “No more,” said Leni after awhile. “It will give you a belly ache and you will be sick in the night.
It was now quite dark and the flickering firelight gave a haunting cast to the Elf girl’s face. It also made the Orcs more frightening, casting weird shadows on their harsh features, glinting off their teeth and eerie eyes. They were all closer to the fire now with the settling cool of night: noisy, talking and laughing and sometimes yelling at each other in their snarling tongue, and sometimes they would touch the weapons they carried in a menacing way, but nothing ever came of it as seeming confrontations broke up in raucous laughter. A few of them, even with all the racket, actually seemed to be sleeping—their eyes shut, their mouths slack and drooling, stomachs distended with their quick gorging.

Leni rose, touching Maevyn’s hand lightly as she did, and Maevyn got up as well. The Elf girl stepped through the circle of Orcs and she followed nervously. Several of the Orcs glanced after them briefly before returning to the ongoing talk—one, though, Maevyn saw, was staring after them. More specifically, after Leni. His upper lip was curled in a scowl, and hostility emanated from his body.

Leni led her to a small curling pile of furs beneath a fragrant tree. “This is where I sleep. Come. You can keep me warm.”

“Who was the one looking at you?” asked Maevyn. “The one with the funny-colored eyes.”

“That is Nazluk. He does not like me.” She shrugged in the darkness. “Well. None of them like me, really. Their kind like little beyond cruelty and the raw metals from which they craft their tools and weaponry. Beyond that they hate nearly all things under the sun. But it is said that Orcs do hate Elves in especial for that they were originally create of our flesh—Elven folk taken and tortured and twisted by Morgoth into vile shapes, long long ago—and they resent us for the beauty and the goodness that was lost in their unmaking.”

Maevyn’s mouth made a surprised circle in the dark. This was a tale she hadn’t heard. “Orcs used to be Elves?”

“That is the legend. Nazluk hates me with all the force of this old hatred and would be glad to be rid of me. The others tolerate me, though, and do not object to my presence.”

“Why?”

“They have become accustomed to having a slave, I think. I give them little trouble and make myself useful to them. Originally, their impulses were much like Nazluk’s and most of them wished to see me killed. Kurbag would not do it, though, and chose to keep me for himself. The others stopped pressing him; now only Nazluk continues.”

“Why did Kurbag want to keep you? Which one is he?” asked Maevyn.

“Oh…” Leni’s voice sounded strange all of a sudden. “Let us speak of that in the morning, shall we? It is too dark to try to tell you which names go to which Orcs. I can point them out to you in daylight.”

“All right.” Maevyn yawned, then lay there, blinking. “What are these trees?” she asked, looking up at the tree they were under and the number of others by their encampment. They were like no trees Maevyn had ever seen before, roughly triangular in shape with pointy tops that towered blackly against the dark sky and the stars overhead. “They have needles on them!” she said, astonished.

“They are pine,” said Leni. She reached up and bent a bough down towards Maevyn. “See? They do not have leaves like other trees but these green needles instead. And they smell spicy and sweet.”
Maevyn took a whiff. Her nose wrinkled at the pungent odor. “I miss my trees,” she said. “We have a lot of trees, back home. Beeches and oaks and elms. I climb them, so very high. I had a hiding place in one—I wouldn’t’ve been caught if I hadn’t been stupid and left it.”

“I miss my trees as well,” said Leni softly. “They all knew my name, and I used to know all of their names—the secret ones, old ones they told me on quiet summer evenings such as this. I am beginning to forget some of them.” Barely audible: “And no one calls me by my name anymore.”

Maevyn grabbed her hand. “Leni!” she whispered. “I won’t be here in the morning. I want to get away. When it’s darker, and they’re all asleep. Come with me!”

“Foolish child. You speak madness.” The Elf girl stroked her arm gently. “I tell you this: there is no escape from them, Maevyn. Orc ears are keen and sharp. They can hear us speaking now, quiet as we are and loud as they are, even if they cannot make out the sense of what we say to one another. They see in the dark like cats, and they move quickly. But most of all, their sense of smell is strong. If somehow they missed your leaving, think you they would not snuff you out as soon as they found you gone?”

Maevyn was silent. Then: “If I leave now…they’ll kill me.”

“Yes.”

“And if I leave now…I can’t kill him. I can’t kill Grushak.” She felt the Elf girl’s stillness in the dark. “The big one, the one that was carrying me. He killed my Mama and my Da. Prob’ly killed my brother too. I cut him with Demmi’s knife and he wants to kill me. I don’t know why he hasn’t done it yet, Leni.”

“He wants to play with you first.”

Maevyn scowled. “That’s his own stupid mistake, then. He can play with me all he wants, as long as I get to make him die.”

“You do not know what you are saying!” Leni’s tone was unexpectedly harsh, startling them both. Just as suddenly, it softened again. “Maevyn, you are small and do not know everything there is to know about the world. But I tell you this. If you want to live, you will be careful. You will not fight them and you will not disobey them. You will do whatever they want of you, and even what they do not know they want of you. You will not anger them. They can hurt you badly, and they kill without compunction. You understand this?”

Maevyn wanted to argue, to say something really mean, to call Leni a coward. But the Elf girl’s voice had frightened her a little, speaking of experience beyond her comprehension. “I understand,” she said sullenly. Her body pulled in on itself and she wrapped her arms around her knees, hunching forward in a stubborn way. “But I’m not going to cry for them! I don’t care what they do. They’re stupid and they’re ugly and they smell bad, and I’m not giving them that.”

“So small, so brave.” Leni sounded sad as she brushed Maevyn’s cheek with her smooth fingers. “You say you will not cry for them, Maevyn? Do not make that the only thing you live for.”

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Chapter End Notes

Im… Mae govannen, mellon-nin. “I… Well met, my friend.”
"Elelulieniel" was a tongue-in-cheek bid at producing the ubiquitous unpronounceable fantasy name. Why I chose to do this in an otherwise serious story, I don't know. Just be glad I didn't include an apostrophe, because I remember thinking about it.
Grushak belched and picked at the shreds of meat between his teeth contentedly. It had been good to fill his belly. The day had been a long one. Too much running, and much too much sun. Lousy stinking sun. Made his skin dry, and his eyes itchy. Now, though, it was pleasant to hunch before the fire’s warm glow with nowhere to go and with a drinking skin of good Orc beer to make him even warmer.

“Grushak? Oi! Anyone would think I don’t interest you.”

“Oh, you’re always interesting, Mushog.” Grushak gave the Uruk a sardonic look. Mushog was taller than him, as were all of the Uruk-hai in their band, but Grushak had more mass on him. It was rare for an ordinary Orc to reach man height, and nearly unheard of for one to be as large as the Uruk-hai, who among other attributes had been specifically bred for tallness. Grushak knew that the others talked about his great size sometimes, guessing he might be a half-breed like Kurbag. For all he knew, it could well be so. Most Orcs never knew the specifics of their parentage, being raised communally. Though perhaps “raised” was a loose term.

Mushog bared all of his teeth in a ferocious look of pleasure. “You flat-nosed bastard. Rut in the bushes later?”

Grushak’s eyes narrowed and he licked his lips deliberately. “Fuck yeah, bitch—I’m your stud.”

The Orcs that were awake laughed, Mushog loudest of any of them. He got to his feet, staggering a little as he took a swig from his drinking skin. Unexpectedly he aimed a heavy blow at Grushak, who jerked his upper body out of the path of the oncoming fist. Mushog overbalanced and fell against him.

“Hey,” breathed Grushak, half-catching the big Uruk in his arms.

“Well, I’ll be buggered: I’m drunk,” Mushog said, laughing.

“Think so, eh?” Grushak was annoyed but amused. “Come on, now. Sit you down a breather, old son.” He pulled Mushog down firmly next to him. Mushog didn’t fight him, humming in the back of his throat as Grushak thwacked him between the shoulder blades.

“If you two sweethearts are finished with your foreplay…” came a loud voice from the other side of the fire. Another large Uruk had joined the group around the fire, along with a much smaller Orc bearing a quiver of black-fletched quarrels and a crossbow. A chorus of yells rose to greet the Uruk’s arrival as even the sleeping Orcs popped their heads up to greet their leader.

“Oi, Bragdagash, where were you at?!”

“Braggy, we missed you so!”

“Not here to meet us when we got back? Talk about rude!”

Bragdagash laughed shortly, his dark features full of unholy good humor. “So who wants to see your ugly faces? I was watching Grymawk’s back. Didn’t want him to be eagle-fodder.”
“Hah! More likely he needed a tickle from your sword to encourage his climbing,” Kurbag suggested.

The smaller Orc closed his eyes long-sufferingly. “The next time you decide to take a little jaunt up to the topmost tip of the tallest tree in the forest for the fun of it, Kurbag, you just let me know. What’s for dinner? I’m hungry.”

“I’ll just bet you’re hungry, you snaga piece of shit!” Bragdagash booted Grymawk’s backside, making the smaller Orc squeal. “Little bastard lost his lunch before he was even halfway up. Had to move smart-like so I wouldn’t get hit by his puke.”

“Tree was swaying!” Grymawk whimpered as they laughed at him. Grushak tossed him a goat haunch and he buried his teeth in it happily.

“Enough of that, what was the day’s take?” Bragdagash directed the question at Grushak.

“Good. We went East, like you said. Struck a little bit of a village, not much of a scuffle. Lotta meat—we ain’t gonna be hungry for a few days. Good iron and steel. Farm implements, mostly—fine for smelting. Some man weaponry.”

“What shiny stuff?”

Grushak reached under his belt and withdrew the silver cup, tossing it to his leader. “Some shiny stuff.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s fine. That’s very fine,” whispered Bragdagash, turning the cup this way and that in the firelight. He suddenly snorted. “They’re fucking, aren’t they? The little man and woman on the side.”

Grushak shrugged. “Well, they’re naked. Guess they are, or they’re about to. Got it out of some sort of fertility trunk, I think it was. I really didn’t get to look at it for long.” Before that little hellion had come at him, that is. “Dead bint also had some bangles and shit.”

He scratched one ear carelessly as Bragdagash examined the cup. Grushak knew the other Orcs often concealed gold and silver they had taken—he didn’t squeal on them, but he did make a personal practice of tossing his leader any worthless valuables he chanced upon. They were no use to him, after all, though he intended to start holding back a knick-knack here and there as they continued North. In the meantime, this far from any other groups of Orcs or Orc-friendly men interested in bartering, precious metals and stones and the like were more of a liability than anything else: dead weight to take up space in his pack, or to provoke covetousness and theft or violence on the part of his fellows. Easier to just get the shiny stuff off his hands—besides, it helped keep him on friendly terms with Bragdagash. Useful, that.

“Grushak, you’ve got first watch tonight,” said Bragdagash, still looking at the cup.

Well, most of the time. “Aw, fer fuck’s sake!” complained Grushak, even as he lumbered to his feet. “Why not put Kurbag on it? He’s been sprawled on his arse all day.”

“When his arse hasn’t been humping skyward, you mean,” remarked Nazluk, who had appeared to be sleeping. He didn’t open his eyes as he spoke. The others laughed, including Kurbag. Nazluk himself did not. Well, that made sense. Everyone knew Nazluk had problems with Kurbag’s little fuck-toy.

Bragdagash stopped laughing first. “Kurbag’s been keeping watch on camp all day. You’re mostly sober, and you’re awake. Leg it.”
There was of course another reason Bragdagash was posting him, although it was something that none of the Uruk-hai would have brought up—ordinary Orcs had the advantage of them in the dark. The Uruk-hai had been bred to perform well in open daylight and their eyes were not troubled by the sensitivity Grushak and the others suffered from. The trade-off, though, was that the Uruk-hai had lost some of the Orcs’ keen vision in the dark. At night, watch was nearly always kept by an Orc rather than an Uruk.

Grushak rolled his eyes but legged it.

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Maevyn was asleep and Eleluleniel lay beside her. It was the way of Elves to sleep with their eyes open, but hers were open with wakefulness. She lay listening to the night. After Bragdagash had returned and put Grushak on sentry duty, the few other Orkish voices had quickly died away to be replaced by the noxious rumbles of heavy snoring. Not all of them were asleep, though.

When she heard the first footsteps she only froze for a moment. She had hoped that he wouldn’t come to her this night: that he had spent himself recently enough that he wouldn’t be in the mood. But then of course he had slept and recouped himself. What a fool she had been.

She rose quietly to stand at full height in the dark Orc camp, forestalling the advance of the large form approaching the pile of furs under the tree. The half-Uruk paused, doubtless puzzled as to why she had gotten up: he was accustomed to coming to her, to finding her lying at his disposal, rigid and silent and praying as she always did that he wouldn’t come—praying to the Rodyn in vain. She had had some time to think about this, though, lying next to Maevyn and listening to her sleeping, breathing punctuated every now and then by a little whimper. Maevyn had been through a terrible ordeal that day and had only the grimmest of futures to look forward to. She was frightened and tired, traumatized in body and in spirit; she should at least be allowed a sleep that was peaceful and unbroken. There was no way Eleluleniel could prevent what was going to happen, but she could at least try to control it by taking it somewhere else. There was no need for Maevyn to be awakened and to find herself witness to such an ugly scene: something that would further terrify her and that she couldn’t possibly understand.

As Eleluleniel faced the shadowy silhouette she almost thought her legs would buckle under her, but the Elven prepossession that was both such a blessing and a curse gave her a façade of seeming serenity. With short even steps she picked her way across the ground towards him, keeping a measured gait so that she wouldn’t trip on anything. She heard no small voice or shifting in the furs behind her, and gave silent thanks that her leaving didn’t seem to have disturbed the younger girl’s slumber.

Kurbag waited for her to come to him. As she stopped in front of him he loomed over her in the dark, his breathing heavy, his scent familiar and thick in her nostrils. She couldn’t help taking a step back. He was so much larger than her, so much stronger and heavier, and she knew the punishment his body would inflict upon hers when he pressed her down. “Not here,” she said quietly. “Please.”

She had begged from him often enough in the past—begged him not to touch her, begged him not to hurt her, begged him not to despoil her. He had ignored her before and done as he pleased. Right now, though, he hesitated, confused about what she was asking of him. “What?”

And so she said again: “Please. Not here. Somewhere else. Please.”

He scratched his head. Once he might have been suspicious, suspecting this to be some attempt at escape. Squeaker had only ever tried to escape on one occasion, shortly after she had been captured, and then he had gone looking for her quickly before the others noticed her gone. He had found her
in short order, hiding in a tree: threatened her at first, then when she still refused to come down had started climbing the tree himself. Her continued refusal had obliged him to move several levels of branches upward, forcing him to mount limbs that he didn’t trust with his weight. One close call when the bough he stepped on snapped, though he’d been able to catch himself just in time. When Kurbag finally reached her he had been shaking, nearly as distressed as she. That was the only time he had ever hit her.

That was a long time ago. Squeaker had been ground down quickly and now her only attempts at resistance were words: few, small, and easily brushed aside. He didn’t know why she wanted to go off somewhere else, but he shrugged compliance. “Shit, all right. It’s no skin off my back.” He laughed shortly.

Eleluleniel walked past. As she did, he caught her small slim hand in his own massive fist. She didn’t bother attempting to pull away. Moving slowly, the Elf led the half-Uruk into the trees, like a twisted parody of two lovers holding hands in the dark.

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“Demmi?” Maevyn stepped inside the tree. It didn’t seem strange to her that the interior of the tree was same as the interior of their house. She looked for her brother.

“Shhh! They’ll hear you!” Demmi’s voice hissed. She finally saw where he was hiding behind the bed that the two siblings shared and would continue to share until she came of age. The top of his head and two bright eyes peeped over the top of the bed. Those eyes were frightened.

“What’re you playing at, Demmi?”

“I said SHHH!!” he practically yelled. In a quieter voice: “Come on, quick, close the door behind you!”

Maevyn shrugged and did so, not entirely knowing why she was listening to her annoying little brother. Even though there were no windows and there was no candle or other source of light in the room, she could see fine. She went over and got on the bed, sprawling across the width of it so that she was looking Demmi in the face. “Well?” she said, exasperated.

“I’m hiding,” he said. “Maevyn, I’m frightened!” He was kneeling, hugging himself and shaking. “It hurt so much. It hurts so much...”

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With only the dimmest illumination from the stars, the night landscape of pine and dark soil, broken here and there with exposed outcroppings of rock, was nonetheless bright and silvery to Grushak’s slit pupils. He took a gulp from the drinking skin he had brought with him, swilled it pleasantly in his mouth before swallowing. Complain though he had to Bragdagash, Grushak didn’t mind keeping watch at night—at least, he didn’t under normal circumstances. This time it happened he had spent most of the day running: physical exertion compounded with his natural dislike for open daylight had made him tired. His body was built for heavy endurance, and endure it did. He would sleep deeply on the morrow, though.

His head swiveled as his pointed ears caught the rustling of pine needles, and his eyes immediately picked out two forms to his far right: one large, one slight. After only a second’s focus he recognized them as Kurbag and Squeaker. Grushak relaxed, releasing the hilt of his scimitar. He watched their slow progress through the trees and couldn’t help chuckling to himself.
“Blind leading the blind. Eh, Grushak?” came a voice from behind him.

“Oi, Nazluk,” Grushak greeted the shorter Orc without turning around.

“Not keeping the best watch, are you? I got very close.”

“Nazluk, you snaga stinker—even if I hadn’t heard you coming, I have a nose, you know.”

Nazluk slid up beside him, looking in the same direction Grushak was and fingering a knife idly.

“Now what do you suppose they’re up to, then?”

Grushak knew the question was rhetorical—that didn’t make it any less stupid. Partially obstructed by trees, the larger figure had stopped and was pushing the slighter figure to the ground. “Having a tea party with some squirrels. What do you think they’re up to, fuckhead?”

“She was leading him,” said Nazluk thoughtfully. “She was leading him in the dark.” He was silent for a moment. “These Uruk-hai and half-Uruk-hai. I don’t know, Grushak. It bothers me.”

Grushak was surprised. He hadn’t realized Nazluk’s thoughts were taking this turn. “You’re dredging up old sewage, friend. The Great Eye and the White Hand both bought it a long time ago, and we’re all Orcs together now.”

Not a complete truth, but not really a lie. Without political motivations dividing them, the two kinds of Orc had discovered they held more in common than apart. Of course, it helped that the old Uruk haughteur had been dispelled almost of necessity. In the wake of the Isengard disaster, Saruman’s specialized breed of Orc had found themselves suddenly a minority among their heretofore “inferior” but more numerous fellows. With intervening years Uruk numbers built fairly steadily—Saruman had created female Uruk-hai shortly before his fall from power, and both sexes were highly virile. In this way the Uruk-hai were able to breed just as their predecessors were: able to produce purebloods in addition to the half-breeds that male Uruk-hai had already been siring with regular Orc females.

Still, though they no longer strictly depended on other Orcs for survival, the Uruk-hai respected the advantages of their smaller fellows…particularly their comfortable and well-ensconced living situations in the darker and deeper places of the world. Uruk-hai were designed for the surface and for daylight, but the Middle-earth of men was not friendly to their kind and it was wise to remain on good terms with denizens of the darker lands. The Uruk-hai’s own advantages were likewise obvious to other Orcs, and initial hostility abated as non-Uruk-hai began enjoying benefits by association.

Of course there were sometimes resentments. Orcs of both breeds were by nature ruthless and endlessly competitive, always looking for a leg up on one another. Nowadays, though, rivalry generally ran on an individual basis rather than a racial one. Which made Nazluk’s comment the more surprising.

Nazluk groaned. “All together, yes. Separate talents to each. Mutual benefits, mutual tolerance, yes, yes…but it is always an Uruk that leads. Or at least, that is generally the case…”

The sounds of fucking were coming to them now: the dim but unmistakable sounds of flesh meeting flesh and hard ragged breathing.

Nazluk shook his head. “That’s what I’m talking about, actually. I am…concerned for Kurbag.”

Grushak laughed. “Concerned”? Nazluk, Kurbag is a big boy—he can easily take care of himself.”

“But this fixation of his. On the Elven bint. Why hasn’t he killed her? Anyone else would have
used her and been rid of her by now."

“Kind of a tired topic this, isn’t it? Squeaker’s a convenience to him. He wouldn’t know what to do with himself if he didn’t have her on hand.”

“Can’t he choke his own snake-meat like the rest of us? Eh? You and me, Grushak, we’re content with that, yes? The end results are the same, yes?”

Grushak snorted. “Well, as it happens, no. Speak for yourself, Nazluk. I happen to like putting my cock in something warm and squishy now and then.”

Nazluk came closer. “But that’s in battle, isn’t it?” he breathed. “You kill them after, yes? Or you bring them back for entertainment, like the little tark child you brought today. But you still kill them soon. A few days at most they linger.” Nazluk looked past Grushak again to the coupling in the trees. “How long has that one been with us now? Some months? Wherever we go, he’s brought her. Will he even take her North? What does he think he’s going to do with her there? Our kind keep slaves, yes, but—” his nose wrinkled with disgust, “—little squeaking Elves, they’re no good in mines. The weight of the earth above oppresses their spirits, addles their weak brains. The dust ruins their puny lungs. They die too quickly to be worthwhile. And even here her uses are limited. She’s not so very strong. The tasks she performs are menial. What’s she good for, except to fuck? And what Orc female isn’t better for that purpose?”

“Perhaps you haven’t noticed, but we don’t have any Orc females in our group. Excepting you, maybe,” said Grushak sardonically.

Nazluk scowled at the dig but persisted, “I don’t like it. She shouldn’t be with us. He should have killed her by now. He has not.” Nazluk looked balefully to where the shadow of Kurbag’s body continued to rise and fall. “Maybe it’s because he’s half-Uruk. But there then, that’s no fault of his own. They can’t help it that they were bred to be more like surface dwellers.” In an insinuating tone: “Perhaps it makes them like surface dwellers as well as being like them.”

Grushak peered at him. “You think Kurbag has some sort of affection for Squeaker?” he asked slowly.

Nazluk sneered. “Well, of course he has affection for her. She is his little pet, after all. He feeds her choice food, he strokes her hair. I hear him talking to her. He calls her lovely. Calls the little Squeaker beautiful. Now what’s he doing using words like that? ‘Beautiful’? ‘Love-ly’?” Nazluk turned his head and spat.

Grushak was thoughtful. “It doesn’t hamper him,” he said after a moment. “He is as strong a fighter as he ever was, and as ruthless. If he were possessive it might make for trouble, but he isn’t.”

Indeed, Kurbag had made it clear early on that the others were welcome to Squeaker if they wanted, and he had been taken up on it a number of times. Grushak himself had used the Elf. Only once, though. The soft, high cries that his thrusting wrested from her, the little squeaks that had earned her nickname, were mildly amusing, but she herself was like a dead thing under him, completely without resistance. It was like fucking a hole in the ground. He preferred something a little more active: an eager, excited female of his own kind or a struggling, screaming lay like the woman he had raped earlier. He liked having marks left on him, and he liked leaving marks as well. Nails and teeth and the room to be rough.

There was a sudden gasp, loud even at their present distance. The breathing sounds sped up, and there was another gasp, and a third.
“I may not understand it entirely,” decided Grushak, “but I’m just as glad she’s here. Kurbag’s a horny bastard and he just needs another living thing for an outlet. Squeaker gives him one, and she doesn’t compromise his abilities. I know you don’t like it that she’s an Elf, and fucked if I do myself. But it’s better than if he were like Shrah’rar.” Grushak scratched his ear. “Speaking of which, the, uh… the meat didn’t taste… funny to you tonight, did it?”

Nazluk shook his head. When he spoke, it was quietly. “It doesn’t seem to have hampered him now, perhaps. But it may in the future. Whatever happens, I don’t like it. I don’t like it, and I don’t like her. I don’t like Elves.” He turned and walked away, leaving Grushak to stand guard alone.

The large Orc sat on a boulder. He raised the drinking skin to his mouth and drained the last of its contents, listening to Kurbag’s quickening grunts. After a time he began to rattle his clawed fingers against the boulder’s granite surface, half-smiling grimly in the silver.

-.-.-.

Oh…there are going to be pine needles in my hair after this…

It had become Eleluleniel’s mind’s way during such ordeals, to try to escape with petty observations and foolish realizations.

*If only I had a brush. My fingers…*

Of course this strategy never really worked. There was no way to escape the painful grip on her shoulders, the heat of his body pressing her down, the endless struggle to keep breathing as he crushed her beneath him—

*It is so much more time-consuming…*

—no way to ignore the hard brutal pounding, like it was a fist he forced into her, pounding until she thought she would be driven in two—

*…to use them…*

—no way to avoid the agony and the disgust at a violation more than physical, deeper than skin, crueler than blood—

*…my fingers…*

—no way to stay the tears that always came—of pain, of shame, of sheer exhaustion as it went on and on—

“…ah…ah…ah…ah…”

—no way to hold back the short hard cries that came unbidden from her throat with the endless thrusts of his abrasive organ—

And with her arms immobilized beneath his own, there was no way to cover her ears, block out the sound of Kurbag’s own grunting, his gasping, his growls and low groans of approaching climax. “Squeaker”—he murmured hoarsely, a huge black mass over her, blotting out the stars…and suddenly the half-Uruk seized her violently, burying himself in one deep piston movement, bellowing and snarling furiously as he emptied himself into her.

His body relaxed briefly on hers. Then he withdrew. The pain of his organ leaving her body, opening her raw and stinging to the elements, was almost as bad as first entry. She whimpered once,
briefly, before the dependable veil fell about her once more and her body, if not her mind, became composed and implacable. She brought her legs together and did not cringe when she felt the slickness he had left there.

*It is nothing I have not felt before. It is nothing I do not already know.*

The mantra brought her no comfort.

She pushed herself awkwardly into an upright position. As she did, Kurbag gathered the young Elf girl against him like an over-sized doll. He slid a talon under her chin and tilted her face up toward his, sniffled it briefly, then began to lick her cheek with long, slow strokes. The gesture could almost have been mistaken for a loving or comforting one if Eleluleniel didn’t know what he was actually after: her tears. Orcs did not cry—their eyes watered only with infection or injury. Kurbag was endlessly fascinated by her tears, and he had a taste for the salty sediment they left behind. The half-Uruk’s wide rough tongue laved her skin repeatedly—she closed her eyes a bare split second before it passed over them, swirling and darting and probing her globed eyelids like the tongue of an inquisitive cat.

When there was nothing left for him to taste, he released her. She got up slowly and staggered a little—he caught her elbows and held her until her feet were sure of their footing. She covered herself, pulled the abused fabric of her ragged dress back down around her, then wiped at the damp saliva on her face with the back of her hand, saying nothing. Abruptly he encircled her waist with his great hands and lifted her. She put her arms around his neck as he placed one muscular arm under her thighs, laying his other hand flat upon her back to secure her against him. She felt numbly grateful to her despoiler—she wasn’t sure that she would have been able to make it all the way back on her own.

The only time she spoke was when he reached the periphery of flickering firelight. “Put me down,” she whispered. She would walk back to the furs. If Maevyn woke up and saw Kurbag lowering her into the furs, she would ask questions, uncomfortable questions to which Eleluleniel wouldn’t know how to respond and couldn’t predict how she would answer—or what Kurbag might say.

The half-Uruk obliged her, lowering her to the ground. She stood, steadying herself against him briefly before turning and beginning the slow, steady process of putting one foot in front of the other.

-.-.-.

Demmi wasn’t crying and that was what disturbed Maevyn more than anything else. She could have handled mere crying. It would have meant something little. But Demmi’s teeth were clenched and his eyes were bright and unseeing. That was how she knew that he was in serious pain. When Demmi was really afraid or hurting it made him stubborn more than anything else. She remembered when he’d fallen and sprained his arm that one time, how his mouth had set in a tight firm line, how the tears came against his wishes and how above all other emotions he mostly seemed exasperated with himself and the pain he was in.

This was different even from that time, though. Maevyn didn’t know what to do. She had never seen her brother acting like this before. He kept hugging himself, gasping behind his gritted teeth and rocking back and forth. From being annoyed she had gone to being worried for him—and for herself. If something was really wrong and she didn’t do something, Mama might get angry at her. “Demmi? Demmi, where does it hurt? What is it, Demmi?” She kept asking him this again and again, and he just went on saying how much it hurt and nothing more.

Suddenly she became aware of how his arms were placed. “Is it your tummy, Demmi? Do you have a tummy-ache?”
“Not a t-t-tummy-ache,” he whimpered angrily, shaking his head.

“But your tummy hurts, right?”

He nodded, continuing to hold his belly tight.

There was an ominous feeling at the back of her head. This was wrong. This was very wrong. “Demmi, let me see your stomach.”

“No—please, Maevyn, don’t…”

“Demmi, I’m older than you and I’ll tell Mama you’re not minding me and she’ll yell at you.” It was a silly threat. Demmi had seen through the “older sister” ploy a long time ago, and he knew Mama would do no such thing. Mama always let Demmi get away with murder.

“I don’t want to. It hurts too much.”

“How can I do anything if you won’t let me help you, Demmi?” she insisted.

And then he did it. Letting out a long jagged breath, he took his arms away. There was a horrible soft moist sound as the long loops of glistening intestine slowly spilled out of the rip in his stomach.

She stared, frozen in disbelief.

“Please, Maevyn.” There was a heartbroken look in Demmi’s eyes. “Please. It…it just keeps coming out.”

“Demmi…” she whispered.

There was a roaring outside the room. Her brother’s eyes opened even wider than they already were. He grabbed her shoulders with his bloody hands, too quickly for her to pull away. “Don’t let him in, Maevyn! Don’t let him in!”

Suddenly the door smashed inward.

“Maevyn!” Demmi screamed.

Maevyn woke abruptly to the dark shape moving over her. She shrank back. “Wh—”

“It is only me. I had to relieve myself,” responded a soft voice.

Leni.

Maevyn shuddered a little as the Elf girl slipped back into the furs with her. Dimly she noticed a disquieting musky smell attended Leni’s return, but she was too upset remembering her brother’s slashed belly to think about it. “I was dreaming,” she whispered. “I was dreaming about Demmi—”

“Shhh…” Leni’s cool hand touched her face and gently caressed her forehead. “Rest you a while longer, dear heart.”

Dear heart. That was what Maevyn’s mother had always used to call her. And all at once everything surged up inside her all over again, pressing hard within her chest. “Mama,” she whimpered softly and began to cry. “Da.”

“Oh, oh…” The older girl gathered the younger to her. Maevyn could feel Leni’s heart beating almost abnormally fast as she buried her face between the Elf girl’s small breasts to muffle her sobs.
Leni’s arms were around her, warm and protecting. “It is all right, Maevyn. It will all be all right. Maevyn—shh, shh…do not cry, dear heart, you might wake them up. You told me that you would not cry for them, did you not…? I am here for you…I will take care of you…it will be all right…Hush, sweetling, do not cry…Please do not cry…”

Chapter End Notes

*Rodyn* (s. *Rodon*) is Sindarin for the Valar.

If I was a purist about canon, my Orcs would all be much shorter. As it is, they are book-verse in the main, but there is some obvious movie glossing to the origins and physiognomy of the Uruk-hai. Nothing precludes Sauron breeding the "large soldier orcs" that also issued from Mordor during the Ring War. Saruman's special achievement in this 'verse is the establishment of a distinct Orkish subtype capable of breeding true (i.e. breeding true-to-type when mated like-to-like.)

When they bother. See Kurbag.
When Maevyn awoke the next day dawn’s gray light was pale behind her eyelids, and the temperature, though not uncomfortably cold, was lower than it should have been inside the house. “Somebody close the door,” she muttered, and turned over. A hand touched her shoulder, then shook it gently. “Aw, I’m tired, Mama, let me sleep longer.”

“I am sorry I cannot let you sleep, Maevyn, but you have to wake up now.”

That wasn’t Mama, that was Leni. Leni? Maevyn sat up abruptly, blinking at the Elf with pitiful bewilderment. She remembered everything.

“Poor Maevyn, you are so tired. Still, rise you must. Morning is upon us, and we have tasks to do.”

Maevyn sighed but got up. “I’m sorry about last night.”

Leni’s whole body stiffened. “Sorry about last night?” she said in strange voice.

Maevyn squirmed with embarrassment. “Uh-huh, you remember. When I…” she trailed off, not wanting any of the Orcs to hear her. They might even have heard her crying last night. What a dreadful thought. It would be awful to have broken her vow so soon after making it. She looked at Leni and mimed rubbing her eyes.

“Oh.” Leni nodded. “You should not feel bad about it, Maevyn. You were so very unhappy.” She extended her hand towards Maevyn’s shoulder. “I know how you must—”

“So what are we doing?” Maevyn interrupted, shrugging away from the proffered gesture. If Leni were to keep speaking to her so gently she was worried that she might break down again. She knew the Elf meant to be kind, but it was a cruel kindness.

She was surprised at the response she got. “We are making bread,” said Leni, turning away.

“What?”

Maevyn followed Leni to the pit of glowing embers that had been the fire. Five Orcs lay beside it—two stirred a little in their sleep as the two girls approached. Maevyn’s stomach responded queasily as one turned over. Otherwise, they appeared dead to the world. Leni, beyond moving so as to avoid their dark forms, ignored them. “We will wait to bank the fire.” Forgoing the nearby pieces of kindling, she began resting stones on top of the other flatter stones that she had used to cook on last night.

“We’re making bread without an oven?”

The Elf girl shrugged, a down-to-earth gesture that seemed incongruous with her ethereal loveliness. “With no oven, that is the only we can make bread, is it not?” she said with a teasing smile. “Yet here, look, you see how I am forming a little cave with these stones. This will be our oven.”

Maevyn was interested. “Can I do it?” she asked.

“If you like.” She hovered briefly, making a few noises of encouragement as she watched Maevyn
arrange the stones to create a sort of hollow as she had seen Leni doing. After a while Leni told her to stop. “That is good. Now we will grind the cornmeal Pryszrim gave me.”

She drew Maevyn over to a relatively flat stone that she had dragged beneath one of the trees, onto which she had upended the partial contents of a bag of cornmeal. She took one rock and handed Maevyn another and showed her how to grind it. As they worked, Leni explained that meat dominated the Orkish diet, but that they enjoyed it well after the spoiling point. In fact, much of the stuff they ate would make her or Maevyn sick, and so Leni often had to find or make and horde edible foods for herself. She had experimented a little with drying strips of meat to make them keep for longer periods, but without any kind of seasonings to mix in the crudely made jerky was foul stuff.

“Also, some of the Orcs decided they liked it and so I am only able to keep a little for myself,” she said, making a face. “But only Pryszrim likes bread—the others think him very strange for this—and so he is the only one I have to worry about when I make that. He brings me the grain for it or Kurbag does, when there is a raid, and then if I am careful I can make it last. I hope you will not be too disappointed,” Leni interrupted herself abruptly, stopping to look at Maevyn. “My bread is not good like lembas. I never learned how to make lembas and I had to guess at how to make this.”

“I don’t know what lembas is,” said Maevyn.

She was only dimly listening to Leni’s words. Most of her concentration was fixed on the rock in her hand and the cornmeal she was grinding relentlessly under it. The task was a new one to her and the repetitive motion should have been dull and boring. Instead, it was oddly comforting. There was a tightness in her shoulders and upper arms that felt good. In the past when she had gotten blisters climbing trees she had complained and whined about them, even going so far as to ask her mother for ointment despite the scolding she knew would come with it. Now she could feel blisters forming on her palms and the undersides of her fingers and didn’t care as she scraped and crushed the cornmeal to powder. The pain was, in some strange way, satisfying, as was her sense of the rock’s punishing force under her hands, grinding and grinding against the cornmeal and the flat surface of the stone beneath it.

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Bragdagash was talking with Hrahragh and Mushog a brief distance from camp. “We’ll stay here another day’s breather—the others need it, and you two could stand to benefit from it yourself. Then we’ll make for those peaks Grymawk sighted. I have to say, I’m not sure what I think about those wing folk he saw flying.”

Mushog spat. “Skai, Chief, Grymawk’s an archer and he’s got good eyes, but he’s not got an Uruk’s sight in daylight. Probably just saw some sunspots and mistook them—”

Their leader shrugged. “Be that as it may. On the one hand it’d be safer without, but if there are eagles I can think of some interesting possibilities…well, enough of that for now. Mushog, go relieve Grushak, will you? It’s getting on to daylight proper, and he ain’t had no sleep since yesterday morning. I’m going to go seek out Kurbag.” Mushog nodded and set off. Bragdagash started walking, gesturing Hrahragh to follow him. “Oi, Hrahragh Ten-Knives, you terror of villages. Fancy some breakfast, do you?”

The other Uruk licked his chops and nodded. “Have a hunger.” He grinned. “Have a greater thirst.”

Bragdagash chuckled. Hrahragh was a late addition to their little band, joining within the past year, and his broken speech had earned some mockery in the beginning. Hrahragh’s intelligence, though,
was above average, his thought processes quick but thorough. And his sense of humor was as sharp as the throwing knives that were his favored choice of weapon. When a comeback could be either an amiable retort or an uncomfortable introduction to a well-placed blade, with no warning of which to expect, the mockery had ended quickly.

“So that’s the way of it, then. Beer makes the best breakfast.” Bragdagash came to a standstill as they reentered camp. “Hey Kurbag, can you get your pretty arse over here a minute?” He cast his eyes around for the half-Uruk, then paused abruptly. “What the fuck is that?”

Hrahragh looked in the direction Bragdagash was looking. It was the dark-haired little one with the all-seeing eyes, sitting with the Elf girl under a tree. “Man-brat,” he said with a shrug. “Grushak brought her.”

“You mean it’s been here since yesterday? I must be losing my sense of smell. I never even noticed it.” He laughed. “Heh. No wonder Grushak didn’t want to go on duty last night.”

“Eh?” The big Orc had just entered the clearing. His eyes, while still seeing, were decidedly bleary and he scratched his ear in a morose way. “I what?”

“Your little toy over there. Though it’s a bit small to offer much sport, isn’t it?”

Grushak looked at the child, who had picked her own head up and was staring back at him. He narrowed his eyes at her, closed them, grunted, said, “Fuck it, I’m not dealing with that one now,” lumbered over to a comfortable place beside the remains of the fire and fell asleep almost instantly.

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Maevyn lifted her head, recognizing Grushak’s familiar rumble. He and two taller Orcs were looking at her. She spared these others barely a glance, beyond noting that one was the biggest Orc she had seen yet and the other was the Orc with the piercings from yesterday. Instead, she glared at Grushak. There was a hard throbbing at the back of her skull and the rock felt hot under her burning hands. She wanted to throw it at him as hard as she could—instead she squeezed it tightly, feeling its unyielding rough surface press into her palms. The rope burns on her wrists itched resentfully.

The Orc glared back at her, his yellow eyes unhealthily pinkish with broken blood vessels. His nostrils flared. He closed his eyes, grunting and muttering something briefly, then went over and flung himself down beside the fire with a heavy thump. Within minutes loud snoring began to come from his direction. The other Orcs that had still been dozing started waking up with cross mutterings and evil glances at Grushak’s sleeping bulk.

Maevyn looked down again at her cornmeal, feeling her body relax and hating it for having been so tense in the first place. She wasn’t afraid of him. She wouldn’t be afraid of him.

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Eleluleniel’s body had also gone quite still. When the little girl had been brought to the camp the day before, the Elf’s heart had leapt up within her. She wasn’t alone! She wasn’t alone anymore! At the same time, she knew that Maevyn’s security was the opposite of assured. Grushak had brought her back for amusement, and Eleluleniel knew the usual end results of Orkish amusement. She had seen them before.

She remembered a scant few weeks before when Mushog had carried back a concussed man in the garb of a ranger. She had begged to have the man’s tending and had given him water. He’d been tall, well muscled and fair, yet with his head in her lap had seemed weak as a baby, cracked lips
moaning around the mouth of the drinking skin. He hadn’t lasted long—they came and took him away from her, and Eleluleniel had turned her face away from what they did to him by the fire, on that night in that anonymous place so many miles away. “Only fit to die,” she had heard Mushog laugh between the ranger’s endless cries of pain and the hooting of his tormenters.

And she had wept bitterly, pressing the heels of her hands into streaming eyes, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. And I, and I. Only fit to die. Only fit to die.

Only she hadn’t died. The moon had waxed and waned thrice over since her capture, and every night its cold face had seen her in the company of the Orcs, had seen Kurbag using her and the others using her as well, and she hadn’t died. And the ranger had been warm one evening and cold by the following morning, a used and mutilated corpse, and still she had been alive: Eleluleniel Undying. What had become of Middle-earth when a strong man, violated, passed away and a small Elven girl lived, and lived, and continued to live?

Truly the ways of the Rodyn were inscrutable. She had come to doubt in them. Not in their existence—rather they must be indifferent to her, or unknowing of her plight, else why had they not invoked the death that was her due? Her people died when they were taken against their wills. It was the common wisdom; it was what happened in all the tales and ballads. Her older sisters had shivered to relate and she to hear the legend of wicked Eöl and Silivien, or dark-eyed Imloseth who lamented her ravishment in flawless metrical verse before forgiving her ravisher and passing away beneath the stars.

Eleluleniel had learned the truth behind the delicate phrasing and high-flown euphemism of the stories. There was nothing romantic about rape. It was ugly: an offence upon the body and the soul. It was agonizing: the physical pain of the act, terrible as it was, secondary to the pain that festered in her heart. The pain of knowing a living being could be robbed so utterly; that her body was so weak as to avail her nothing; that she could be humiliated and reduced in such away, becoming only a receptacle, something to be used by her captors as they pleased, relieving themselves in her like a privy. And she would think of herself as she had been in that other older life, mouthing along wide-eyed to the stories, and she would hate that younger self whose avid ears trivialized the horrors to which she listened.

Yet what could she say to rebuke the younger Eleluleniel, who was so innocent, so pure, who did not know the full evils of the world, did not have the scum of her defilers gumming her inner thighs, corrupting her innards? What might that young girl say to her, the older Eleluleniel with the hollow eyes and tangled, dirty hair, the ragged clothing, the smell of Orcs and their usage clinging to her? She would only turn away in fear and disgust, and how could Eleluleniel blame her? So young—so young and unspoiled. So unready for the fate waiting her.

Maevyn with the flinty eyes…she was young too, and innocent, so far as a child who has seen the murder of her kinfolk can be considered innocent. She made Eleluleniel think of her own little sister. Veisiliel had been the first to call her Leni. She was a bare twenty years of age, not even as big as Maevyn. Veisilie’s tongue was sharp like Maevyn’s, full of questions and opinions. So often she had exasperated Eleluleniel, taking her older sister’s things without leave and hiding them to make Eleluleniel threaten and beg to get them back.

Maevyn made her think of her sister, and it disturbed her to imagine Veisiliel here with her amid such company. And yet she was so guiltily, sinfully glad of the other girl’s presence…and so fearful, knowing that the child would, in all likelihood, be taken from her and she would be alone again. Grushak would have his bit of fun—Maevyn would die from a whipping, hopefully quickly, or he would throw her against a jagged rock or cut her with his sword, or beat her to death with his heavy fist.
Eleluleniel knew that the chance of Maevyn’s survival was small. She would live only if she made herself valuable to the Orcs beyond the temporal pleasure of her torture and demise. Eleluleniel had been overcome with relief when Grushak cut Maevyn’s bonds the previous evening and allowed her to help the Elf. She was pleased again this morning when Maevyn had so willingly employed herself with making bread. She was an amenable child, then, one that would perform useful tasks. Yes, make yourself helpful, dear heart, make yourself worthwhile. Show them that you are better kept alive. She had tried hard not to think about how unlikely it was that the Orcs would want to keep two slaves in their company; tried not to remember that her own presence among them was an exception and far from the rule.

Now, as Grushak and Maevyn stared at one another, captor and captive, predator and prey, she wondered in frozen silence whether all of her hopes were about to be cut horribly short.

It was a brief exchange, barely a handful of seconds in duration. And yet it seemed as long as a lifetime to the watching Elf. When Grushak cut the staring match off, choosing to set aside his entertainment in favor of sleep, she let the air out of her lungs in a long sigh. Looking at Maevyn, she saw the tautness leave the child’s body and gladness filled her own heart. A few more hours, then, at least. From the sound of Grushak’s snoring, most likely the rest of the day.

She leaned over and tapped Maevyn’s shoulder.

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Maevyn started at the unexpected touch and looked Leni, who laughed. “I think you have vanquished your cornmeal,” she said, pointing to the supply of finely ground powder. “See? Flour! And now we are ready to shape it into dough. Look you.” She took a drinking skin and wet her palms with the liquid in it, then took up a handful of the flour and began to play with it. As she formed a thick gray-colored patty she nodded for Maevyn to do as she had done.

Maevyn took the drinking skin and wet her own palms with it, then went to work. She quickly found that making and working the crude dough was quite pleasant. It bothered her that the stuff felt a little runny, though, and when she said this Leni told her to add more flour. The dough became thick and gooey. She kept adding more flour and more of the liquid stuff until there was no more flour left, only a mass of dough. At this point Leni told her to stop because they needed to grind more cornmeal into flour.

The process went on for a while. Forming her dough the second time, Maevyn was troubled by the bits of grit she noticed in it, pointing them out to Leni. “Isn’t this bad?”

“IT cannot be helped,” said Leni. “It is the grinding that does that—some of the stone is chipped away and gets into the flour. I do it as well—it cannot be helped, this is what we have to work with. If you find an exceptionally large chip you should remove it, but you will not be able to get it all out and ought not spend too much time trying. Only remember to chew carefully when you eat the bread later so you do not damage your teeth. But you should do that anyway—I am not good at baking and my crusts are nearly as hard as stone themselves!”

Maevyn laughed. Surreptitiously she tore off a piece of the dough and popped it into her mouth, squooshing it around behind her teeth. She had done this several times already, making faces at the coarseness of the flour and the nasty flavor. Without butter and salt and other ingredients, Leni had explained, it wasn’t going to be good-tasting bread. All the same, the bitter sourness of the dough that had made her grimace before was starting to become appealing. Maevyn swallowed the lump of dough. She was hungry.

And thirsty! She hadn’t had anything to drink since yesterday, when the Orc with the helmet nearly
drowned her. She had already smelled the contents of the drinking skin and wrinkled her nose with dismay, but the bread was starting to grow on her and the stuff in there was the same as the stuff in the drinking skin, right? She smelled again, took a sip…and started coughing and choking uncontrollably.

Leni quickly stopped what she was doing and started thumping her on the back, her small fist making a thwocking sound between Maevyn’s shoulder blades. “Maevyn! Maevyn, are you all right?”

“…it burns!” gasped Maevyn, holding out the drinking skin. “It burns, Leni!” And so it did—burned her mouth, burned her throat, burned her chest.

“You drank some, didn’t you? Poor dear, you should have asked me for water—I have some if you would like.”

Maevyn was spitting, trying to get the vile taste out of her mouth. “GAH!! I’m gonna die!” Surely she was going to burn up from the inside out. What a horrid way to go, her guts eaten up with acid! And she hadn’t even had her vengeance yet! Stupid Grushak!

“What goes on?” An Orc came over, drawn by Maevyn’s yelps of astonished agony.

Leni responded distractedly, “She drank some of your beer. She is not used to it.”

The Orc looked bemusedly at the sputtering child and the Elf girl pummeling her. He dropped into a squat, the loose ends of his knotted loincloth swinging between his muscular thighs, and stared at Maevyn.

She quieted gradually as the sensation in her mouth and throat died away to a distant tingle. The awful burning in her chest of a few seconds before became the most pleasant, soothing feeling: a warm melting glow in her belly that rapidly spread through her whole body in a golden nimbus of well being. As she relaxed she became aware of her surroundings again…and of the tall heavily pierced Orc that crouched directly in front of her, looking nearly eye-level into her face.

He studied her briefly, then flashed a surprising grin. It certainly couldn’t be described as a friendly grin, exposing as it did a pair of yellow tusks curving upwards as long as her middle fingers, but there wasn’t the tacit threat that seemed to go with Grushak’s smile. “Funny little snaga,” he remarked. “Too strong for you, huh?” He laughed, stood again and walked away.

“What’s that supposed to mean, ‘snaga’?” muttered Maevyn with a couple residual coughs.

The danger over, Leni patted her shoulder gently. “‘Snaga’ is their word for ‘slave.’”

“Slave?!” Maevyn practically squealed. She didn’t know which made her more indignant—what the tall Orc had called her or the weird, inexplicable smile on Leni’s face.

Chapter End Notes

Silivien and Imloseth were ganked from dreamingfifi’s real Elvish list of Female Exilic-Sindarin Names. I’m sure the Elves had legends that didn’t make it into Tolkien’s writings, and it seems plausible that these could include additional legends about canonical figures like Eöl. Whether he actually was a sexual predator or just an
especially notorious recluse, nobody seems to have liked him very much.
Hrahragh sat a little distance from the fire, one of his knives lying on his knee. Picking it up, he looked at its stark cutting edge outlined against the brown hide of his hand. It was a throwing knife, not intended for use as a deflective weapon, but there were some little niches from when one of the men yesterday had closed with him during the fighting. Hrahragh removed the black whetstone that hung on the hempen cord around his neck and began the process of smoothing out the burrs, sharpening the edge keen.

Over on the other side of camp, Bragdagash was doing the same with his broadsword. It was nearing noon, and the sun was warm and bright, rays slanting through the pine boughs overhead. Grushak, who was lying by the fire, stirred and at length rose sullenly. Still half-asleep, eyes closed against the light, the large Orc sought out thicker shade in which to take his rest. The smaller Orcs, who were awake but similarly unenthusiastic about the daylight, were already there.

Hrahragh’s broad mouth quirked. He liked the sun and its heat on his bare shoulders and back. He liked the scrape of the whetstone, the sight of the sharpening edge under it. He liked laying the tip of his finger against the edge and watching the thin bloodline form, liked putting his finger in his mouth and sucking briefly, idly.

High-pitched but quiet voices: Kurbag’s Elf girl and the man-child. With Grushak gone they were beside the fire now, the Elf heaping the embers and coaxing them with kindling. It caught slowly—she fanned it with her hand and the little red flames began to lick more eagerly. Keeping an ear on the two girls’ activities, Hrahragh sharpened his knife.

“--.--.--

“It should be hot enough now. I will put the dough in. Here, sit you down a spell while we let it bake.”

Maevyn sat her rear down, watching Leni slide the flat stone with the dough on it under the makeshift oven. She cocked her head at her friend’s stilted syntax, which she had been wondering about for a while now. “Do all Elves talk funny or is it just you?”

“Pardon?”

Maevyn was truly curious, but she suddenly realized the comment had probably sounded rude. She could just imagine Mama cuffing her for it. “I’m sorry.”

The Elf girl laughed. “No, I think I know what you mean. Westron is not my first language. That would be Sindarin.”

“Is that Elf-talk?”

“Of a sort, yes.”

“Like when you met me. You called me a melon.”

Leni laughed. “You have a good memory. I called you ‘mellon-nin.’ That is Sindarin for ‘my friend.’” She smiled, then looked around in a regretful way. “It is good to speak Sindarin, even to someone who does not understand it. But I ought not to do it too often: they—these Yrch, they do not like it.”
“And that’s Elf for ‘Orc,’” said Maevyn, earning a nod of affirmation. “What’s Orc for ‘Orc’?” she asked. She had decided it would be a good idea to find out as many Orc words as possible.

“Uruk.”

“Ur-uk. What are some other Orc words?”

“Ah…I do not know many,” said Leni.

“What ones do you know, then?”

The Elf girl smiled, but it was a somewhat stiff smile. “I have learned some of their tongue in the time I have been among them, Maevyn, but I do not choose to speak it.”

“But I—”

“Maevyn. I said no.”

Maevyn wanted to persist. She didn’t like it that the Elf girl was holding out on her. She didn’t like being among these big creatures whose speech amongst themselves she didn’t understand and yet who could say things that were important for her to know. A sense of their language might help her to protect herself. She wanted to say this to Leni but she didn’t quite know how and of course there were also Orcs around them right now and they had ears. And then too the expression on Leni’s face didn’t brook much argument.

Though normally that wouldn’t have stopped Maevyn. She was accustomed to back-talking her elders and betters and had often smarted for it. She didn’t mind a cuffed ear or a slapped face, but somehow she didn’t want to make Leni upset, and the set to the Elf’s mouth told her that upset was just what Leni would become if Maevyn kept up this line of questioning.

It was strange: Maevyn felt an odd reticence around Leni that she had never felt around anyone before. It was her nature to be talkative and lively—rambunctious, truth be told. Maevyn was already subdued by her experience of the past twenty-four hours, but Leni’s nature curbed her normal behavior still further. The older girl had an advantage—for one thing, she was older, and she seemed to have a certain tired confidence among the Orcs that Maevyn didn’t have in the slightest. Then too she was an Elf, and Maevyn had never met one before in her life.

Leni’s voice was so gentle and musical, and she was so very pretty. Maevyn had never seen anybody as beautiful as Leni before. The slender points of her ears were so different, but nice—much nicer than regular boring rounded ears, Maevyn decided—and her skin was so very fair. Her hair was mussed and unwashed by daylight, but that didn’t matter to Maevyn, only how lovely and pale the long tresses were. And her eyes were so pretty and so sad…

Maevyn lowered her gaze. She wanted to apologize, but two apologies in as many minutes—no, she wouldn’t do that! She would remain silent. If Leni didn’t want to talk, that was fine. She set her jaw and didn’t look up.

“Maevyn…are you sulking?”

Shocked eyes darting up: “No!” Maevyn didn’t like Leni talking to her like that, like she was some sort of child. Seeking to change the mood, she said, “Can you at least tell me their names then? You said you would last night. Then I can know which is which.”

Well, maybe talking about the Orcs at all wasn’t the best way to change the mood, but Leni nodded. “All right. Well. You know Grushak already, yes?”
Maevyn got a sick feeling in her stomach at the sound of the big Orc’s name. She nodded heavily and pointed to where he had gone to sleep under a tree. Some other Orcs were sitting nearby, playing at dice. She shifted her finger to indicate a little one that she hadn’t seen before. “Who’s that?”

“That is Grymawk. He is not so bad. He has never been cruel to me. He is an archer.”

“He’s littler then the others,” said Maevyn. In fact, he might even be an inch or so shorter than her! It amazed her, all the different shapes and sizes the Orcs came in. She appraised the small Orc quickly. I could fight him, she thought to herself. And I could knock him down too. It would be bad if I was far away, because he could hit me with an arrow. But I could win if I fought hand to hand with him. “The one next to him?”

Leni provided each of their names in turn and Maevyn repeated them after her: Pryszrim, Shrah’rar, Rukshash. It was comforting for Maevyn to have names for them, some way to identify them. Like knowing what to call them told her something about them. She carefully stored away any information that Leni gave her. Rukshash had fought in the Great War. Pryszrim, the one who liked bread, wasn’t very smart. Shrah’rar ignored anything that wasn’t furry, whatever that meant. Mushog, whom she had seen, was very loud and a braggart. Bragdagash was the leader because he was the biggest Orc of all.

Maevyn looked around and saw the tall Orc who had spoken to her before and called her a slave. “What about that big one over there—the one with the knives—what’s his name?”

Leni opened her mouth to speak, but—

“Hrahragh,” said the Orc, examining his blade. He didn’t even look at them.

Maevyn was startled to realize that he had heard her. He was far away from them, and they had been speaking very softly. Not sure of quite how to respond, she fell back instinctively on a long honored tactic in her arsenal for whenever she didn’t know what to do. She stuck her tongue out.

“Maevyn, stop that!” hissed Leni.

He started it, Maevyn nearly responded, but since of course he hadn’t started anything, she didn’t. Holding her hands in her lap and twisting the hem of her skirt, she decided simply not to speak at all. Leni tried after a few minutes to make idle conversation but Maevyn wouldn’t pay any attention to her.

Instead she looked around at the Orcs and painstakingly named and renamed them in her head, going from one to the next until she was sure that she had all of them correctly. Looking at them all, she realized there was something different about three of them: Hrahragh, Bragdagash and Mushog. They just didn’t look quite like the others. They were bigger for one thing, but it was more than that: it was in their faces and the way their bodies were. They wore their hair long too. But Hrahragh wore his longest, and it was like the tangled black tail of a badly groomed pony.

Maevyn’s upper lip curled a little. Hrahragh. That’s a stupid name. Like the noise you make when your throat itches. Somehow, though, she couldn’t stop watching him.

Well, not him so much as his knives. Rather than slipping them away when he finished sharpening them, he kept two out, one in either hand, hefting them thoughtfully. Maevyn was startled by what he did next. Suddenly he began…twirling them in his fingers. The blades were blackish rather than bright and shining, but they made dazzling dark wheels as he spun them. He spiraled them around his head in devastating proximity—Maevyn didn’t know how it was he avoided cutting himself.
Then he tossed one in the air abruptly and she gasped aloud as it whirled downwards…and he caught it easily, harmlessly, the sharp point between thumb and forefinger.

He cast a glance in her direction and she quickly looked away, her face hot, telling herself that she was just planning for the ideal moment to steal one. Then she could use it on Grushak. Grushak, who had taken Demmi’s knife from her. She remembered the hard tight feeling of his arm across her arms and chest as he threatened her with it: again she felt its sharp edge against her throat and her whole body was hot and cold with the memory. She felt the horrific events of yesterday trying to suck her under, and anger was the lifeline she clung to.

*I’ll get it back,* she swore to herself. *I’ll get him back, and he will bleed.*
Elimination

The half-Uruk took the rough terrain, grumbling to himself as he did. From time to time his brisk pace and the treacherous gravel underfoot combined to spill him painfully on his hands and knees, but his tough frame was able to take the punishment. Bird twitter filled the air, and rays of sunlight cut through the green boughs overhead. Motes of dust danced in their columnar pathways, merrily oblivious to the large Orc’s irritation.

Kurbag was unusual among Orcs of both breeds in one respect—he had a strong capacity for aesthetic appreciation. For example, he recognized that the glimmering late afternoon, with its color schematics of green and gold, was beautiful. Ordinarily, he would even have found it pleasant to look upon. However, at the moment he didn’t really care about admiring it. There were other things that he would much prefer to be doing with his time, and he could think of one in particular that didn’t involve tree gazing. Still, though flitting images of blue eyes and smooth pale limbs might beg to ply their dreamy influence, he kept his attention on the task at hand, casting a glance up through the verdant greenery overhead whenever there chanced to be a break in cover.

A squirrel began chattering somewhere. Kurbag gritted his teeth. He had only just left behind another squirrel that had followed him for some distance, scolding this tall intruder for daring trespass on its woodsy domain. Kurbag wondered if this wasn’t the same squirrel. If it was, the little bastard had been following him for nearly half a mile now.

Abruptly, the half-Uruk stooped and picked up a large rock, tossing it up and down in his hand. “Hel-lo-oh…Where are you, little friend?” he called softly, his thin lips widening in a sinister smile. “Come out, come out, wherever you are…”

The words were greeted by silence. However, it was not the silence typically greeting such an interruption—rather, it was the deafening silence of everything within hearing distance holding its breath. It was silence of a kind that Kurbag had learned to recognize and treat as the ominous sign it was. He quickly dropped to his belly—

—and not only saw but felt the tremendous shadow pass over him. Looking up, he had a bare split second to register dark wingtips before the patch of blue was once again placidly vacant.

A good twenty feet overhead, and no evidence it had noticed him. Nonetheless, his brain continued hammering out panicked obscenities. Kurbag exhaled slowly. Forcing himself to rise, he knocked pine needles from his arms and continued walking.

The next time the big shadow passed he was watching. He also saw what it left in its wake. Actually, he was lucky he wasn’t hit by it, as a bucket’s worth of guano spattered the forest floor for the length of several yards ahead of him.

Kurbag’s comment was accurate, if not particularly original.

“…shit.”

“Aw, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fuck that, y’little pervert, I saw you slip it behind yer back!”

“I’d like to see you prove it, old One-Ear.”
“Don’ think I’ll take that shit off’ve you! Hand it over or I’ll—”

Grushak hovered grudgingly at the edges of wakefulness. With his keen senses of hearing and smell, he could come to an instant alert in the event of danger or threat. Without immediate confrontation, though, he was reluctant to leave off his sluggardly dozing.

Then someone fell against him heavily, and that changed.

“Oi!” Grushak bellowed, surging to his feet, “gerroff, you!”

Shrah’rar yelped as he tumbled away. Grushak towered over him, teeth bared angrily. “I didn’t mean to, he pushed me!” the small Orc exclaimed. His eyes widened and he ducked, narrowly avoiding Grushak’s fist.

The swipe had been a cursory one. Grushak swung around to see the target of Shrah’rar’s accusation. Rukshash swayed a little on his feet, betraying his intoxication, his good eye a slit of rage. “Out’ve my way, Grushak,” he said in a slurred snarl. “He’s b’n cheatin’ me this entire game, and if he won’ give it to me in silver I’ll take it out’ve his hide. You tell ‘im, Pryszrim…you tell ’im what the little goiter owes me.”

“Um, well, I, uh…”

“Feh! You’re useless,” Rukshash dismissed the stammering Pryszrim with disgust. “I ain’ lived this long to put up with yer crap, you miserable goatsuck,” he growled, turning on Shrah’rar in a threatening manner.

Shrah’rar darted behind Grushak. The larger Orc grunted and kicked him away but put up a hand to forestall Rukshash. Though ugly of temper as any of them, he had long realized that sometimes conciliation was in the best interest of the band. “Hold, friend. Why break a sweat over it? He’s not worth the effort.”

Shrah’rar heaved a shameless sigh of relief.

Grushak smirked. “Easier to wait and slit his throat while he’s sleeping.”

“Yes, easier to—Hah! Hah! Hah! Oh, you are so funny, Grushak! Yes, very funny!” Shrah’rar laughed weakly.

Rukshash’s upper lip was still curled, and Grushak wondered if he would have to turn Shrah’rar upside down and shake loose any items on his person to satisfy the older Orc. The prospect wasn’t uninviting. Fortunately, or not so fortunately, Rukshash finally muttered something incomprehensible and sat down again, taking up his drinking skin again and swigging sullenly.

Blows avoided for the moment, Grushak yawned and stretched. He squinted up through the branches of the tree they were under, noting the late afternoon hour. Unable to sleep any longer, he glanceded at the overturned dice board and dismissed it, not being of a mood for abstraction. Scratching one shoulder, he happened to notice Squeaker’s companion beside the fire. The Man-brat’s eyes were fixed on him. Grushak pretended to ignore her, sauntering the circumference of trees and looking up at the sky as though marking the progression of the sun’s slow circuit overhead. He could feel her stare boring into his back.

Yes, watch me, little rabbit. Let’s draw this out, shall we? He touched the scratch on the back of his hand and smiled grimly.
“He’s awake,” muttered Maevyn.

“Maevyn…”

Maevyn clearly wasn’t listening. She crouched, hunched over, at the Elf girl’s side, watching the big Orc talking with the others. Strands of dark hair fell over her eyes, but she seemed unaware of them.

“Do not attract his attention,” said Eleluleniel quietly.

Maevyn made an odd sound in the back of her throat. Fresh scabbing cracked as she rubbed the rawness of her wrists against her knees. She watched Grushak as he resolved the other Orcs’ quarrel and crossed to the other side of camp.

The Elf sighed. “The bread is finished,” she said, resigned to the fact that Maevyn was paying her no heed. So long as the girl didn’t try anything impulsive, she supposed there was nothing more she could do. Eleluleniel had quickly discovered that her new friend had a stubborn streak. Too many cautions, too many imperatives and Maevyn might do something foolish out of pure childish rebellion. *These Men, thought Eleluleniel despairingly. It is as Father said, they have the lives of moths—already brief, fluttering ever nigh the flickering flame.*

The sound of stirring in the underbrush many yards behind broke into her reverie. She cocked her head briefly to decipher what she was hearing, then went on with drawing the little loaves out of the chamber of heated stones. Kurbag’s heavy tread was readily recognizable to her. Maevyn, with her lesser hearing, did not hear the half-Uruk’s approach until he was closer. Breaking her fixed gaze at Grushak, she looked over her shoulder. Her eyes widened. Eleluleniel continued with the task at hand. Mentally she prepared herself for Kurbag to stop, but he passed them by, heading straight for where Bragdagash was sitting, leaning in to speak with him.

Well, of course. He would want to make his report before anything else. She relaxed a little.

“Who’s that?” asked Maevyn, sidling nearer her. “I saw him last night.”

“That is Kurbag. Bragdagash sent him on an errand of some sort earlier. He must have just returned.”

Maevyn studied the large Orc. He was tall, with dark gray skin that almost verged on bluish—a flint-colored complexion. He wore his black hair in a long ponytail like Hraghragh’s but, unlike Hraghragh, was fully clad in ashen gray and black leathers, with plates of rusty metal crudely appended here and there in a half-hearted attempt at armor. Kurbag was gesturing to an object of some sort that he held in his hand, which Bragdagash took from him in a somewhat delicate manner and peered at with obvious satisfaction. He looked up, nodding and saying something in a pleased rumble. Kurbag, looking smug, scratched the side of his neck as he turned and headed over to join Grushak.

“I wonder what that was about,” said Maevyn.

“I think he was doing some scouting on Bragdagash’s orders,” said Eleluleniel. “But where and to what purpose I do not know.”

“Kurbag. You didn’t mention his name earlier, with the others.” Maevyn cocked her head. “He’s the one you talked about yesterday. You said he’s the one who wanted to keep you.”

“Oh. Yes.” Eleluleniel went very quiet. “I would rather not speak of that right now, Maevyn.” Avoiding Maevyn’s eye, she proffered a little loaf of the bread. “Here. Eat this.”
The girl took the little loaf, looking at Eleluleniel curiously. The ploy with the bread was an obvious one but, probably remembering how the Elf had snapped at her before when she asked too many questions, Maevyn did not try to ask any now. As she was about to bite into the bread, though, a clawed hand snatched it out of hers.

“Bread!” Pryszrim crowed, and stuffed it into his mouth. His left cheek bulged obnoxiously as his eyes glazed over in evident bliss. Maevyn gave him a surprised and resentful look. The Orc ignored it, saying in a stuffy voice through his mouthful, “Garrummore, Squeaker?” Eleluleniel sighed and offered him four of the loaves, which he snatched in characteristically thankless Orkish fashion, making off for the shelter of the trees.

“I hate him,” muttered Maevyn.

Eleluleniel was surprised. Pryszrim was no prize, and she didn’t expect Maevyn to like any of the Orcs, but he wasn’t the worst of the lot by any means.

Maevyn, without being asked, expanded: “He practically drowned me yesterday.” Suddenly she squirmed, glancing around uncomfortably. “Leni,” she whispered, “I can’t hold it anymore.”

“What?”

“I have to pee.”

The Elf blinked. “Oh.” Understanding Maevyn’s dilemma—and amazed that she had managed to abstain for so long! She had realized the girl was strongwilled, but this was some extraordinary proof—Eleluleniel looked in the direction of the Orcs. For herself, she had been in their company long enough that old dismay and embarrassment had long given way to numbed necessity. Eventually Maevyn would have to reach that point on her own, but far be it from the older girl to force her early. She turned and inclined her head in the direction of the pine trees beyond their bedding of the night before. “I will take you to those trees over there. They will not bother you if they see me go with you.” They know I will not let you do anything foolish.

Maevyn gave her a grateful look. She got rather awkwardly to her feet, and Eleluleniel, likewise rising, was irritated with herself that she hadn’t asked Maevyn whether she had needed to go before. Many years of experience as an older sister should have made that second nature. Guilty half-memories of similar occasions with her little sister, when Veisiliel had been even littler than Maevyn, prompted her to reach for the younger girl’s hand to lead her.

Maevyn pulled away, annoyed. “What are you doing that for? I’m not a child!”

Eleluleniel, unable to repress a smile at this, turned her face away so that Maevyn wouldn’t see. “Come you,” she said, walking to the edge of the pines, far enough from where they were sleeping that there would be no problem. “I will stand guard.”

“As long as you don’t watch,” Maevyn grumbled, pushing into the deciduous skirts of piney green tree boughs.

Still smiling, Eleluleniel turned her back on Maevyn…and saw Nazluk watching her from across camp. Her smile faded, and she looked back at him timidly for a few brief seconds before dropping her gaze. Studying the needle-strewn forest floor, she wondered what it was that he was thinking.

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Nazluk, as it so happened, was irritated. He snorted. “Did you see that?”
“See what?”

“Bloody Elf accompanying Grushak’s bint.” His upper lip curled unpleasantly.

Grymawk looked at where Squeaker was standing near the trees, where the little tark brat was doing her business. He looked back at Nazluk and shrugged. “So?”

Nazluk rolled his eyes. Sometimes he thought he was surrounded by fools. Didn’t anyone else recognize the danger represented by the Elven bitch? The very fact that they tolerated her among them showed how far they had been compromised. She could hold them back on their push North while Kurbag made his little considerations for her. Seeing that she had water, weak Elves being quicker to thirst than proper Orcs. Wasting his time and attentions on her. Nazluk did not understand the half-Uruk’s preoccupation with her. Was it a question of novelty? She had been a novelty of sorts, yes, but three months was a long time for any novelty. Surely she would be of better use eaten than holding them back.

The fact that the Elf had been of little tangible inconvenience to them thus far was no matter to Nazluk. It was the principle of the thing. And her merest action, her slightest movement, the movement of her eyelids as she blinked, the flickering pulse of her throat with her breathing—these aggravated him to no end. That his fixation on the Elf was every bit as obsessive as he accused Kurbag of being did not trouble Nazluk. Orcs are not known for temperance. Where Nazluk loathed, he loathed immoderately.

Certain factors, however, constrained the full expression of his resentment, and so he cast for another outlet for his frustrations. A roar of laughter caught his attention. He cast his baleful stare in the direction of Grushak and Kurbag, narrowing his eyes. Grushak was the culprit, still guffawing loudly, while Kurbag smirked in evident amusement of his own. Nazluk glared, resentful of their good humor.

It was Shrah’rar, though, who actually asked out loud what Nazluk was silently wondering. “Oi, you big fuckers. What the fuck are you laughing about?

Kurbag grinned at him. “Oi yourself, little fucker. We’re laughing because your buddy Grymawk is fucked!”

“Eh?” Grymawk, interrupted twice in as many minutes, looked up from his fletching again. “How do I come into this?”

“I’ve already spoken to Braggy. Ask him, why don’t you?” The half-Uruk chuckled. “My suggestion to you is, eat up tonight, ’cause you’re not gonna be wanting any breakfast on the morrow!”

Grymawk looked pained. “No! It involves climbing, doesn’t it? I hate climbing!”

“And just what has our favorite half-Uruk been up to, anyway?” Nazluk queried dryly.

“Why, as it so happens, I sent him on a little expedition,” Bragdagash said, joining in. “You were right, Grymawk. Wing folk in the mountains. Isn’t that so, Kurbag?” He held up a curiously white and glistening rock, turning it this way and that. “Eagle scat. Freshly shat, too.” Suddenly, without warning, he tossed the rock in Grymawk’s direction. “Catch!”

Grymawk, acting reflexively, dropped the bolt he was holding to catch the rock. There was a moist chunk sound as it made contact with his hands. He swore and dropped the rock, breaking the quarrel in the process, while the others laughed.
“There now,” said Bragdagash, teeth bared in a grin. “You’ve got the best nose for this sort of thing, Tracker. Tell us what you think, eh?”

Irritated at the loss of a good quarrel and wrinkling his nose, Grymawk sniffed the revolting stuff on his hands distastefully. He blinked and examined it with new interest. Hesitantly he licked his lips, then flicked out his tongue to sample briefly. Contrary to revulsion or even further merriment at this action, the laughter died down as the others waited in semi-seriousness on his judgment. Even Hraghragh, who had been holding back to enjoy the last of the sun before its setting, drew near with curiosity. Grymawk sucked in his cheeks, turning his eyes upward in thought. Then he smiled slowly. “Female. Just brooded…”

“Eggs,” breathed Pryszrim unnecessarily.

“Yeah. That’s right,” said Bragdagash, looking around his band of Orcs and Uruk-hai with lazy satisfaction. “And what do you suppose fertile eagles’ eggs are fetching up North, my lads?”

“Oh aye, we’ll be drownin’ in tokens,” said old Rukshash sourly from his beer skin. “But who’s gonna be shimmyin’ his sorry ass up to get them, I’m wonderin’?”

Grymawk’s face fell as the others eyed him. “Oh no.”

“Oh yes!” Kurbag clapped him on the back, nearly knocking the small Orc over. “Don’t worry there, Grymawk, we’ll watch your back.”

“Sure. You’ll have first dibs on the liver as well,” said Bragdagash. “That’ll cure what ails you. They say an eagle’s vigor lies not in his heart but in his liver.”

“Grymawk, eagle-mighty!”

“Foe to the feather folk!”

“Braver of the high sharp rocky places!”

The mocking cries were going up among all of the bigger Orcs, while Grymawk himself stood, a diminutive and rather forlorn figure in their midst. “I’m so honored,” he muttered sardonically, looking as though he was going to be sick.
It was growing dark when Leni arose and touched Maevyn’s elbow, signifying for her to rise as well. "What are we doing?" asked Maevyn dubiously as she got to her feet. The light was dim, forcing her to squint, but something was off about the Elf girl’s manner. Leni seemed anxious.

Her voice, on the other hand, was calm in its characteristic softness. "We need to get wood for the fire." Gently inviting: “Come. You can help me look."

"Are we looking for green wood, or brown?” That was always the first thing Maevyn always asked Mama whenever Mama sent her to gather sticks at the periphery of the woods.

"Whatever you see that lies loose." Brown, then. Dry dead wood to catch quick and burn fast. There was a part of a large broken branch nearby. Maevyn started towards it, but Leni caught her arm. "No no, smaller pieces. That is too big. You will hurt yourself pulling it."

"I'm strong enough!" said Maevyn in an aggrieved voice. "It's not that big!"

"Nonetheless, smaller pieces are easier to feed the fire." Leni bent and picked up a paltry stick. "Such as this one."

Maevyn stared at the little twig. She wondered, not for the first time, if Leni wasn't a bit funny in the head. "But we'll be at it forever if we just pick up itty-bitty ones like that—"

Leni turned, put her hands on Maevyn's shoulders and leaned in towards her. Her blue eyes looked into Maevyn's brown ones intently. "Maevyn. Please. Do as I say."

Maevyn sighed. Her first response to this sort of command from an elder was always an urge to talk back or whine. But Leni had this strange power over her. She only wanted to please the older girl. Instinctive obedience warred with rebellious habit. "All right, we'll do it your way," she said sullenly.

Then Leni smiled at her, a sudden, relieved, approving smile that made Maevyn's heart jump up inside of her and made her forget her annoyance. As she followed the Elf girl, she thought to herself with a sense of wonder, *I don't care if she has me picking up twigs all night, if she'd smile at me like that again…*

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*He was looking at her.*

Eleluleniel had seen Grushak’s increasing glances in their direction, the predatory glint in his eye as he watched Maevyn. Grushak was the one who had brought Maevyn back from the raid—she was his captive by Orkish code, his to treat as he wished. And Grushak was not Kurbag; not one to keep a prisoner long to enjoy at further leisure.

She had to buy time. For all that she knew it was in vain, she had to buy time. So long as Maevyn was busy and was near her, she could keep an eye both on the little girl and the Orc.

They had been picking up sticks for several minutes when she heard a sigh—small and faint as a
feather falling on soft grass, and yet clearly audible to Eleluleniel's keen Elven ears. She spared a glance for Maevyn and was immediately struck by the set look to the girl's mouth, the telltale rapid blinking of her eyes. "Maevyn?" Maevyn mumbled something. "Pardon?" Eleluleniel asked. "What did you say?"

"I do this with my little brother—did this with my brother…"

"Ah." She pursed her lips, feeling a sympathetic pang in her chest. Maevyn had lost a great deal. Eleluleniel missed her own family. Sometimes she missed them so hard, her whole body ached with the pain of missing them. And yet, she knew they were alive—knew that they were well, and that they were grieving her, and that they were living their lives without her. It hurt her, hurt her badly, but it comforted her as well. So long as she knew that, she could feel that they were not lost to her, but were only far away. She could not begin to imagine how she would feel if she did not have that illusion to console herself with.

But Maevyn had nothing.

"What was your brother's name?" she asked gently.

"Demmi." Maevyn's head was turned away suspiciously, and Eleluleniel knew that she was barely holding back tears.

"Demmi." Suddenly the older girl smiled. "Like Demaerion."

Maevyn swallowed a little, then looked at her. "What?"

Eleluleniel tilted her head inquisitively. "You do not know of Demaerion?"

"Who's he?"

"Demaerion who had to choose. You have not heard the tales?" she asked, honestly somewhat astonished. But then, Maevyn wasn't Elven. Perhaps that explained it.

"N-no. Should I have?" Maevyn, distracted, looked at her with eyes half bright with unshed tears, and half with curiosity.

"Ah." Eleluleniel laughed, a soft laugh of surprised delight. "We shall have to rectify this…But oh—you do not understand Sindarin. Wait a moment, let me consider how I may best render this. Aear gelair, luin, a veleg sui venel…" She stood still for a moment, deep in thought. And after a time she lifted her face to the starlight beyond the tops of the pine trees and began to sing in a sweet clear voice:

"Demaerion came to the bright blue sea,
   Broad as the sky and twice as free,
And he smiled on the waves and the white seabirds
   And none of his thoughts could be put to words
   As he hearkened the call of the sea."

As she sang she was suddenly struck by an unexpected memory of a sunlit day…sitting under a poplar out in the green grass, her fingers busy with a bit of embroidery…one of her sisters plucking out a tune on her lute, the tune to this very song, and Eleluleniel raising her voice in a spontaneous duet. It seemed to her that she could almost hear the instrument’s plucked notes accompany her singing.

"Yet o’er and away her singing came
Sweet as the nightingale, sad as the same,
And he sighed, for the sand was as gold as her hair—
Her voice and the sea, they were both so fair,
The sea and his Elven dame.

“And Demaerion sighed, for to heed the call
Of the sea meant to never return at all,
Ne’er to kiss her lips, nay, to see her face;
To stay meant losing the sea’s proffered grace
As the ship sailed beyond recall.

“And away to the east sang his lady fair,
And the sea bid him westerly journey there,
And he sighed, and he chose…
He rode forth,
Turning away from the sea and his love
For the north.”

As she drew to a close she held the final note for a time, and it was as if she could hear the last soft touches of the lute drifting in the darkness after. Her lips curved in a wistful smile.

Maevyn stared, taken aback by the unexpected ending. “North?”

“Yes.”

“But what about the Elf lady? What about the boat?”

Eleluleniel giggled. “That is why he is called Demaerion Half-Ways. He never takes the obvious choice.”

“So it’s a joke?”

Eleluleniel shrugged. “Do you know, most would say it was? And yet I have always felt there is wisdom in it of sorts, for where most would see only two choices, or one, Demaerion sees three, seven or more. He sees the world in many shades. Nevertheless, he is something of a scoundrel.” She leaned towards Maevyn confidingly. “When I was little I used to say that I wanted to marry Demaerion. He seemed so full of fun.”

Maevyn made an odd face. “Uhhh…I don’t think I get Elf jokes. I mean, I liked it fine. But it sounded like a sad song to me.”

“Well, in truth, it is not one of the happier ones,” agreed Eleluleniel. “There are others, though.” Since Maevyn seemed interested at that, she tried to think of a good one. There was the one where Demaerion eschewed both the stately Elven beauty and the humble mortal maiden in favor of the handsome stable boy…but she remembered well enough the job her older sisters had of explaining that one to her, and she blushed at the prospect of doing the same for Maevyn. Oh, verily Demaerion was a scoundrel. As she searched for something amusing but appropriate, she murmured unconsciously,

“*Hîr vuîn, mas ledhil, Demaerion görînui,*
*A man i theled i ledhil dem?*
*O vas telîr hent fâen lîn*
*A man cenîr?—*”
She stopped short abruptly. A piece of night had detached itself from the outlying shadow, and she recognized Kurbag’s silhouette.

“That’s pretty,” said Maevyn. “What does it mean?”

“Whither rides Demaerion…” Eleluleniel heard herself saying distantly.

Maevyn gave a stifled gasp as the half-Uruk loomed up out of the dark. He spared a half-curious but dismissive glance for the little girl, directing his words to Eleluleniel: “What was that you were singing?” She didn’t speak, and he scratched his ear as he contemplated her. “Cut it out, Squeaker,” he said at length, cryptically.

She looked down at her armful of twigs. “I was not thinking.”

“Ah. Then think next time.” He examined her a time longer; then his eyes shifted to the sticks she was carrying. “Hey, those are kind of small, aren’t they? You’re gonna be at it all night, picking up sticks that small.”

A shifting sound at her left elbow. Eleluleniel saw Maevyn out of the corner of her eye, looking fidgety and uncertain in the Orc’s continued presence. “Why have you stopped, dear heart? Best not to fall behind now,” said the Elf, trying to keep her tone a casual murmur.

“My arms are full,” Maevyn mumbled. “I got to go get rid of these ones.” She turned and started back the way they had come.

Eleluleniel, alarmed, made a movement to follow her when Kurbag stepped, unaware of what she was about, into her path. “You would not believe the day I have had,” he began with a faint groan, and Eleluleniel realized, with despair, that she was stuck.

Maevyn, for her part, was feeling very odd about what she had just left behind her. The tall dark Orc gave her a funny feeling, not funny “ha-ha” but the other way, like where you know your parents have been talking about something important but they fall quiet just as you come in. The same funny feeling Leni gave her whenever Kurbag was near, the feeling she’d given Maevyn when Maevyn had mentioned his name and Leni had abruptly changed the subject. Funny-strange, with a touch of the shivers, like poking around a rock with a snake under it.

And usually Maevyn would pick up the rock, because it was always just so tempting to have a peek, just one little peek. But she didn’t think she was going to like what was under this rock. Not one bit.

She bit her lip. She didn’t like to leave Leni alone with him. She liked Leni. And, while Maevyn was young and did not entirely understand all of her feelings, unconsciously she detected a strange familiarity between the Orc and the Elf, and she resented it. With her family dead, this new friend of a bare twenty-four hours was the only one she had. She didn’t want anyone else having any part of Leni, much less Kurbag. Much less an Orc.

Preoccupied as she was, she wasn’t really paying any attention to what was in front of her. And so when, in the dimness, she walked abruptly into a wall of muscle and sinew, it was a big shock.

Grushak had evidently seen her coming and had evidently been waiting. “Watch where you’re going, scum.”

Thick fingers twisted in Maevyn’s hair and she shrieked in unexpected pain, dropping her armful of sticks.
Grushak made no move to pass her. Looking down at her, he leered menacingly. “Pick those up.”

Though he spoke in a low growl, she could sense the high eagerness crackling behind the words, as if he were hoping for her to defy him. It made Maevyn think inadvertently, painfully, of the dares her little brother would make her, the taunting games he would play.

_Try and make me, Maevyn. Want to bet, Maevyn?_

And as with Demmi, it made Maevyn wish to respond with nothing so much as a good slap. Since that would be suicide in this case, she gritted her teeth and bent down to pick the sticks up.

Grushak continued to tower over her until she rose once more with her armful. “You’re still in my way, _tark._”

Maevyn, not sure of which way he intended to go, took a step to her right. The Orc stepped with her. Biting her lip, she took a step to her left and again he stepped in the same direction. She looked up at him in angry bewilderment.

Grushak, for his part, was decidedly amused. He had waited long enough for his entertainment. Idly he scratched his neck, looking down at her. “This is beginning to grow wearisome,” he remarked.

But it wasn’t, not a bit of it. It was just getting started.

Chapter End Notes

_Aear gelair, luın, a veleg sui venel..._ Literally, "Sea, bright, blue, and great as heaven..." And then she translates the poem, and it actually sounds poem-like.

_Hîr vuin, mas ledhil, Demaerion gónuí/ _Dear lord, whither go you, valiant Demaerion
A man i theled i ledhil dem?! And what is the purpose that you go sad?
O vas telir hent faen lîn/ From whence do they hail, your radiant eyes,
A man cenir?—/ And what do they see?—_

This translation benefited, years after the fact, from the helpful suggestions of dreamingfifi (_Merin Essi ar Quenteli_).

Demaerion's name, however, is nobody's fault but my own. It riffs on a phonetic connection with Demmi and, by extension, the English prefix _demi_- or "half." I have never tried to find out whether Demaerion might actually mean anything in Tolkien's various conlangs. I rather doubt it.
“You made bread today. I can smell it on you. *Gaakh hosh-ishi bûb-ob fauthulûk.*” The gravelly Orkish was strangely teasing. “Consign it to Pryszrim’s belly, the lot of it.”

“I am glad when I am able to make bread,” said Eleluleniel softly as she picked up a particularly puny stick.

Kurbag caught her wrist and removed the stick, dropping it with a dismissive gesture. Taking her hand between his own calloused palms, he chafed it lightly. “Makes your hands rough. I don’t like it.”

Very carefully she withdrew from his grasp. He didn’t try to stop her; only watched as she bent to pick up the stick again. Eleluleniel kept her eyes for the task at hand, deliberately not looking at Kurbag. She felt, rather than saw, the characteristic cock of his head, the half-Uruk’s thoughtful appraisal.

“We have enough firewood. What is it you’re about, I wonder.”

The remark was rhetorical, not even a real question, but she answered nonetheless: “I used what we had to keep the fire burning throughout the day. Bragdagash will be angry if it dies in the night.” A patent untruth, obvious to both of them. There was still a sizeable pile beside the fire. There would be wood enough to last them two days, at this rate.

“Ah.” One syllable, meaningless really, but Eleluleniel’s heart sank. So she was not surprised to hear him say, “Wouldn’t pin your hopes on it, Squeaker. She ain’t gonna last long.”

“I do not know what you are talking about,” said Eleluleniel. She turned her back on him, stooping slightly to peer through pine boughs. Rather than seeing twigs, though, she saw Grushak’s face, the dark glances he had been giving Maevyn, the telltale shift of his jaw. When she told Maevyn that they had best gather wood for the fire, it was actually an attempt to buy time and forestall the large Orc’s plans, and to at least keep an eye on the girl.

But already she had failed. Maevyn was nowhere to be seen. She had never come back from her return to the campfire. And as Eleluleniel realized this, she suddenly heard a faint, startled cry from that direction.

She caught her breath, rose—and backed into Kurbag, who had stepped in close behind her. “… please…do not…” she heard herself say.

He was touching her cheek, brushing his thumb against her jaw as his hand slid under to cup her chin. The gentleness of the gesture was juxtaposed with the underlying prick of talons against her skin. She felt the heat of him against her back as he leaned in to smell her hair. “Little moon-elf…” he murmured over her.

She stood with her slim hands buried in green needles, her body stiff with quiet desperation.

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“Did you hear the one about the Dunlander tart who would only take the cock sideways?”
“Yes, Mushog, you’ve only told it about ten times.”

“Did I tell you about the rider of Rohan who’d only give it to his mare?”

“Yes, Mushog, we’ve all heard that one too.”

“Oh. Then, have you heard this?” The large Uruk belched long and loud.

Nazluk looked bored. “Yes. Yes, I have.”

Mushog scowled. “Well, fuck you.”

The slender Orc’s ear-tips flattened in thought. Then he shrugged. “Actually, that would have to be the dullest proposition you’ve made yet.”

Rukshash choked abruptly at that, snorting beer out his nose. Mushog snarled and downed more drink.

There was a sudden scabbling sound and a painful cry. Pointed ears perked up briefly around the fire before the handful of Orcs dismissed it. Nothing important. The Man-brat had evidently just taken another ‘fall.’ It was her third in as many minutes. “Better watch your step, little one,” Grushak said with an unpleasant laugh as he continued past her. He made an unsubtle movement to step on her hand, chuckling when she snatched it away barely in time.

Nazluk’s nostrils flared at the smell of fresh blood. He glanced with faint interest at the girl, who was getting shakily to her feet, noticing her badly scraped knees and the torn palms of her hands.

Nazluk wasn’t the only one who had picked up the scent. “Eh, Grushak. Do you plan on eating your food when you’re through playing with it?” asked Rukshash as Grushak took a position at the fire.

Grushak grunted. “Quit eying what’s mine, Rukshash. I don’t believe in rushing. If you’re hungry, there’s plenty of meat.”

“Skai,” spat the old Orc, who preferred his meat raw and looked distastefully at the strips sizzling on the stone periphery of the fire, “that would require movement on my part.” Returning his gaze to the tark child and switching to Westron: “Oi, girl! Fetch me some of the uncooked pork.”

Grushak glanced across the fire at Grymawk, who was tucking into his beer and meat with a voraciousness that sat ill with his small body. “Do you have room for all of that?” he asked dryly.

Grymawk sucked grease from his fingers noisily. “It’s my last supper, and I’m going to bloody well enjoy it.”

“Keep stuffing your face at that rate and you’re going to bloody well explode.” Furtive steps to his left. The Man-brat, bringing Rukshash’s food. Grushak licked his lips. As she extended the pig shank to the other Orc his hand shot out, locking onto her arm.

Startled, she dropped the meat. Rukshash cursed as his supper landed on the ground. “Shit! Grushak, would you take your games elsewhere?” he exclaimed, picking up the meat and brushing away the worst of the grit and pine needles. “Some of us are looking to eat around here.”

Grushak ignored him, smirking as he drew the girl roughly onto his knee. She was struggling and he caught hold of her hair, holding her head in a secured position. “Ah har. Now isn’t this a sweet sight?” he purred. She bared her teeth at him in a snarl and he chuckled. “Cute as a Warg cub, and
twice as helpless.”

Actually as he said it he felt oddly uncomfortable. He wished she would stop grimacing at him in that manner—this close, she almost looked like a young Orcling. Orcs do not treat their spawn with special tenderness and Grushak did not cherish or revere the young of his kind. However, eating or killing them was still a definite faux pas. Pulling her head back, he leaned forward and sniffed in deeply the exposed skin of her throat, unconsciously reassuring himself of her distinctly un-Orkish odor.

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Maevyn strained against Grushak’s grip. The heat from the fire beat hot against her back, the Orc’s knee was hard, and his closeness disgusted and frightened her. Fear turned to frenzy when he wrenched her head back, and as he lowered his face to her throat she thought in terror of his fangs. The image flashed in her mind of Mama, Mama with her throat cut—

…the blood, the blood, it was bubbling out, it was so red it was black…

His other hand clasped both her wrists behind her back. As he sniffed her closely she felt his grasp relax, and with a frantic burst of strength she pulled her hand free and struck him. It was a flimsy, glancing gesture, all force lost in the wildness of it, but it brushed his unprepared left eye. Taken off guard, he jerked back in swearing surprise and Maevyn freed herself with an improbable wriggle. Grushak made a grab for her, but with a hand covering his smarting eye his judgment was off and he caught only air. Maevyn scrambled away between and past him and Rukshash, the mutilated older Orc too busy laughing to stop her.

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“Scum-sucker! Stupid little bitch!” Grushak roared, stumbling to his feet as he rubbed his eye. Luckily, it was unharmed. Rather than relieved, he only felt angrier—the energy he might have spent on concern for his eye was all channeled as purest, sweetest homicidal rage.

Rukshash and Mushog were both in the throes of unabashedly uproarious merriment, and even Nazluk was smirking. “Oh dear, Grushak, what happened? Did that itty-bitty slip of a thing hurt you?”

Grushak whirled on him. “SHUT UP!” he yelled, spittle flying in his rage. “Where did she go? By my troth, I’ll kill the little snot!” His yellow eyes dilated darkly as he glared into the burgeoning night beyond the glow of the campfire.

The others watched in amused anticipation.

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She had to get away. There was nothing else for it. Somehow, she had to escape.

Foolish child. You speak madness.

Maevyn threw herself behind a large boulder, pressing her back against it as she tried to regain coherent thought.

Orc ears are keen and sharp. They can hear us speaking now…even if they cannot make out the sense of what we say…

But she wasn’t talking. She was barely even allowing herself to breathe, listening fearfully into the
dark. She could hear Grushak’s angry bellowing, and frightened as it made her, at least it told her where he was, and that he wasn’t here. Yet. Obviously she had to move, and soon, but wouldn’t any movement on her part give away her position?

*They see in the dark like cats...they move quickly. But most of all, their sense of smell is strong.*

Smell she could do nothing about. But her eyes were adjusting to the dim light. She had scrambled her way out here, blinded by fear and the afterimage of the campfire, and now she began to perceive her surroundings. She could see the broad expanse of the sky, and behind her was the Orc camp, buried in trees, and before her a swathe of sparse ground, loose shifting gravel.

That was the direction in which home lay, she knew it. A ruined home and a ruined village. Home was lost to her now. And if she tried to run in that direction, she knew that the open space would be her death sentence. He would see her and run her down in a matter of minutes at best. But if she stayed here, with only the stone pressing into her back hiding her from sight, all he had to do was round the boulder, and…

It was a choice between being caught running like a frightened rabbit, or crouched in huddled despair like one resigned to death.

Unless she took the trees.

*No! No, no!* The trees were between her and Grushak, and taking the trees meant narrowing the distance between them rather than widening it! And if she moved, and if he picked her out with his keen Orc vision…but…

If she successfully made the trees, it might buy her some time. He would find her eventually, but at least she would survive a few seconds more, a few moments more. And her heart shrieked—angry, rebellious, savage—that every moment, every living instant was precious.

Incongruously at that moment she heard again the lightly sung words:

*Demaerion came to the bright blue sea…*

Maevyn shivered, and breathed deep, and chose. She leaned sidelong, flexing her toes anxiously as they bent under the brunt of her weight, then sprang up as silently and swiftly as she could, darting into the nearest pines.

-.-.-.-

The girl’s pick was wiser than she could know. A bare minute later Grushak touched the place where she had crouched, still warm from her body, and snarled as he snuffed the air. An Orc’s sense of smell is keen indeed, and the scent in Grushak’s flaring nostrils was strong—the scent of green pine, spicy and sharp, magnified ten times man smell in pungency.

He cast his eyes around the silvery sylvan silhouettes of trees, growling annoyance. Three times he cursed the brat, and three times again the trees that obscured her from him, both in smell and sight. Glancing to either side briefly, his smoldering eyes caught sight of one of the smaller pine, a seedling, barely the girl’s height, and his hand made a smooth overhand gesture. The curved blade on his back cleared its scabbard with a satisfying metallic *snik*. A subsequent *hwoosh*. And the little tree fell softly to the ground.

A blade’s edge may close the distance between anger and pleasure. Grushak grinned fiercely, hungrily, in the dark.
The trees rose up like looming black monoliths around her, and yet the night was strangely clear. The starlight was bright. Maevyn looked up at the sky and sent a silent prayer to Eru. Please, Sir. Mama always taught me to ask nicely. Please don't let them kill me. I made a promise. Not before I've killed him first. I made a promise…

She maneuvered silently as possible through the black trees, and as she did she ran through the mantra over and over in her mind, but she had no way of knowing whether He was listening. Well, it was up to her then. If He wasn’t going to help, she would have to help herself. She would have to keep herself alive.

Carefully she inched her way forward, not knowing quite what she was about. If she had some manner of weapon she might have a hope, but she had nothing but her fists, her feet, her teeth and her nails, and these would avail her precious little against the thick leathery hide of an Orc. The trees were her only form of defence, and she realized with a chill that they were Grushak’s friends as much as they were hers, for they hid him from her as surely as they hid her from him.

If I had Demmi’s knife—

Maevyn scowled. If if if. If wishes were fishes there’d be no room for water. And besides, look where the knife had got her. Taken by Orcs.

She froze stock still when she suddenly heard rustling footsteps to her far left. They weren’t Grushak’s, a smoother stride than his unique lumber, but nonetheless she couldn’t afford to be caught by any of the band. If she were, there was no way she would escape alive. Crouching low, she peered through the dark boughs and was able to make out a tall form walking purposefully towards a break in the trees up ahead.

“Oi, who’s that then?” came a brusque voice, startling her. There was another Orc up there that she couldn’t see, and her heart hammered in her chest. That was the direction she had been heading a moment ago. If it hadn’t been for her stopping to hide from the first Orc she would have stumbled right into the path of the second one. She shivered at the close call.

The first Orc stopped. “Hrahragh. Brought you a rabbit.”

“Rabbit, huh? Live one?”

“Killed.”

“Oh.” Evident disappointment. “Pity.”

Hrahragh made a noise of disgust and threw the limp corpse on the ground. A smaller figure scuttled into Maevyn’s line of vision. One of the littler Orcs: she couldn’t tell who in the dark. He retrieved the rabbit, stepping back a few paces and saying something, but what it was she couldn’t understand. She waited a minute and when their talk didn’t return to Westron, resolved that this was the best chance she would have to clear the area without them hearing her, while their attention was focused elsewhere.

Just then she heard a crackling sound. A rustle in the trees a ways away from her. "Where are you, you little snot?” Grushak’s voice muttered ominously.

Maevyn’s heartbeat, which had just been dropping to a more normal pace, sped up again. She clutched her hands to her chest as if that would somehow muffle the pounding and hunched lower. Her bent knee came in contact with something that prickled painfully through the material of her skirt
and she bit her lower lip so hard to keep from crying out that she tasted blood.

“Come out, little bitch…I’ve got something for you…”

Slowly, gingerly, she reached down and her fingers explored what her knee had discovered. Maevyn had never seen a pinecone before, and so she didn’t know what it was that lay under her hand, but she quickly ascertained that it was long, and vaguely ovular in shape, and prickly to the touch. She scooped it into her hand easily, and it was the size of a good throwing rock. Not the heaviness or the hardness, though, and she knew right away that it wouldn’t avail her as a weapon. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t come up with a use for it. She remembered a time or two playing at hide-and-go-seek with her brother, how sometimes when Demmi was dangerously close she would use a stick or a small pebble and—

“When I catch you, maggot…gonna fuck you up proper…” the large Orc was growling.

Maevyn’s hand tightened on the pinecone, and her eyes shifted in the direction from where she had heard Grushak. Dimly she saw his shouldering bulk framed through the trees, and her eyes narrowed dangerously for an instant before she gritted her teeth, shifted her gaze, drew her hand back and hurled the pinecone as far as she could. In the dark she couldn’t see where it landed but she could the sharp \textit{pkk} as it struck something solid. Grushak swung in the direction of the sound and he headed towards it and away from Maevyn. Steeling herself, she used the cover of the threatening promises he was snarling to rise into a cautious slouch and skulk away unheard.

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“Big to-do by the fire, huh? I could hear it all the way from here,” said Shrah’rar as he slit the dead animal’s belly open with a skinny talon. Licking his lips, he peeled back soft pelt and sank his teeth noisily into the young coney.

Hrahragh shrugged nonchalantly. “Meat and beer aplenty. Spirits are high.”

“\textit{Unh.} What’re you at killing rabbits for, anyway? We got enough food. ’Sides, it’s a little \textit{late} for that sort of thing, ain’t it?” Blood dripping from his chin, Shrah’rar looked Hrahragh up and down insolently, knowing that the Uruk couldn’t see him proper in the dark.

“Bored.” Hrahragh didn’t elaborate. He didn’t care to explain to Shrah’rar that he saw night as a challenge. In fact, Hrahragh made it a habit to wander some nights, following little trails by smell and feel, trying to compensate for an Uruk’s natural visual shortcoming by navigating with his other senses.

For the most part nothing came of it, but this time he had been lucky. He had come on the droppings, fresh and exuding heat, and he had known the prey was close at hand. A chance break in the boughs overhead permitted enough starlight to pick out frail whiskers quivering as the rabbit sat up on its haunches, sniffing inquiringly of its surroundings. A single swift throw sufficed to dispatch it before it took alarm.

It was a kill he would have scorned by the light of day, but by night he considered it highly accomplished of himself. Even now, at the memory, his chest swelled once again with a pleasant suffusion of pride.

“Mother-fuckin’—stupid little cock-sucking—\textit{sha}!”

Hrahragh and Shrah’rar both blinked at one another, recognizing Grushak’s gutteral utterances. From the sound of it, he was in a most unholy temper. “Uh…is that so?” called Shrah’rar tentatively.
The accompanying cracking sounds amid the trees stopped. “Did you see her come this way?”

“Her? Who? Uh. D’you mean the tark child?”

Snarling: “No, the Witch of the Golden Wood!” Dark branches shook at the periphery of pines as the big Orc thrust his way through, directing such a vicious glare at Shrah’rar that the smaller Orc actually backed up a few paces. “You’re supposed to be on Watch, dipshit!”

“And I have been! She didn’t come this way, I swear it!” Shrah’rar protested.

Sensing he was to be challenged next, Hrahragh nodded in affirmation. “Not seen her. Or heard.”

Grushak growled angrily but grunted acceptance of their word. “Fine then. But if you see the little maggot, don’t kill her. She’s mine.” His coarse features were wrought with anger. Anger, conflicted with grudging approbation. He glanced at the pinecone he was holding in his hand, tossing it up and down briefly. “She’s a resourceful thing, I’ll give her that,” he muttered as he turned back the way he had come.

Shrah’rar shook his head. “I think our old pal Grushak is starting to lose his touch,” he said. “Given the slip by a little thing like—oi, Hrahragh, where are you going?”

But the Uruk had already melted away into the trees. Night was a challenge—and here was better game than rabbits…

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When Grushak fell for her trick with the pinecone, Maevyn’s mood elevated. Suddenly, she wasn’t scared. She was careful with her movements but bolder in making them, never careless but almost carefree. She was clever and tricky and the Orc was so, so stupid. Let him try coming near her. She’d just outsmart him again, that’s all!

This burst of confidence lasted for about two minutes.

And then she heard a low hoot come from somewhere nearby, and she flinched at the suddenness and unfamiliarity of the owl’s call. And in that instant she remembered that she was alone in a scary and unfamiliar place, that she was miles from anyone who might help her and that there was at least one very angry Orc looking to pick his teeth with her bones. And suddenly she was very small and very frightened, and there were things out in the shadows, and they were watching her.

She bit her lip again but it was sore from last time so she stopped that pretty quickly. She had the hem of her skirt bunched up in her hands so that it wouldn’t catch and tear on tattletale twigs, and she could feel her knuckles whitening in the dark.

The trees were closer together here, and there weren’t so many places for the stars to break through. Her movements, already cautious, became smaller, and more hesitant, and fewer. She worked her way forward and sideways, weaving by inches, and every noise, every quiet rustle, the faintest whisper of wind, brought her to a paralyzed standstill. Every sound, she just knew, was Grushak come upon her. And where there wasn’t a sound, there her mind began making up noises, darksome and twitchy, and her heart alternately sped and stopped with fearfulness.

And then there came a something that definitely wasn’t in her head. A low, thick, throaty sound from somewhere up ahead, to her right. A rasping chuckle.

Orc.
It might not be Grushak, but any Orc was bad. She braced herself to run, uncertain only of the direction in which to flee.

And then she heard the second something. A soft hurt sound, like a gasp or a sob.

*Leni?*

She strained to hear it again. For a time she almost convinced herself that she had imagined it. And then another small cry, and she knew for certain she had heard that. It was faint as anything, muffled by the intervening trees perhaps, but up ahead somewhere. Where the Orc sound had come from.

She shivered. Something was wrong. Something was very very wrong. Leni was hurt—Leni, the only friend she had. Something bad was happening through the trees up ahead. Without Maevyn really making a conscious decision, her feet began walking. She moved slowly, helplessly, in the direction of the sound.

*This is crazy. Maevyn, you are a crazy girl. What do you think you’re doing? This is how you got caught in the first place. Haven’t you learned your lesson yet?*

*I can’t just not go. She’s my friend.*

Disbelief. *So that’s it. That’s all. You’re gonna die. You’re gonna die—you know that, right? You know that, don’t you?*

Resignation. *Wasn’t ever gonna live forever, was I…*

The thought of her own mortality brought her strange comfort in that moment, a painful but somehow soothing revelation, shiny and sharp. She guarded it close as she advanced, step by step.

And in that place through the trees, Maevyn saw what it was inevitable that she see.

In the dark, the Orc was grunting. The silhouette of his body repeatedly rose and fell, rose and fell with a terrible rhythm, and at first she couldn’t make out what was going on. He was too engaged in what he was doing to see her, and so she took a few brave steps closer, and then she saw what he was doing, and to who.

Her mind stopped working at this point. She could see, but somehow she couldn’t understand. Her mind couldn’t encompass it fully. She could only absorb discrete and disjointed facts, like pieces of a puzzle, the sense of it scattered and unintelligible. The fact of Leni’s arms fixed stiffly at her sides, like a dead person laid out for a viewing. Of the delicate material of her worn torn dress, shoved up and exposing her bare legs, spread wide by the imposition of Kurbag’s body. Of Kurbag’s nakedness below the waist, his breeches lying in a careless pile a few feet from where he was thudding at her. Of Leni’s hair, pale and glimmering even in the gloom, tangled in pine needles and loam. Of her eyes, open but strangely unseeing, dirty tear tracks marring her smooth face, her lips pressed together and yet the sounds squeezing through them: high, short, painful cries jerked from somewhere so deep inside of her as to be unspeakable.

Maevyn saw. She registered everything. But for that first interminable period of staring she couldn’t process what it was that she had stumbled upon.

And then she did. She gasped and took a pace back. Leni’s eyes fluttered toward her, and they saw Maevyn, and they widened with horror and shock and terrible shame. Her hand lifted a few inches off the ground, shakily pleading. Maevyn backed further away, and Leni’s eyes misted over with despair. The slim hand fell.
A voice behind Maevyn. “Girl.” Her head whipped around. Hrahragh was standing not five yards behind, and he was holding one of his sharp knives. He faced her in the dark, saying blandly, “Don’t move.”

Her feet were stuck to the ground. She wasn’t sure she could have moved if she’d wanted to. And maybe, maybe she didn’t want to. She didn’t know. She was too shaken to think properly.

“If you move,” he said in a quiet tone, taking a step toward her, “I throw.” Another step. “And you die.”

She clutched nervously at the material of her skirt as she looked back at him. To move or not to move. Well, that’s that, she thought. I can be caught and dead, or I can just be dead. Ridiculously: That’s not so many choices. That’s only two. I mean, what else could Demaerion possibly see here?

And the third choice suddenly presented itself, as another Orc appeared behind Hrahragh. “Man-brat, you are mine.”

Hrahragh evidently hadn’t realized that Grushak was behind him. His eyes flicked sideways, and Maevyn moved. She pelted to her left, thinking to dash through the trees there, when yet another Orc loomed up out of the black pines, blocking her path.

“What, did all the laughs move here or something?” asked Mushog crossly. “Oh, there she is. Oi, Grushak! found your tark…”

“-.-.-.-.

“What the FUCK?!!” bellowed Kurbag, stopping in mid-rut. Squeaker whimpered under the shifted distribution in weight as he raised himself up on one elbow, glaring at the others. As a rule Orcs are not overly particular about matters of privacy, but having the (to use the nasty Elvish) entire glamhoth descend on him in the middle of a pleasant screw was a bit much. “D’you lot mind? I’m kind of busy at the moment!”

Grushak ignored him. The Man-brat was darting her eyes back and forth between he and Mushog and while her inferior eyes couldn’t see their faces proper, he could perceive the indecision writ upon her countenance clear as day. He laughed unpleasantly, knowing what was in her mind. She was trapped in a quandary of indecision, every shadow become for her an enemy waiting. Didn’t dare make a break for any of the trees lest she run smack into another of his fellows. “Sure—run, tark,” he taunted in Westron, swaggering a little as he stepped toward her. “Just try running again. It only makes it that much more entertaining.”

Then she made a sidelong zigzag, throwing herself to the ground and scrambling under the low boughs of a particularly broad conifer.

Grushak gawked. “…shit!” he exclaimed as he stormed toward the tree.

“You told her to run, Grushak,” Mushog pointed out, laughing. Ah yes. Everything seemed funnier with beer…

“I didn’t tell her to go in there!” complained Grushak, prying branches out of his way. They were too thick and many for this to be very effectual, and their dense mass compromised his vision—he could hear the little brat scrabbling through the pine needles at the base but couldn’t make her out. “Oi, sha pushdug! How the fuck am I supposed to get to her now?”

“The more pressing question, really, is how she is supposed to get out,” remarked an evil voice from
nearby. Nazluk, who had evidently followed Mushog from the campfire, was standing idle nearby, cleaning the dirt from under his talons with a sharp blade. He glanced up, a faint smile on his face. “Oh yes, she has a lot of options there. Pretty effectively cornered herself at the moment—tries to come out and it’s a simple enough matter for one of us to grab her. Where can she turn? What direction does she have left to go?”

There was a thrashing sound from the interior of the pine and Grushak’s pointed ears swiveled toward it immediately. The Man-brat had reached the thicker base boughs at the trunk of the tree and was hauling herself upward. Drawing his sword, he began jabbing it through the branches, but unable to make out his quarry properly, his blade bit only bark—when it met anything solid at all. The brat was spry and she quickly clambered up beyond his reach. Cursing fiercely, knowing that it was a waste of time but needing some kind of outlet for his frustration, Grushak backed away and began to hack at the greenery.

Hrahragh, who had philosophically accepted losing his perfect bearings on the girl’s shadowy profile and had stowed his knife away in his makeshift bandoleer, threw dark Nazluk a squinty look. “Were saying?” he asked. Which direction indeed…

Nazluk only responded with a noncommittal shrug, watching as Grushak butchered the tree.

Maevyn had climbed quite high—higher, in fact, than she had ever climbed in her life, and maybe even higher than poor dead Benard had ever done. But then again, neither she nor Benard nor anyone from the village had ever had the opportunity to climb such a tree as this. If it weren’t for her great fear and for the pain from her smarting hands and knees and for the horror of what she had just witnessed, her heart would have sung out with the climbing of the great pine. Never had she experienced a tree more ideal for climbing! The branches lent themselves to her limbs with such ease, it seemed they grew for the sole purpose of providing her hands and feet with purchase—better even than a ladder, because a ladder would have done nothing to shield her from Grushak’s wrath, and yet, huddling close to the dark, pungent, sticky nexus that was the tall pine’s innermost trunk, somehow the tree preserved her from his reaching arms, and preserved her as well from his attempts to stab her with his sword.

The scimitar, with its broad, smoothly curving blade, was not suited to this mode of attack to begin with, and the interference of the branches turned its thrusts all sideways when he tried to put it to that use. But it was a hacking blade, made for broad, wide strokes, and when he began chopping away at the branches below her she shivered and clung fast to her perch and was glad she was out of reach. A sturdy tree it was, and strong, but still the tremors traveled up to where she was, and her stomach quivered in response. She climbed higher, climbed until she had reached a point about two thirds of the way up, the point at which the boughs began to feel less secure under her weight, and the point at which she was sure Grushak, if he thought to brave the tree himself, would not be able to hoist his mass.

And wondered what course of action, if any, was left to her…

The conifer was groaning. It was a tall tree, and its seasons were many, and the pain it bore beneath the wanton attack of the wrathful orch was great. Still, it would guard the little Child of Ilúvatar that had found refuge in its broad branches; guard her till its height was laid low.

Eleluleniel wanted to cover her ears to block out the sound of the tree’s sorrowful resistance, but knew this would avail her not. And so she remained unheeded where Kurbag had left her, and she
kept the material of her dress pulled tightly down about her legs, and she stared at the ground. Trying not to think of Maevyn in the tree. Trying not to hear the Orcs as they conversed near her. They had all, it seemed, with the exception of Shrah’rar, ventured thither to amuse themselves with the little girl’s plight and to have a laugh at Grushak’s expense.

She made herself small and inconspicuous as possible so that they might not have cause to turn their riotous attentions to her, and she wished that she might likewise hide herself from her memory of Maevyn’s eyes when the girl had seen her and Kurbag, hide herself from the memory of the realization in them. Realization, and disgust….

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“D’you think she’ll be up there all night?” wondered Pryszrim as he threw the dice again. Grymawk had brought them with him and a number of the Orcs were making a game of it, passing their time at a comfortable vantage point near the tree Grushak was glaring at.

“Three tokens she isn’t,” said Mushog.

“I’ll wager four she is,” Rukshash countered. “Grushak’s a big bastard, and he’s wrecked the lower branches he might have tried the climbing of. I’d like to see him mount that height ere the daystar rises.”

“Oh, but Grushak’s a stubborn bastard,” pointed out Kurbag, who was resigned to the camp’s impromptu shift in locale and had finally left off his sullen muttering about the inconsideration of others. “I suspect he’ll think of something.”

“Grushak’s also an almightily pissed bastard at the moment,” growled Grushak. “And if certain fellows don’t leave off talking about Grushak as if he weren’t there, he’s liable to thump some heads together.”

“Oooh, touchy,” grinned Rukshash. He made a confidential gesture with his ruined hand. “Here, you might try setting fire to it. That’s always a sure method. Works with dwarves, at any rate.”

“Arrr, you rotten old Goblin. As if I hadn’t thought of that.” Grushak rolled his eyes.

“Grushak,” said Nazluk, who was sitting by idly, “has brains. And he knows Bragdagash might have a problem with that.”

“Really? How come?” asked Pryszrim in his usual simple fashion.

Nazluk bestowed a particularly sardonic look upon him. “Think, Pryszrim. Think very hard. And while you think, remember what we’re up against on the morrow.”

Pryszrim actually took a moment to consider. “…eagles?” he ventured at last.

“Yes, that’s right. And I’d just as rather they didn’t know we were headed their way, wouldn’t you? And so lighting a pretty tree-tall beacon to attract their attention mayn’t be the most practical course, now mayn’t it?”

Pryszrim mouthed a silent O of comprehension.

Mushog scratched the back of his neck. “Here then. I have it. Grymawk can just shoot a few of his arrows up in there, and this will all be dealt with easy as—”

“I will most certainly not!” exclaimed Grymawk with an incredulous laugh that this was even
mentioned as a possibility. “I am very much intent on reserving my arsenal for my little climb tomorrow, thank you very much. Good quarrels don’t just grow on trees, you know!”

“But…but then, where do you get the wood to make them from?” asked Pryszrim, surprised. And received a look of disdain from the smaller Orc in response.

*Thwack.* There was a faint cry from up in the tree.

Eyes of varying hues, from orange to red to molten gold to, in one case, mismatched green and yellow, shifted in Grushak’s direction. He looked at the second rock in his hand, glanced back at them thoughtfully. “Oi, lads. If you will insist on pitching in suggestions, why not turn your hands to pitching something else?” One fang glinted in a toothy grin. “The one to knock her out gets a clout on the shoulder and a pinch on the arse, courtesy of me.”

“What an inviting prospect,” said Nazluk dryly. He picked up a stone.

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Maevyn sobbed as the Orcs launched their second volley, sobs that she fiercely defended to herself as sobs of anger and frustration, not pain or other weakness. For thus far, none of the rocks had hit her, being either deflected by the branches or passing harmlessly through on unbroken trajectories. Still, as a stone whistled narrowly by her ear, she knew it was only a matter of time before one struck home. And then, oh, she knew how that was going to hurt.

In desperation she shrieked, “YOU STOP THAT!!” And felt, naturally, an utter fool. The Orcs were Orcs, not irritating playmates to stop their games at her demand. And of course only horrible laughter greeted her words, and she scowled fiercely. In the dark her hand found another mysterious prickly object such as the one she had thrown earlier, and with a quick snatch she jerked it free of the branch and hurled it down at them. A startled exclamation from somewhere below gratified her, and she grabbed for another one.
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Kurbag shook his head in disbelief. “You weakling, it was only a pinecone.”

“It hit my nose!” exclaimed Grymawk. “And I didn’t even throw anything at her to begin with!” He really was quite indignant as he rubbed the offended body part. “*Bitch!*” Angered, he too grabbed up a rock and hurled it with the others. However, not having the aim with rocks that he had with archery and not taking any great care in his anger, he not only missed the girl, he missed the tree entirely. But only narrowly missed Bragdagash, who had just arrived on the scene.

Their illustrious leader and the largest Orc in the band dodged the projectile just in time, shooting a look of surprise at the much smaller culprit. “Just what is going on here, I’d like to know?” he demanded.

Once given to understand the situation, he shrugged. “Aye, fire’s out of the question, but don’t any of you lot have something you can cut the tree down with?” Silence. “Oi. You really are a silly bunch.” He chuckled shortly, folding his arms across his chest. “I can understand wanting to draw out your playtime, but we have a tricky bit of business awaiting us tomorrow. Have your fun but get it done—you’ll want the time to sleep before sun-up.”
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Eleluleniel wasn’t relieved when Bragdagash showed up. The Orcs had stopped throwing stones, but she knew with dull certainty that this was only a prelude to something worse. Her thoughts were
confirmed when she saw Bragdagash hand Grushak the hatchet; saw Grushak turn towards the tree…

She breathed in slow, out slow, trying to control her rising panic. Why do I pray for her to live? It is no kindness to wish she continue in this place. There is nothing before her but pain. Why am I so selfish? What is life, to hold it so dear?

The first stroke bit deep and she uttered a strangled gasp and brought a hand to her mouth in horror. Nazluk looked at her sharply but she paid him no heed, unable to look away from what was happening. All false philosophy and contrived logic flew out of Elelulieniel’s head, and there was only the extremity of emotion, the magnitude of her potential despair. Save her, she thought madly, save her save her—

And the silent stars twinkled complacently overhead.

—don’t leave me all alone—

Well. They had stopped chucking things at her at any rate, but Maevyn couldn’t figure out whether that was a good thing or not. She knew that, with it being quieter down there and all, it must mean some new bad thing was going to happen.

And then there was a thudding sound below and a whole peculiar quiver ran through the tree.

She peered down through the branches. She couldn’t see anything. She thought it might be that Grushak was chopping at the branches again. And then the strange tremor came through again, and she realized what it was he was about. He was cutting into the main trunk.

Gasping, she scrambled up a branch, then scrambled down a branch, then up a branch again, and then had to acknowledge that she couldn’t go either up or down. Further up the branches became untrustworthy, and in any event, what good would going higher do her if the whole whopping tree fell over? But on the other hand, down below was Grushak and that wasn’t a choice she could stand.

She moved up two more branches.

Her position, which had been less than great to begin with, was now grown exponentially more perilous. As the Orc chopped repeatedly into the thicker main trunk below, the more slender portion to which she clung trembled violently. The branches were sparser where she was now and when she looked away from where she was clinging she could see the dark night sky, and the Orcs many feet below…and Leni’s face looking up at her, the features indistinct but the pallor of her face and throat unmistakable even from this height.

For a moment Maevyn saw it in her head again: saw Leni lying on the ground and Kurbag on top of her. She closed her eyes and silently screamed the image away: Get out, I need to think! Get out get out get out! She took a deep breath. Trying to banish the memory, she resolved to focus on the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes. Lifting her head she looked over and away, and saw the tree nearest hers.

Maevyn forced herself to stare at it and slowly she realized…it really wasn’t so very far away. The trees grew together fairly thickly. Maybe she could—but that was just crazy. There were no branches near enough for her to jump to. Further down, though, where the branches were broader and extended further out, there was less distance between them and the branches of the other tree.
She knew, she just knew, that if she threw the effort into it, she could clear the distance. But not if she tried jumping from here—these higher branches were too flimsy, and without strong purchase for her feet she wouldn’t be able to push off hard enough. And if she didn’t push off hard enough, if she botched this…she would fall to her death…

*Ka-chunk, chunk, ka-chunk.* The trunk was half cut through.

“Little bird, little bird, can you fly, little bird?”

“Hey sweetheart, come on down. We’ll be gentle. We promise…”

“Oh dear, the poor thing, she’s about to have *such* an accident…”

The Orcs taunted her from below: snarls and mock warnings and hooting laughter, like so many animals. Maevyn resolutely tuned them out. Steeling herself up, she climbed down three branches to the little niche where she had huddled originally, and then lowered herself another two. The perch itself was solid, but the tree was swaying precariously. The excitement of the Orcs was grown elevated and raucous. It would not be long now.

The situation was grim, the outlook hopeless, but the question in Maevyn’s head was almost playful. Up or down—which would Demaerion pick?

She almost smiled. Why, sideways of course…

And then she launched herself into the air.

And, for a brief eternity, she flew.

Chapter End Notes

*Gaakh hosh-ishi bûb-ob fauthulûk.* This translates as something like, "Let them all lie hidden in the guts of the pig." Or as Kurbag put it much more nicely, "Consign it to Pryszrim's belly, the lot of it."

*Glamhoth.* Sindarin term for an Orc band. Translates literally as "noisy horde." An apt description at the best of times, its extra appropriateness under the circumstances overcomes Kurbag's natural Orkish prejudice against Elvish.

*Oi, sha pushdug!* "Oi, gah dungfilth!"

My Orkish is of the *Svartiska* brand. Svartiska is a Swedish fan-made conlang. Tolkien's own *corpus* for the Black Speech is very small: sneeze, and you'll miss it. Svartiska is a good way to go if you're not particular about correct BS. According to Tolkien most Orcs aren't. Another (fairly sophisticated) Orkish conlang is Shadowlandian Black Speech, devised by Scatha. Evidently *gaakh-* and *fauth-* are Shadowlandian, though I originally cribbed them from *A.Appleyard.*
The Orcs at the base of the pine tree made taunts and catcalls, but when the Man-brat leapt a stunned quiet fell upon them. There had been leering speculation she might jump, but none of them expected such a powerful effort from something so small. Wide eyes and gaping mouths followed her passage through the air, and when she traversed the space between the two trees, successfully reaching the limbs of the other pine, there were exclamations of disbelief.

“What in the—!”

“How did she do that?”

Grymawk began babbling excitedly: “Did you see that? I did not just see that. She cleared it! I can’t believe she did that. Did you see that? I did not just see that.” He would have gone on like this at further length but was knocked out of it by an absent cuff from Mushog, who didn’t even break off gawking to do so.

It was obvious that she was struggling. The slick pine needles evidently made her hold on the second pine tree treacherous. She cried out in dismay as she slid several yards down the length of the bough she had grabbed. The observers muttered ominously among themselves and when she locked her ankles around the branch, cutting her descent, and then began wriggling her way up, there were actually a few scattered curses of approval. Some of the Orcs, who had been calling for her blood moments before, were grown fickly invested in her progress.

Rukshash clacked his jaw in frank amazement. “By the Great Eye! That’s simply not natural. She climbs like a bloody Easterling ape!”

“Aye,” Bragdagash agreed briefly, and he said no more, but a thoughtful flame flickered in his eyes.

But Grushak, cheated of the quarry he had thought so nearly his, was in a towering rage. “You’ll not get away that easily,” he growled, picking up a rock as he had before. Drawing his arm back, he hurled it with all his strength. And this time made contact.

The rock clipped Maevyn on the shoulder. First she simply felt it as a hard blow, and then pain blossomed, unfurling in undulant folds of white agony. In a stunned instant she lost her grip, slipping from the branch to which she clung. She didn’t even have a chance to scream. Part of her brain shut down in a kind of little death and she watched the ground rush up toward her with a strange detachment.

And then, a bare six feet from the ground, she was caught by a pair of strong arms, the suddenness knocking all of the breath from her lungs. Velocity checked with such abrupt force, it felt as though her heart continued to plummet, smashing into her gut. The immediacy of impact brought her back to herself and she gasped in belated terror at her near brush with death. It was such a shock to her system that she couldn’t hold it inside. A broken wail burst out of her, long and high, and she buried her face against her unexpected rescuer’s chest, shaking and shuddering uncontrollably.

Hrahagh looked with bemusement at the howling girl in his arms. He was baffled by this sudden undisciplined display, in such stark contrast to the surprising toughness she had displayed till now. It was a paradox, and one that invited thought.

The time for contemplation, however, was short-lived. A dark form lumbered blackly toward him. In the dimness the Uruk could not distinguish the features on Grushak’s face, but the large Orc’s
yellow eyes smoldered in an unmistakable fashion. “Give her here, Hrahragh. I’m gonna rip her apart.” And his glaring eyes lent credence to the words. Grushak had every intention of reducing the little tark child to disparate shreds and chunks of bloody meat and bone.

Hrahragh shrugged. Shifting his grip to clasp the girl under her armpits, he held her silently forward. With a menacing snarl Grushak reached for her.

“Oi! Not so fast!” Bragdagash pushed his way through the other Orcs. “That was impressive up there,” he said. “And worth thinking about.”

“Screw thought. I’m hungry,” growled Grushak, eyes intent on his prize.

“Abide your appetite a time, friend. She might be of some use to us.”

Grushak, finally tearing his eyes away, looked at Bragdagash as though the Uruk had lost his senses. “Eh? And what is it you’re saying, exactly?”

“I’m saying don’t kill her.” He peered at her in the gloom. “Yet.” A moment’s silent thought, and then an abrupt decision: “Bring her back to camp. I want to take a closer look at this Man-brat of yours…”

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Maevyn’s shoulder throbbed brutally, as it had ever since the rock hit her. She hadn’t had any time to examine the injury, and she was trying to imagine how bad the bruise was going to be. One to put all other bruises to shame, hers and Demmi’s both, and she should know! The two of them had used to compete over their respective scrapes and scratches all the time. This bruise, she could tell from the slow burning agony of it, was one to be proud of—a purple royal above all others. A pity she most likely wasn’t ever going to see it. The sight of a bruise, the oohs and aahs over its mottled hue, were normally some consolation for the pain. This way, in the dark, all she had was the pain and none of the pride.

Oh well, it’s not gonna matter so much longer anyways, she thought to herself faintly as she was hauled through the trees. Grushak had her by the wrist, and his crushing grip hurt. When she stumbled from time to time on the irregular ground, unable to see where she was walking, he would only jerk her forward with a forbidding growl. He never once looked at her, and she was glad of that—she had caught a glance of his eyes earlier, glowing horribly in the dark, filled with such an ugly feral look that she had to shift her own away in a hurry. She didn’t try to fight his lead—she could feel the rage pulsing in his grip, a tangible force running through his arm and up her own, visceral and intense. He would seize on any excuse, she knew, to rend her where she stood.

That Grushak was in such a foul mood should have gratified her. She had no love for him. But all Maevyn felt at this point was tired and sick and scared. Still, some embers of resistance remained, burning in her gut and gullet. They flared up some at the sight of the fire as they came again to the Orc camp, and she realized suddenly that she had lived for longer than she had truly expected earlier, when she first pulled away from Grushak’s grip. Then she would have counted another moment of breathing a success, five minutes a miracle. And when she thought about it that way, her vain little escape of over an hour ago didn’t seem so very fruitless anymore, not really. Thinking this made her chin lift and her back straighten, and when Grushak pulled harshly on her wrist Maevyn quickened her step to avoid stumbling and lifted her head higher.

The girl’s change in posture didn’t go unnoticed. Bragdagash raised an eyebrow at it, and the dim idea he was toying with found stronger footing in his mind. “Right then, bring it over here,” he said, taking up a stance by the campfire. Looking sullen, Grushak stopped and pushed the Man-brat
toward Bragdagash. The Uruk caught her by the shoulder, and he didn’t miss her sharp intake of breath as his hand closed on it. Brow furrowing, Bragdagash took a handful of the material of her blouse at the neckline, yanking it down to bare her right shoulder. She made a startled move to pull away and he cuffedit her. She subsided, swallowing angrily, and he continued his examination in a brusque but unhurried fashion.

Grushak had done a number on her. Bragdagash’s tongue took up thoughtful abode in his cheek as he appraised the sizable bruise on her shoulder, the slashing rips in her clothing, the livid weals where skin was exposed. They didn’t quite have the look of whip marks, though, and he was puzzled briefly before he remembered her fall from the tree and concluded that she must have been thrashed a number of times as she fell through the branches. It was amazing that she hadn’t cracked her skull, or any other bones in her body for that matter. She was covered with scratches, most likely from the pine needles, and these were only the most recent additions to the abuse she had sustained over the past two days.

He held her hands, turning them this way and that, absently noting the painful sounds she choked back in her throat. A stubborn one to restrain herself in this fashion, for the ropeburns on her wrists were ugly and obviously still hurt her. However, the period for which her hands had been bound did not seem to have compromised them—at least, not judging by her performance in the tree. Wanting to test her grip, he placed her hand on his index finger. “Squeeze it.”

She only stared at him disobediently, but another cuff and she grudgingly did as he said. Curling her fingers around the digit, she clamped down as tightly as possible. The force she exerted didn’t quite hurt, but it was uncomfortable and Bragdagash, studying the small fist attempting to crush his finger, decided that it was strong for her size. “Stop,” he said. Her grip relaxed briefly, and then she renewed it, trying to dig in with her nails. He caught hold of her hair, gave her head a punishing jerk. “Stop,” he said again, and she subsided. He obliged her to repeat the exercise with her other hand, maintaining his lock on her hair to discourage any similar stunts.

Then, pulling her head back for a more accommodating view, he scrutinized her countenance closely, looking past the smudges and scratches to study the twist of her mouth as she scowled, the anger that glinted in her eyes. Those eyes glared back at him, and he could see his own powerful physique and forbidding features reflected in them in miniature. If her eyes had been utterly without fear he would have judged her foolish or mad. The examination would have ended there and he would have tossed her back to Grushak without any further thought, to be disposed of at her resentful captor’s pleasure. Rather than an absence of fear, then, it was the presence of fear, mixed with a kind of angry, hopeless, ballsy determination, which decided him.

He looked up. “Oi, Grushak. Take this one over and tell Squeaker to slather some ointment on her. We keep her in health and hearth another night.”

Grushak’s expression, one of fierce anticipation, became one of surprise and cheated outrage instead. “Another night?”

“Aye.” Bragdagash nodded. “Another night.” His gaze shifted again to the Man-brat, who only returned an unblinking, uncomprehending and suspicious stare. “I’ve a new proposal for the morrow…”

“Oww-oooh,” Maevyn whimpered faintly as Leni dolloped the gunky stuff on her knee. She had been sitting with her lips pressed together, trying not to utter a sound, but the ointment stung so much. It was the first noise to pass her lips since the Elf girl began treating her injuries.
Leni, who had maintained a strained silence up to this point, relaxed a little at what she evidently thought a cue for speech. “I am sorry. It hurts, I know. It is Orc medicine, and they do not bother with making their treatments pleasant. Nonetheless, it will heal you in a fashion. It hastens the mending process—you will notice a great difference tomorrow even, when you awaken.” She paused, apparently waiting for Maevyn to speak.

Maevyn said nothing.

Leni bit her lip as she smeared more of the ointment into a particularly vicious cut on Maevyn’s left ankle. “It is good that Bragdagash ordered this. So long as he wishes to preserve you the others will not cause you trouble. And he wants to keep you alive, or he would not expend this unguent on you. They do not scrimp on it, but neither do they use it casually, and certainly they do not waste it on…I mean, you being…” she trailed off.

Maevyn said nothing.

Evidently discouraged, but still trying: “It…it does nothing for the subsequent appearance, unfortunately. Orcs do not object to scars—if anything, they find them a source of pride. All of the Orcs have a great many scars. More than they would if they did not use this substance to treat their wounds.” With a forced lightness in her voice: “It is ironic when you think about it.”

Maevyn lifted her head at this, looked Leni directly in the face. “How many scars does Kurbag have?”

The Elf blanched. She paused, her fingers poised over Maevyn’s leg with another dab of the medicine, opened her mouth as though to reply, and then closed it again, looking away. She continued her ministrations in silence.

Maevyn was grimly glad of the reaction. She didn’t want to think about what she had seen earlier, but the ugly memory persisted nonetheless, and with it, increasing resentment. She hated Leni, and she hated Kurbag. The sound of his voice added new fuel to her hatred every time she heard him speak. Over around the fire the Orcs were holding a noisy discussion and she had a feeling that it pertained to her, but she didn’t know what they were saying and, frankly, she didn’t care. She was grown weary of conjecture. She sat by stiffly under Leni’s care and stared ahead, suffering the ointment’s astringent burn with perverse satisfaction, and it was somehow appropriate that her dark mood be accompanied by the growling, spitting speech of Orcs.

Grushak, for his part, was seriously pissed off. As a general rule he respected Bragdagash: the Orc chieftain had more than superior size and strength on his side, he had a certain degree of brains and affability as well. Not always mutually inclusive properties, those, in either an Orc or a boss. Nor did Grushak choose to argue with Bragdagash on the Man-brat’s score, for he could see the sense of the Uruk’s proposal. It was a plan the like of which he might have proposed himself if he had been thinking straight at the time. But the fact was that he hadn’t been—his blood had been up: he had hungered for her squeals, absorbed in the anticipation of playing Cat’s Cradle with the little tark’s entrails…and instead he had been badly cheated. And Grushak did not take kindly to being cheated.

Meanwhile, others in the band were expressing their own opinions of Bragdagash’s decision.

“Not that I’m arguing against it,” said Kurbag. “It just seems a little unusual, is all.”

“Yes, I guess you would know all about that,” Nazluk remarked pointedly.
“Oh, bitch bitch bitch,” groaned the half-Uruk, making a talking gesture with his hand. “Let’s do keep on beating a dead Warg, shall we?”

“And in any event, of course he would want to use her for it. After those pretty tricks of hers up in the green places?” Nazluk shook his head, a dismissive sneer on his face that this wasn’t obvious to everybody to begin with.

“There you go, Nazluk, evidently we’re just not as smart as you,” Rukshash said sarcastically. Nazluk gave him a baleful look. “Yes…it is good that you are able to admit it, Rukshash. You’re never too old to learn a little humility.”

“Oh ho. So that’s the lay of the land then, is it?” He leered. “Never too young either, you yowling little pisser, and I’m the one to teach it to you.”

Mushog, complacently ignoring the sniping among his fellows, shrugged. “I have no great thought on the matter. She’s a titchy little thing. All that’s going to happen is she’s gonna break her neck.” He grinned at the thought. “Which is entertainment in itself, certainly, but aside from that accomplishes little.”

“Heyla, didn’t you see her climbing earlier? She climbs better than Grymawk does.” Rukshash sucked in his cheeks thoughtfully, then stated in a decided fashion, “It’s those skinny limbs of hers. I said it before and I’ll say it again: she’s built like a monkey.” The others looked at him blankly and he repeated, “A monkey. The Haradrim, the lads as rode the mûmakil in the War, they used to keep ’em as pets. Took ’em around on pretty little golden chains. They were, oh, ’bout so big…” He indicated an approximate two-foot distance. “Like squirrels, but with hands, catch me? Mannish hands, and their feet were like hands as well, and their skinny tails could grasp like it was almost a fifth hand, and their faces were like the face of a Mannish infant. Big-arse eyes they had: peered at you all creepy-like. Shrieked and chattered fit to drive you mad.” They continued to stare at him. “What?” he demanded. “Don’t look at me as though I’m some senile old goatfart—it’s simple fact I’ve seen some things in my time as you lot haven’t, and I say she’s built like a monkey!”

“Thank you for that enlightening comparison.” Nazluk rolled his eyes. “Look you, I’m not disputing the brat can climb. What I’m wondering about is Grymawk. He’s already going to have his hands full as it is, yes? How will it be when he has to worry about company as well, eh?”

At this point the individual in question spoke up. “I likes company!” declared Grymawk in a slurred voice. “I likes it gooood.” An evening’s steady drinking and general good cheer had finally caught up with the small Orc. He hiccupped, tossed his head back for another draft of beer, and promptly toppled over. A series of guttering, glottal snores ensued shortly thereafter.

Bragdagash, who had been sitting by tolerantly enough during the conversation, laughed. “I think Grymawk has the right of it. So if you lads are quite finished rehashing the divorce of the Two Towers, I’d suggest some shut-eye.”

“Now that I’m all for!” Mushog spoke with enthusiasm. “This slumber party is growing old. To sleep, then, and to sweet dreams of rut.”

“You,” said Kurbag, “have a one-track mind.”

“Aye,” the Uruk agreed. “And a pleasant track it is!”

This statement was answered with laughter from all among their company save Grushak, who stood abruptly. “Piss,” he growled. It seemed an unprovoked and rather curious sort of insult at first,
before he walked away and his meaning became clear.

Sleep. The first intelligent thing any of them have said this night, he thought darkly, obeying the usual male instinct to find a projection to urinate against. His foul mood made him seek a spot out of sight of the campfire. Stopping before a promising tree, he unfastened the front of his breeches and took his member in hand. Useless fucking lot. He aimed his stream at the base of the tree. The hot urine plashed against the rough surface, steaming even in the dark. Grushak grunted with gradual relief, and his thoughts turned to the real source of his irritation. Didn’t ask so much as a mother-fuckin’ by-your-leave...

And out loud: “Quit trying to sneak up on me, Nazluk. This is a piss-break, not a bloody ambush scenario.”

If Nazluk was miffed at being caught out, he didn’t express it. He took up a position to Grushak’s left, and for a brief time there was no sound but quiet spatter.

Grushak, who didn’t much hold with the kind of slinking shifting indirectness Nazluk affected, at length growled, “Well, what do you want? If it’s buggering I’m not interested.” He shook himself dry before slipping himself away, and he made a point not to be overly considerate doing so. Some droplets hit the back of Nazluk’s hand and the other Orc grimaced but did not make complaint.

“All odd precedent our Bragdagash is setting,” Nazluk said instead, eyes fixed in the direction of his own scalding jet. “I don’t wonder that you’re angry.”

“Hrmn,” Grushak rumbled in the back of his throat.

“It’s every Orc’s basic right to deal with his own personally captured property as he chooses. Unusual for a chief to meddle in that so casually.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say casually,” said Grushak, watching Nazluk askance through dour, half-lidded eyes. “This idea of using the Man-brat is a good one.”

“True. True. There is sense to it, yes.” His stream having dribbled off, Nazluk tucked his member into his breeches in unhurried fashion. “But somehow, I have a notion that he didn’t ask you first…?”

Grushak’s tongue passed over his teeth. The other Orc’s words were of a twin with his own line of thought. Never mind that it was a stupid line of thought.

Orçs did not ask. They took.

“The balance of things has been thrown off,” Nazluk whispered. “Interfering, keeping the tark alive? It is as I’ve said, yes? make accommodations for an Elf, and…”

Now that, of a certainty, didn’t follow, and Grushak’s eyes narrowed. “Ahhh. So we’ve left the subject of Bragdagash’s leadership behind, then?” Nazluk was silent and Grushak chuckled softly. “I see. Every Orc’s basic right, hmm? Kurbag seems to be exercising that just fine, now doesn’t he? Of course, it’s different when you don’t approve of his choices.” He took a deliberate step towards Nazluk, and another, until he was looming over him. “I’ve some advice for you, snaga. This little quirk of yours, this bent for trouble. This need to stir things up. You had better curb it.” He leaned in, his eyes dangerous slits as he looked daggers into Nazluk’s own widened orbs. “Cause it’s gonna get you dead.” He wheeled and strode heavily away.

When Grushak was out of sight Nazluk let out the ragged breath he was holding, and only then became aware he had been holding it to begin with. In a sudden mad frenzy he grabbed a knife from
its place at his hip and drove it into an unassuming spruce. The knife quivered where it struck and he grasped the hilt to pull it out. The blade stuck fast. He cursed it, not in the vernacular of any known language in Arda but in the universal tongue of incoherent frustration, ultimately planting his foot against the tree for leverage as he worked to yank the weapon free.

When he finally succeeded in returning it to its sheath and had steeled himself to a controlled and brooding calm, he returned to the fire. The others were sprawled out on the coarse thin pallets that served the band for bedding. Most of them were clearly already asleep. Nazluk threw himself down on his own pallet and turned onto his back, glaring up at the stars. Yes, and what are you looking at? he thought resentfully.

The stars made no reply.

-.--.-.

A whisper in the dark. “Maevyn? Will you not come to bed?”

Nothing.

“You will be cold if you do not come in under the furs.”

Nothing.

“Maevyn?”

“I’m all right.”

Hesitant. “If it is… I mean…” A sigh. “If it is that you do not wish to sleep with me, then…” The soft sliding and shifting of furs.

“I don’t want one. I don’t want any of them. I’m not tired, and I’m not cold.” Leave me alone.

“If it is what you saw, then…”

Don’t talk about it. Don’t talk to me about it.

“I did not want you to see. I did not want you to know.” A pause. “…I—I wish that you had not… that I had not… I…” Stumbling words, faltering in the dark.

Coldly: “You said he wanted to keep you. When were you gonna tell me why?”

Silence.

“I thought you hated them, like I do. I thought you were just too scared to run away. But I guess that was never it, was it?”

“Do you think… I want—?” A long pause. “Maevyn, what do you know of… of the ways of a man with a woman?”

A sneer. “How old do you think I am?”

“Please. I do not mock you. Among my folk, maidens are not told of these matters until they begin… until we are of a certain age. I did not know until I was thirty, not so very long ago.”

I don’t care about what Elves do and don’t do. Stupid Elves. “I know what you were doing, Leni. I’ve seen it lots of times: dogs and sheep and goats and pigs. My mama told me all about it, and
what it’s for, so there’s no use your pretending about it. He was putting his thing up inside your quim, and you were letting him. You were doing the coupling thing, the stuff they do to make babies. D’you think I’m stupid?"

Silence.

“Why? Why would you do that with him? How can you do that with something like him? You’re not even supposed to do that until you’re—it’s dirty, girls who do that are dirty, doing that when they aren’t even—”

Wet swallowing sounds.

“What, are you crying now? What are you crying for?” Maevyn despised her.

Soft, gasping words. “I am crying because you are right—I am crying…because I am defiled. But you do not understand…you cannot know…This is not something that I have chosen…this is not something that I have asked for…it is not, sweet Rodyn, it is not…”

Stubborn silence.

“He forces me, Maevyn…It is not by my will…He uses me when he chooses, at his own pleasure…I have no say in it…I do nothing with him, he does it to me…”

Dubiously: “You don’t like it? I…I thought it’s s’posed to be—”

A strange harsh laugh. An ugly sound. The first ugly sound that Maevyn had ever heard Leni make: Leni, whose voice was so gentle and lilting, and whose normal laugh was like the tinkling of little bells. “Like it? Dear heart, I…I am not grown. I am not even of his kind. He is too big for me, he…It hurts me. It hurts me very much. Sometimes, I think it even…does me damage.…”

Confused. “Then…how come you don’t fight him? How come you let him do it, if it’s so bad?”

That ugly laugh again, and Maevyn realized why it was so ugly—it was wedded with a sob. “Because I am weak. Because I am useless. I have not the strength to keep him, to keep any of them, from doing as they wish. Think you I did not struggle in the beginning? That I did not resist, did not cry out? Struggling was only met with cruelty; crying out, their amusement. Squeaking little one, they called me. Their little squeaking mouse. They only laughed at me. Laughed! And did as they pleased. And took what they wanted. It was the same, whether I cried or not. Whether I fought or not. And so…after a time…I did not resist. I did not struggle. I lay there, and I let them take me. And one by one, they lost interest.” Muffled. “Kurbag alone remains…”

Such a long silence.

Low weeping.

“…Leni?” Pause. “Leni, are you all right?”

“…No. No, I am not. I am defiled and shamed. I am ruined. That would be shame enough, but it is worse, for I am also fearful, and weak. Too craven even to…” A guttering sigh. “Who could ever want me now? Who could ever love me now? Used plaything that I am, befouled…corrupted…”

“But it’s not your fault! You never did anything, never asked for it…”

A dull voice, and weary. “What does it matter anymore, anyhow? It is simply so. It is the way
things are. I am tainted. Even you will not abide me.”

“But I will! I do, I do—” scrambling into furs and hugging the stiff slender form. The embrace was awkward because Leni was weeping into her hands, and her left elbow dug into Maevyn’s armpit uncomfortably, but the younger girl clung to her nonetheless. “Please, please don’t be sad, please? You’re right, it isn’t your fault, you didn’t do anything wrong. It isn’t your fault he made you nasty…You’re pretty, and you’re nice, and I like you, I do. Please don’t be sad. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t know. Please don’t cry…”

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Supine on his pallet, Nazluk could not hear everything the two girls said, for there was much that was whispered and what wasn’t whispered was muffled. But there was that which he found interesting in what he did hear, and he smirked, scratching his neck with an idle claw and thinking how it always comes in handy to pay heed to what is going on around you, however irrelevant or trivial it may seem. And for some time after their misery finally found its outlet in unhappy slumber, the little tark and the Elf, he lay there with his arms folded languorously behind his head, smiling to himself in the dark.
Even the beech tree wasn’t safe anymore.

The hiding place beneath was grown from a shallow scrabbled-out hollow in the earth to a vast cavern, darksome and dank. The beech roots were bigger as well: they were like the fat coils of an enormous serpent, twining ominously through the cavern around her, heaping and contorting and spilling over themselves. None of them touched her, but she was wary of them anyway. Once they had been solid and serviceable, a shelter and a support, holding up the sod above her head. They had afforded her some security. Now they were transformed. Loathsome and exposed they were, like snakes, or entrails…and she didn’t know which was worse. They glistened in a strange, slick way; glimmered like the dappling light on the underside of a bridge over water. It gave them almost the illusion of movement, quivering and sliding.

“There’s nowhere you can run,” she heard him say. She whirled around, but there was nothing there, and his voice came again, seemingly from everywhere, echoing through the cavern and in her own head. “Nowhere to hide.” Pleasant. Conversational. “All you can do is die.”

She closed her eyes and yelled as loud as she could, “LEAVE ME ALONE!!”

A disquieting chuckle. Then silence.

And then, from somewhere close by, the sound of sobbing. And it wasn’t Demmi.

“No! I don’t want to see that!” Maevyn whispered hoarsely. She turned and ran, but it was like running through mud. She fought the air, felt the suck of it at her limbs. There was dirt falling on the back of her neck. Her feet staggered and she was coughing, struggling to keep her brittle senses together. There was the taste of dust in her mouth. She fell to her knees, landing awkwardly on the palms of her hands. Her fingers dug into the dirt and she stared at them, fascinated by the little mounds they formed, tucked in the crumbling earth.

That sobbing again. And now it was coming from directly in front of her. Her eyes lifted in spite of themselves, and she saw what she saw. And then what she saw changed. Because suddenly it wasn’t Leni anymore, and it wasn’t the Orc. And she was elsewhere, and she wasn’t seeing what had been in front of her, but instead the dark interior of a house…and Mama laying near the back…and her dress ripped…and her legs wide…and the blood…and the blood—

She shook her head frantically to get the screaming out: she wanted it to stop, wanted to tell whoever it was to stop it, and then she realized it was her. There was a crushed, tight feeling throughout her body. Part of it was fear, and part of it, she became dimly aware, was the tight grip of the muscular arm that crushed her against Grushak’s powerful frame. The long scream ended as his knife greeted her eye. She could see the tip increments away, so close to her pupil that she wasn’t able to focus on it and it was become an undecipherable blur. And as if from somewhere far away, her captor’s voice came: “See something you didn’t want to, little one? I can do something about that. I can make it all go away.”

“Up.”

The world of her dream disappeared, and Maevyn shuddered as she was summoned up out of the bowels of one nightmare into another. Mama, she thought, but the memory was leaving her…it was already gone, and she was left with nothing but a dull relief to have forgotten…what? Blinking, unable to see, she passed a shaking hand over her eyes and something caught her hand in a cruel grip.
that made her cry out.

“Up!”

“Please. Oh please mind her fingers!”

A growl. “What? She’s got ten of them.” But her hand was released as Grushak transferred his grip to her shoulder, hauled her roughly upwards. “On your feet, brat.”

If it weren’t for his grip on her she would have fallen over. When he let her go she nearly did fall, stumbling forward into slender arms that caught her and steadied her. Maevyn clung to Leni helplessly, dawn-blind and bewildered, as she heard the Elf say, “I will take care of her. Please. Please, just a few moments…”

“You’ve got five. Five minutes to get her wakeful and fed.” A grim laugh: “And if she’s not ready by then, I’ll do my part to see she is.” His footsteps crackled as he departed.

“Cruel. He is cruel,” Leni whispered, trembling. She continued to hold Maevyn, a kind of desperation in her embrace.

Maevyn shivered. Her throat felt tight and uncomfortable. Swallowing, she became very aware of Leni’s arms around her, the warmth of her willowy body. It should have been comforting. Instead, Maevyn was stricken by a nausea born of unbidden and unwelcome associations. At the same time, she remembered Leni’s words of the night before and how she herself had hugged the older girl in response, trying to comfort her. It’s not her fault, Maevyn thought distantly, and so she did not pull away, but neither did she contribute anything to the embrace.

The morning that followed came at her in fleeting moments of awareness. Eating something she couldn’t taste and didn’t recognize. Taking her relief in the place Leni had shown her yesterday, while the Elf girl stood watch again. Except this time, an Orc lingered with Leni as well until Maevyn had emerged. It seemed that some Orc or another always managed to be nearby that morning. The smaller Orcs, like they’d been given instructions: told to guard. Slitted eyes and pointed ears were always on her. There was no subtlety to it: they sat or stood nearby or followed forthrightly, sometimes looking attentive, sometimes bored. They were watching her, and why that was she didn’t know.

The bigger ones not so much: a curious look now and again between raucous conversation, packing up the rank leftovers of several nights’ dining, bundling sleeping pallets into tight bedrolls to hoist upon powerful shoulders. Bragdagash, who had looked at her so speculatively the night before, barely looked her way that morning and Grushak, after his rough wakening of her, seemed intent on ignoring Maevyn. His yellow eyes, even when turned in her direction, slid over her as if she weren’t there.

The moment they actually broke camp and departed the clearing came and went without her realizing it—strange, when so much had happened there in such a brief span of time. At some point she simply found herself trudging rough and stony ground amid monsters that snarled at one another over her head in a dull barrage of argument and banter. Leni walked next to her, talking to her continuously in a low, urgent voice, saying things to which Maevyn listened occasionally, only to realize that they meant nothing, or so little as to be the same as nothing. The older girl was bent under the packs she carried, and this started to bother Maevyn—after a while she realized it was because she herself carried nothing.

“You have all the load,” she said then out loud.
Leni bit her lip. “I think…” she said carefully, “…I think they do not want you carrying anything.” Maevyn stared at her. “I think…they have something that they want your arms for.”

Maevyn continued to stare for a minute. Then her gaze dropped, and she watched the ground passing step by step underfoot instead, and she thought about what Leni had just said to her. *Something they want my arms for…*

“…”

“I don’t see why it has to be so bright out. It would be better if we did this at night. The sun is making me itchy. I hate traveling during the day. Why couldn’t we be doing this at night? Why do we have to do it at all? I hate this—I hate everything. Oh, my head is killing me—how much did I have to drink last night, anyway? My stomach hurts…I think I’m going to be sick…”

Nazluk stalked on ahead, teeth gritted in response to the griping behind him, when it cut off. He hardly dared hope at first, but as the ensuing quiet approached the duration of a minute his jaw began to relax…

“Why is it always me, anyway?” Grymawk, having caught his breath, demanded loudly of the universe. “It’s always me! I hate my life. I wish I was dead. I wish I was never spawned. I wish —”

Nazluk turned suddenly, using every extra inch to tower over Grymawk. “How would you like me to make your wish come true, hmmm?”

Grymawk looked up at him and snorted, elbowing past the taller Orc in truculent fashion. “Oh shut up, Nazluk. You’re the last thing to frighten me right now.”

Nazluk stood stock-still, locked in the pose of menace he had assumed, every fiber straining to gut the little vermin. But the others would be on him if he did that. Grymawk was the designated eagle fodder for this day’s outing, after all, and if Nazluk were to kill Grymawk, well, he didn’t much fancy the notion of replacing him.

“You’re right, you know,” said Kurbag. He winked as he also passed Nazluk, who, suspicious, fell in behind him anyway. “I hear the birds in these parts are vicious.”

“Of course I’m right,” said Grymawk. “…How vicious?”

Kurbag shrugged. “Just ask Rukshash. He can tell you all about it.”


“Balls?!”

“Bollocks, lad! You know what those are, don’t you?”

“They’re located about midways, aren’t they?” remarked Kurbag.

Rukshash nodded again. “Good place to aim.” Hawking suddenly, he spat a globule of mucus and saliva. His aim was good despite the single eye: Grymawk jumped out of the way just in time. The older Orc smiled mildly at his intended target.

“I’ve thought they would try for something higher,” Mushog commented up ahead. “Bein’ as how they fly and all.”
“Ah, but like as not if they dive at you they want summat to bring back for their trouble. Head’ll just pop off if they go for that. Waist-height they have the, wotchercallit, ‘center of gravity’ working for ’em. Bear away a body easy-like.” His smile widened in a gash of black rot.

Nazluk laughed softly as Grymawk winced. Evidently these scenarios were all too vivid.

“Hmm.” Mushog was mulling over what Rukshash had just said. “No. No, if I were an eagle I’d go for the back. Element of surprise, and the spine is a prime weak spot. Attack from behind, and snap—”

At this point their archer bolted. Dropping his pack, he shot into the undergrowth. Kurbag, who had obviously been waiting for a move of this sort, bounded after and snatched him up easily. “Crazy! You’re all crazy! I’m not doing it!” yelled Grymawk, struggling under Kurbag’s arm as the others roared with laughter.

“Now come, friend, who can say what’s certain in this world?” said Nazluk innocently. “Spine, head, testicles—I’m sure it just depends on the eagle.”

At this point Grymawk saw fit to inform Nazluk of several interesting and hitherto unsuspected details about his parentage and family life.

The fun came to an end when Bragdagash bore down on them from the front of the band like murder on two legs. Though his face was dark with rage his words were low and clipped: “Are you lot suicidal or are you just stupid? We are getting into a dangerous piece of terrain here. Now you will all shut the fuck up if you know what’s good for you. Kurbag, put the runt down. Get your arse to the front of the line, Grymawk.”

He did not have to say it twice. Grymawk hit the ground scuttling and Bragdagash followed close behind. When he’d stopped to chew them out the rest of the group had also ground to a halt, Kurbag’s Squeaker and the tark child ending up roughly toward the middle: as the Uruk chieftain stormed by he grabbed the smaller girl by the neck of her blouse, pulling her to the front as well. The Elf made an odd noise in the back of her throat and subsided, staring silently after.

When the march began again it was without a word. Conversation among the Orcs was replaced with the occasional glance exchanged or quick grins flashing. They were not cowed, for the scolding was already forgotten. Rather they were tense, and eager. There was a shared sense that action was close at hand.

Maevyn explored the raw skin on her neck gingerly, with tentative fingers. It felt stinging moist and warm where the fabric had jerked against her. He didn’t have to do that so hard. What was that for?

At least she hadn’t woken up hurting the way she’d been hurting last night. She’d become aware of that gradually as they kept up their walking. Leni had been right about the Orc medicine: her body still ached but the worst of it seemed simply to have melted away with sleep. What hurt was left was manageable. She consoled herself with this as she walked, but was angry that she should be grateful for simple relief.

They got to where they were going late that morning, when the sun was still mounting overhead and the last of the increasingly scrubby pinetrees were coming to an end. Bragdagash, who was walking just in front of Maevyn, made a sharp gesture for them all to stop, and so Maevyn did. As she did so she lifted her eyes and looked past the Orc to where the rough ground they had been traveling—yellow dusty soil treacherous with shifting rocks—became the jagged flank of a mountain that
loomed forbodingly before them.

There was a sudden loud scream from above. Maevyn’s head jerked in the direction of the noise and she stared in shock at the huge something that had launched itself out of the mountain. It was broad and black from the underside, and it had two enormous wings. It was an eagle. But that was impossible. Wheeling twice over the little band of travelers, it was the largest living thing she had ever seen, a creature out of legend and time. It screamed its primal scream again and she ducked instinctively, covering her ears with her hands. Then, slowly uncovering her ears, she lifted her eyes in time to see it sweep back into the hidden fissure from which it had emerged.

“Well,” said one of them from behind her. And laughed. “Glad I’m not for that.”

Which was when Maevyn came to find out what it was they had been keeping her alive for. She was to go up, Bragadagash told her then, with Grymawk. She was to follow Grymawk’s instructions in everything. Together, they were to climb up to the eagle’s nest and take what eggs were there, and carry these down, and all—this was very important—without breaking a single one. Do it, he told her, and they would let her live. Do it, and they would let her go free.

It was the stupidest, most patently insincere offer Maevyn had ever heard, and she had heard adults tell some real whoppers in her lifetime. The Orcs behind her weren’t even bothering to hide their sniggers, but she didn’t listen to them: her attention was focused on Bragdagash. “You’re lying,” she said flatly. His eyes narrowed and she went on, “You are a lying liar, and I’m not doing it. I don’t listen to people who lie to me.”

He looked at her and smiled like he was trying to put her at ease. His face was not made for it and the results were altogether hideous. “I’m not sure you know your situation,” he told her. “You would do best to do as I say. You don’t have much of a choice in the matter, you know.”

“Oh, I have lots of choices,” she said, glaring back at him. “There are all kinds of things I could do instead of listening to you.”

“Like what?”

She just continued to glare. She figured she would think of something. If she had learned anything last night, it was that she could think on her feet.

The smile went away. “No, you would much rather do as I’m telling you. You see, you’ve made my friend Grushak very angry, and he doesn’t like you much. In fact, he doesn’t even want you doing this—not really. He’d much rather kill you.” He looked past her with meaningful intent.

Maevyn did not turn her head. She would not look at Grushak. She knew that he was there without having to do that. She could feel his eyes burning into the back of her skull. “So? He’s gonna kill me anyway,” she said.

Grushak rumbled ominously behind her. "And when would you prefer I do that? Now, or later?"

She folded her arms across her chest. She was pushing it, and she didn't care. They wanted her to obey. Leni told her to obey because Leni obeyed—but look at what happened to her. Maevyn had had enough of obedience.

Bragdagash, frowning, took a step back, and Maevyn sensed Grushak’s approach. She clamped her folded arms more tightly against her chest, hands gripping her elbows. She never even felt him touch her: in a split second he had spun her around and she found herself facing his midriff. The movement was so sudden it set little motes of light to dancing in her vision. She drew a ragged breath. Her heart
was pounding in her ears.

"Later? Or right now?"

*I don't want to die,* she thought. And pressed her lips together the harder.

Someone coughed. "Perhaps we should all slow down a little. After all, I'm sure there is still some room for persuasion, hmm? Don't you think so? Squeaker?"

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Nazluk stood with his arms wrapped around the Elf, enjoying himself immensely. Both Grushak and the Man-brat looked at him in some surprise: Grushak’s eyes went squinty first, clearly wondering what Nazluk was about, but the *tark*’s eyes remained wide and unknowing. Nazluk could feel the Elf stiff and unresisting in his arms, as confused as any of them. Well now. That wouldn’t do. He brought up a hand to caress her face, allowing his talons to stray perilously near her eyes, and she flinched.

“Hey,” Kurbag objected.

Nazluk spared him a sly look, speaking in Orkish: “Relax, Kurbag. I’m not going to hurt your pet.” *Much,* he thought.

Aloud again, in Westron: “I’m not going to have to, am I? These two are fond of one other. You are, aren’t you, girl? Don’t you like her?” He breathed deeply, deliberately, of the Elf girl’s hair—inwardly nauseated, outwardly evincing every sign of pleasure. “I can see why. She’s pretty, isn’t she? Pretty, and nice, and you like her, don’t you?” His hand dropped casually to brush one small breast. “Gentle. Soft. You wouldn’t want to see her damaged, I’m sure.” Finding her nipple through the sheer fabric, he pinched it hard and made the Elven bitch squeal good.

“Nazluk,” Kurbag growled dangerously, but was forestalled by a warning grunt from Bragdagash, who could tell that Nazluk was on the right track. The Man-brat seemed fascinated by what he was saying.

“It’s not so difficult, is it? Just a mountain. You do what you’re told, and she isn’t hurt, yes? You’re sharp enough—I’m sure you can understand what I’m saying. And you *like* her, right?” He gave the Elf’s breast a twist and she cried out again in pain: he pulled her closer in response. “*Sma ambal karanzol-han…*sweet little moon-elf,” he purred, relishing her fear and Kurbag’s frustration.

“Maevyn…” whispered the Elf in a quavering voice.

There was a brief hush. “I want my knife,” the little *tark* said of a sudden. “I want my knife,” she repeated, turning to Grushak.

“What knife?” he asked, glowering.

“You took it from me. Give it back. Now.”

“And what if I don’t have it?”

“You have it,” she said stubbornly. “I know you do.”

He rolled his eyes at her. “Will you make the climb, or what?”

“I’m not doing anything until I have my knife back!” she yelled, face turning red, hands balled up in
fists at her sides.

“Oi. Do you have this knife she’s howling about?” muttered Bragdagash.

“Been using it to clean under my nails,” Grushak grumbled, removing one of the packs on his shoulder. “Size it is, that’s about all it’s good for.”

“Hey, don’t give her a knife,” Grymawk protested. “It’s gonna be all I can do to watch for eagles without having to watch for her into the bargain.”

The girl scowled at him, declaring with brutal honesty, “I won’t touch you if I can help it. I could care less about you, you nasty stupid thing.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “All right then.”

“Give me my knife,” she demanded again of Grushak, who had lifted the flap of his pack and was fumbling around inside.

“WOULD YOU SHUT UP?!” he roared in her face. The girl closed her eyes against the blast. Opening her eyes she stared back at him again but didn’t say anything more. He gave her a close look, waiting to see if she would open her mouth, then went back to searching. After a few seconds he grunted, pulling his fist out of the pack, and looked at the girl again. Opening his hand, he revealed the weapon, which appeared truly diminutive resting on his leathery palm. She snatched for it and he caught her wrist, holding it a moment while he continued to study her face. Her lip was curled, her eyes narrowed and watchful. Turning her hand over he placed the knife in it, hilt first.

“Well,” said Bragdagash dryly. “Now that that’s settled…”
Baiting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I wonder if they’ll be coming down again.”

“Oh, they’ll be coming down all right. The question is how fast!” Mushog chuckled at his own joke.

“’Cause they could fall, right?”

“Oh, you’re clever.” Shrah’rar rolled his eyes at Pryszrim.

“Lay you silver one comes down alive,” said Rukshash. “Grymawk won’t be falling. He may not like heights, but he’s good for ’em. No coward either—least, not when the heat’s really on. Fuck me but I wouldn’t want to be the one under him when they get climbing proper, though.”

Mushog made a retching noise and they all laughed.

Kurbag was a distance from the other Orcs, paying no attention to their banter. He stood leaning back against the sun-warmed surface of a boulder. It should have been a pose of relaxation, but he was too forbidding a figure in his dark leathers and dismal armor, arms folded across his chest, an impassive look on his face. Normally he would have been jesting and laying bets with the others, but he’d been quiet and said little since the incident with Nazluk and Squeaker. Not six feet away from him the Elf sat silently on his bedroll, staring at the hands she held clasped tightly in her lap. Squeaker liked to keep her distance when she had the choice, but she was sticking pretty close to him at present. Close for her, anyway. She’d sat on his bedroll without comment when he put it down for her.

Nazluk had given her a nasty turn, Kurbag knew, and was annoyed. He’d reached her side within seconds of the other Orc letting her go—she’d looked like she was going fall, and when Kurbag put his hands on her he felt her trembling. Looking angrily at the other Orc, he had seen Nazluk eye him back with dark satisfaction: him, and not Squeaker.

“What was that for?” he had demanded in a sharp voice.

“It worked, yes?” Nazluk spread his hands in a gesture of mock appeasement. “Anyhow, she’s not hurt, is she? She’s still in one piece.”

True. She was undamaged, which had Kurbag relieved. He was not one for second-guessing himself—most Orcs aren’t—and so he wasn’t inclined to question his own concern for Squeaker. Leave such analysis to Nazluk, that smug ass, who turned his own thoughts over and over in his brain like a dragon counting coins in the dark. Talking was a part of Kurbag’s thinking process. He usually rendered his thoughts out loud, and there were a number of choice words he would have given Nazluk at that moment, except there had been an expectant look on Nazluk’s face, even an eager one, and Kurbag was not inclined to gratify the fucker.

Ignore Nazluk: that’s what he was doing. Watch Squeaker instead: study the spreading fan of her pale hair, the smooth slope of her back. The tightly interlocking fingers of her slender hands. And wonder, Ah Squeaker…what was it you did to piss him off, anyways? besides being an Elf…

“Two pieces say she’s bird-food.”
“I still say she falls and breaks her neck.”

“How much do you care to lay on it, Mushog?”

Grushak, under the semi-decent shade of a rather pathetic pine tree, had watched the small figures grow smaller with distance before grunting and turning his attention to his pack again, scanning its contents and then refastening the flap. Unbinding the mouth of a drinking skin, he slugged it and went back to staring in the direction in which the Man-brat and Grymawk had disappeared. At first he was angry, but another swig and he felt decidedly mellower. The good thing: there was always beer.

While Kurbag brooded, Nazluk smirked and the others conjectured about the ultimate fate of the two erstwhile adventurers, Hrahragh watched Grushak down another swallow. “Have some?” the Uruk asked. Grushak shrugged and passed him the skin. Hrahragh took a brief suck at the contents and ran his tongue over his teeth. “Good.” He handed it back. “I don’t think she dies,” he said. Grushak grunted again. “We’ll see, yes?”

“I guess we will.”

Hrahragh examined the black claw-tips on his right hand. “Why give her the knife?”

“She wasn’t going without it,” he said simply.

“Hmm. Could have said you’d give it after.”

“Could’ve. She wouldn’t have gone, though.”

Hrahragh nodded. They both agreed with this assessment. “And you’d have killed her if she hadn’t. She knew that. Funny little snaga. Has a will to her.”

“That she does.” Grushak’s mouth twitched in annoyance, mixed with something else. Hrahragh put his hand out for the drinking skin again and Grushak watched the Uruk’s head tilt back, watched the muscles of his throat at work. He was standing clear of the shade from Grushak’s pine tree, body edged in sunlight, brown skin gleaming. The large Orc grunted incomprehension. “Huh. Fucking noontime. Don’t know how you lot can stand it.”

Hrahragh smiled a lazy smile. “Sun’s good.” And downed the final contents. He dropped the limp drinking skin in Grushak’s hand.

Grushak looked at him moodily. “Sun-bathing mother-fucker.”

“Be quiet,” Grymawk muttered down at her, “and don’t do anything sudden, or we could both regret it.” They were ten feet up the rough face of the cliff, and he was acting like they were ten times that high already.

“I’m not doing nothing.”

“You’re talking, aren’t you? Shut up and climb.”

But she hadn’t said a thing before he—! In a rare display of restraint Maevyn bit back a retort. He was higher up than she, after all, and she was within easy kicking range. Not a smart place to provoke anybody.
"Why they always have to send me, I don't know, I swear I do not," the Orc was grumbling to himself. "They could have sent up that filth Shrah’rar. I'm surprised he didn’t volunteer. I suppose birds aren’t his thing—hah! A wildlife enthusiast like himself? now there’s a first…”

He continued in this vein. At first Maevyn listened to him in sullen silence: Oh, so it’s fine for him to talk. Then she just stopped listening to focus on what she was about. Climbing a mountain was much different from climbing trees.

At first their ascent had been more of a hike, really: a rougher continuation of the terrain they’d been crossing already, scrabbling over more loose gravel and shale, and then clambering over and around huge rocks and boulders. And then they’d rounded an abutment and come to a place where the stony way was sheer rough wall, and it was a matter of hooking fingers into tiny crevices, feet finding purchase on the slightest protuberances. At that point the hike had become a climb in earnest.

Now they were at thirty feet. She looked down and thought the ground looked far, and said as much.

“Don’t look down,” snapped Grymawk.

What? Why? Just because he was scared to? “Look look look,” she said under her breath. And yelped as a displaced clump of dirt went down the back of her neck.

That had clearly been deliberate! For the most part the Orc did not misstep: he was too slow and methodical for that, and obviously deeply concentrated despite the constant grumbling. Grudgingly Maevyn allowed to herself that he was good at this—had even given her some things to go by. He’d taken off the thick-soled sandal things he wore for the vertical part of their ascent: this made sense to her and she had followed suit, slipping her knife into one of her own thin leather shoes before thrusting both into the pocket of her skirt. Then when they began hauling themselves up she was able to watch where he took his toeholds and follow his example.

In this respect she had it easier. On the other hand, when he paused for whole minutes at a time, deliberating his next move, her fingers and toes would cramp and lock in place and she would wish she could just climb around him. He was being too careful, too cautious: these little eternities when all she could do was cling to the side of the mountain and wait for him to move were maddening.

Like the pause he took now. At first she thought he was looking for another handhold. Then she realized it was something far more sinister.

“Ohhh…” Grymawk groaned, hunching his shoulders, “…shit…” and craned his head to the side. Beads of sweat stood out on his gray face.

“What’s wrong?” Alarmed: “Are you gonna be—” He started to heave and she shifted her body as much as she was able before he was sick.

When he was finished he cleared his throat and spat a couple of times. “Well,” he said, and sounded almost cheerful, “that’s out of the way.” And began to climb again.

Maevyn, shaking a little, continued to cling where she was. There was Orc vomit all down the side of her right arm.

“Hey, come on, you. Time’s a-wasting.”

“You’re not going to do that again, are you?” she asked weakly, starting after him and trying not to think about the smell, or the burning sensation on her arm.
“Hmm? No—I shouldn’t, anyway. It’s usually just the once.”

*Usually,* she mouthed.

“It’s much better afterwards. steadies my nerves.” Indeed, where he had halted and hesitated before he now moved upwards at a much quicker pace. Maevyn had to expend some effort to close the gap between them. “The beginning is always the hardest part. Be so much easier if it weren’t for beginnings. This rock’s gonna give.”

That was all the warning she got before her hand dislodged the rock he’d just stepped from and she nearly lost her purchase. The rock skimmed her shin, struck the side of the cliff and fell to hit the rocks below with a rattling sound.

“See?”

She made an angry hiss in the back of her throat. “I’m tired of this. Let me go first, ahead of you.”

“Hah! Shit no! You’d only fall on top of me and we’d both go down. No, I’m keeping you well behind me. You may be a fair enough climber but there’s a little more involved than that. We have eagles to watch for.” He paused. “Surprised Mommy up there hasn’t had a go at us yet.”

“Why hasn’t she?” asked Maevyn, who’d been wondering the same thing ever since that huge form first swept over them at the base of the mountain. The eagle had made several subsequent forays, each time wheeling twice overhead before disappearing again.

“Female. Brooding. They get stupid when they’re like that.” He elaborated, “The problem with the big birds is they’re too smart to be birds, so it just makes them dumb in other ways. A regular eagle, you cut on its territory, get too close to its chicks, it’ll dive at you without a second thought, or even a first thought for that matter. Her up there, she’s wondering whether she can afford to leave her eyrie. Figures if she can see *us,* there must be something else she doesn’t know about. Come after us, something else will get her spawn. Leastways, that’s what I figure she’s figuring.” Reflectively, “Of course she could also be counting on Daddy-Eagle to take care of business. But I think we would have met him by now, if there was a Daddy-Eagle.”

Maevyn was quiet. She was thinking about the mother, hunched protectively over her precious clutch of eggs, and how worried she must be. Maevyn could hear her screaming at intervals as they climbed.

“It’s not like up North,” Grymawk was musing. “They’re more family-minded up there. Seem to be more the loner-type in these parts. Maybe the males leave after mating.”

Suddenly he gave a grunt. “There’s a ledge just up ahead of me. We’ll take a breather, see how best we might proceed. Be glad to get clear of this accursed sunshine.” Maevyn was certainly warm enough for her part, but the Orc was panting, his tongue lolling out of his mouth like a dog’s. He topped the ledge and Maevyn pulled herself up after. Grymawk didn’t make a move to help, only flopped into a cross-legged position and took a drink from the leather skin he had brought with him.

“Is that water?” He nodded. “Give me some.” Shrugging, he handed her the drinking skin. Thinking of the Orc’s mouth on it, she tilted it over her lips in such a way that the vessel didn’t touch them. Then she poured some of the water on her arm to clean it off.

“Oi ooi, that’s plenty!” shouted Grymawk, grabbing the skin back. “What do you think this is anyway? *Fuck!*” He shook the drinking skin, which was now partially empty.

Maevyn made a face. “That was nasty before. Anyway, there’s still some left.”
“Why you little—I ought to throw you off this ledge, is what I ought to do!”

“So try it! Maybe I’ll throw you off instead, huh?” she taunted him.

As sudden as that he was on his feet. Before Maevyn could make a move to defend herself he grabbed her by the front of her blouse, swung her around and slammed her into the side of the cliff. She might have had an inch or two on Grymawk, but the little Orc was easily strong enough to keep her pinned: worse, he caught her arm and wrenched it behind her back. “Don’t push me, girl. I am not in the mood!”

“Ow! Stop! Stop that—ow! Ow!” He continued to hold her in place as she struggled, her cheek and ear mashed against bruising stone. “My arrrrrrrn!”

It finally grew obvious, even to Maevyn, that she wasn’t getting anywhere with this, and she went still. “Are you finished?” he demanded. She whimpered assent and he gave her arm another punishing jerk before letting go. “Behave yourself, or you’ll get more of the same. We don’t have the luxury to muck around here.”

Turning slowly, rubbing her wrenched shoulder, cheek already starting to swell, Maevyn glared at the Orc and thought about charging him and knocking him off the ledge. But Grymawk stood in a ready position and Maevyn knew that if she made the attempt, she was the one who would make the plunge. At length she lowered her eyes in mingled resentment and newfound respect.

“That’s more like it.” He turned and spat off the edge. “They may say what goes below, but I am boss up here.” He looked up. “You’ve got that knife on you?” She stiffened, thinking he was going to take it and ready to fight him if he tried, whatever the consequences. Then she saw the shadow pass over them both. “Get ready. We’re about to be for it.”

There was another one of those ear-rending screams, and the eagle was on them. The world was a sudden fury of pinions as she battered her body against the ledge. Clutching, spasmodic talons scrabbled against stone; massive wing gusts beat the air to frenzy. Maevyn pressed back against the stone behind her, hand fumbling desperately in her pocket for her knife. By the time she pulled it the eagle had surged up and away again, and she was confronted only with tranquil blue sky.

Grymawk had disappeared. She hurried to the edge to look over, shielding her hand over her eyes to scry for his body before she thought to cast a wary glance upward. The eagle was nowhere to be seen, but Grymawk was hanging from a lip of rock overhead: he dropped to land beside Maevyn. Had he been tossed up by an updraft from the eagle’s flailing, or had he somehow scrambled up in the chaos? “Phoo! We’re not dead! Think I scratched her, too. Let’s get moving.”

Maevyn did not know that Grymawk carried, in addition to his quarrels, small darts tipped in a poison made by the spiders that lived in the place he came from. It was one of these darts with which he had scratched the eagle, and from which sprang his new cockiness. Not that he thought the dose enough to really set back something as large and fierce as an eagle. Still, he hoped it would slow her down some and give him a chance to stick her again.

Maevyn had no way of knowing this now. Now she only chalked the new swagger up to the Orc being crazy. They might not be dead yet, but they would be soon enough. Still she followed him. Why not? It might be a bad choice, but at least it was one she had made for herself.

The cleft in the rock began another forty feet up: a barely perceptible hairline crack at first, gradually widening into a V-shaped passage big enough for Maevyn to climb inside. She clambered
awkwardly after Grymawk, almost managing to get stuck in the process. With some maneuvering she was able to plant her feet on either side and stand aright. This was the fissure out of which the eagle had flown, and over their heads the space broadened until Maevyn could see how it was able to accommodate that huge wingspan.

There was some light from an unseen source lost in the folds of stone far above, and it imbued the interior of the cleft with a kind of dim rosy glow. She would have taken a moment to get her eyes better accustomed, except that she could see Grymawk grimacing and gesturing for her to hurry up. He had unbuckled the weird bow-looking thing from his back and had drawn a peremptory quarrel from his quiver. This was a dangerous place to linger. The eagle could easily catch them and dispatch them on another sweep of the passage.

Maevyn pulled her knife out of her pocket and Grymawk nodded curtly before turning and scurrying along the passage. She hurried after him as best she could: the diverging angles of slanting rock underfoot offered no problem to the Orc’s ungainly limbs, but for her young human legs they presented some difficulty. Nonetheless she soon found her—awkward, painful, pitching—stride, and was moving along at enough of a clip that, when Grymawk stopped, she plowed right into him.

He turned and backhanded her. Hissing, she made an abortive swipe at him with her knife. He dodged it easily. “Stop that or I’ll gut you,” he whispered. "Look!” He jabbed a finger upward.

Maevyn looked up. Over them was suspended a jumble of boulders, dizzying in size and in imminence. It was as though some giant child had dropped a handful of playing marbles into a crack on a whim, and left them there. The boulders hung wedged between the diverging walls of the cleft, forming a kind of rough rocky platform. Over the edge jutted the dark outlines of branches and large sticks. Maevyn and Grymawk were looking at the underside of the eagle’s nest.

“Hrreee…hrreee…” the soft thrumming came from overhead: the uncertain murmur of an anxious mother animal. Maevyn lowered her knife.

“Right,” said Grymawk. And gave her an appraising look. “I didn’t really think you were going to make it this far,” he remarked. “I could still use you as bait, I suppose. But then you wouldn’t be able to carry anything. Wait here.” Before she could protest he was scuttling up the stony side of the fissure.

Nervous and annoyed, Maevyn looked around her. Though she could make out forms and even some colors, her vision still wasn’t very good. She certainly didn’t have the Orkish prepossession that Grymawk had in the dark. Tucked in the narrow and protected space under the stones of the eagle’s nest, she knew that she was relatively safe—at the same time, she didn’t like to be left alone in such a place, even if the alternative was an Orc…and she really didn’t like it when she knew that something important was about to happen somewhere up over her head, something that she couldn’t see.

Maevyn started climbing up the same way Grymawk had. She hadn’t gotten very far when she heard a strange sort of breathy whistle that cut short in a hard thwop. And the eagle screamed. It wasn’t like before, when her screams had been screams of warning or attack. This was a scream of shock, pain, and sudden terror.

The next second Grymawk came half running, half sliding down the wall, right smack into Maevyn. She lost her hold and they tumbled down together. Struggling free of their entanglement with a curse, Grymawk was on his feet first, already poised with another quarrel at full-cock.

He did not have long to wait.
The eagle pitched herself over the side of the nest, screaming and beating her wings. He fired again, a shot that should have entered her breast, but the buffeting of her wings knocked his bolt askew and it hit her neck, where his other bolt was already lodged. Cursing again, he jumped away as she dove at him and struck stone where he had been an instant before. “The nest! Get up to the nest, right now!” Grymawk snapped at Maevyn.

She began scrambling up the wall again.

“You see that?” he shouted at the eagle, dodging her clacking beak. “You great featherbrained tit! She’s gonna get them if you don’t watch out!”

The eagle’s head snapped up in the direction of this newest threat to her eggs. She shrieked incoherent fury and lunged again, this time at Maevyn – and, in the process, exposed the downy fluff of her breast feathers to Grymawk, who had been watching for just this opportunity.

The Orc’s bolt thudded home.

Maevyn clung to the edge of the nest in a paroxysm of terror as the large sharp beak opened and shut, mere inches from her head. She saw the two black pupils contract suddenly before dilating slowly to fill the eagle’s large eyes, turning them into depthless pools. Below, she heard Grymawk give an excited shout, heard another arrow leave his bow. A long hiss left the eagle’s throat, but Maevyn knew the bird was already dead.

She shuddered and pulled herself up over the edge of the nest. Sitting there, she continued to shudder.

Grymawk reached the top a bare few seconds later. Standing, he turned; lifting his weapon coolly, he fired into the eagle’s left eye. His arrow entered so deeply that only fletching protruded, and a clear glistening fluid ran out of the dull marred eye. The archer lowered his crossbow, certain of his kill. “That’s done her,” Grymawk said with satisfaction. He patted Maevyn on the head. “Good bait! Now let’s see what it was we came to see.”

The nest was large and surprisingly clean, without a smidgen of bird droppings. Maevyn, who considered herself quite the expert on bird nests, found this strange. More familiar was the untidiness of the giant nest, woven as it was of branches and sticks and torn-up mountain bramble. She picked up a golden-brown wing pinion as long as her forearm and peered at it closely. It had a rich dappling pattern that shifted as she turned it this way and that.

He had to search a bit, but when Grymawk found the eggs he gave a contented sigh. Ah, there were the little beauties. He pushed aside a covering of bird fluff and feathers to reveal the beige exteriors of three ovular shapes. Each was slightly bigger than Maevyn’s head. She stroked one curiously: it felt like touching an animal, leathery and warm under her hand. Its mama had been taking good care of it. This thought troubled her, and she didn’t let herself think about why. She made herself think of the savagery of the creature that had attacked, and not of a mother caring for young.

They packed up their spoils together, Grymawk thrusting handfuls of the mother’s soft downy feathers in with the eggs as well. He was none too gentle about it: this padding was intended to function as heat insulation rather than to protect the shells, which were very thick and didn’t need much protecting. A fully-grown man could stand on an eagle’s egg and it would not break. Turning Maevyn around, the Orc buckled their cargo onto her back. She complained of the weight and heuffed the back of her head. “Oh, come off it—you’ve done hardly anything this whole while.”

How she glared at that. Hadn’t done anything? Her hands and bare feet were torn and blistered. Her limbs were stiff and sore from climbing, and she would be climbing again yet. Being used as a
decoy and nearly pecked to death by a giant eagle on top of everything... she thought that was plenty!

“And now I suppose I have her to contend with.” Grymawk muttered something darkly to himself in Orkish as they began climbing down from the nest. He gave the eagle’s head a savage kick, making Maevyn wince. “Great stupid thing. Well, I shan’t be doing the whole bird, anyhow. Just the choice portions.” He pulled a small hooking dirk from his belt.

Maevyn watched, fascinated, as the Orc set about dressing the eagle. The body was wedged into the base of the cleft in an upright, albeit somewhat slumped, fashion. For all of Grymawk’s grumbling about awkward angles he was deft and quick, resting his feet against the carcass for leverage and slitting the bird open neatly from a semi-recumbent position. Laying bare the secrets of this silent body, he filleted strips of flesh, wrapping and packing them with great efficiency. It only reinforced Maevyn’s experience beside the village well. She was a farm brat and had seen her share of animals gutted and cleaned, but nothing to master an Orc’s butchery. Grymawk, if she was to go by his commentary, had never dressed an eagle before, but he was doing so now with the brisk hands of a professional.

Finally, tongue thrust into the side of his cheek, he leaned into the bloody cavity of the eagle’s chest, reaching in almost shoulder-deep. “Seat of vigor indeed,” he said as he carefully detached the liver and drew it forth. It was about the size of a cow’s heart. Licking his lips, Grymawk cut off a small piece and put it in his mouth, chewing and savoring for a moment’s uncharacteristic silence.

“---”

“You smell like blood,” Maevyn spoke up as they returned the mouth of the cleft and saw the blue sky beyond.

“And?”

He was an Orc so he wouldn’t care. Of course they would smell like blood a lot; would like blood a lot. He looked disgusting, sticky and crusting over with the eagle’s gore. When he winced and shrank back out of the sun she got a mean grin on her face. That was something she’d always heard in the stories, that Orcs didn’t like sun, and she had seen it confirmed now on several occasions.

Her grin faded. So what good was it? It didn’t seem to bother some of the others at all, and the ones that it bothered it still didn’t seem to stop for long. It hadn’t stopped Grushak, had it? or the attack on the village. She would have liked to know what good the stories were, anyway! Where was the ending with all the Orcs dead, and all the wrong they’d done put right? What about Leni and what had happened to her? What was supposed to change that? What kind of ending could Maevyn hope for, when her family and all the people she knew were gone? What ending ever put anything back the way it was before?

*How do I go back?*

“Hey.” Grymawk elbowed her. “Stop daydreaming. You’re going first.” He had been fixing up a heavy gray rope of some kind, half the coils of which he now tipped over the edge of the cleft. Both watched the rope unfurl as it fell. It looked both strong and tenuous: long and thick, but waverling, the end waggling with the faintest breeze. And very far below it, the ground. It looked a Long Way Down.

Maevyn stared, and wondered just how she had made it all the way up here to begin with. She’d never climbed so high in her life: every inch of her body was shouting it. And now she was to climb down it again with all this stuff mounded up on her back. Grymawk had turned her into an awfully
convenient pack mule. It was heavy enough just to walk with: how she was to climb down with all of this on her back, backwards, and not fall was a mystery.

“Oooh, scared now, are we?” he mocked. “That's made her eyes bug out.” The straps of the innumerable packs he’d piled on her crisscrossed her chest and stomach: the little Orc collected several of these straps in one hand and fed a belt-thing under them, which in turn he cinched to the rope. “Come, I’m doing all the work again. I’ll feed this out until you reach that ledge, and then I’ll come down after you. If you fall the rope will burn right through your clothes and into your skin, so don’t fall. You can use handholds or you can just hold on to the rope and use your feet to walk down. Just don’t muck around, right? You fall, I could get into trouble.”

This time he did not miss her grin: he caught her by the belt and yanked her close, bringing his fangs near her face. “Don’t. Muck. Around.”

Still smiling faintly, she shook her head. As tempting as the thought might be, she had something she had to do. There might be no happy ending, but Grushak was going to die. She had sworn it. It was the biggest promise she had ever made in her life, and she had no idea how she was going to keep it, but there it was, and it stood between her and a crushed skull at the base of a cliff.

And so she started down, lowering herself off the edge. She tried holding onto the rope at first as Grymawk said, trusting it with her weight while she used her legs to walk the side of the mountain, but it felt too weird…all the stuff on her back made her feel teetering and unbalanced, and she didn’t like the idea of Grymawk’s hands slipping, of her falling from that great height. And so she went back to the familiar, clinging to the rocky surface and doing her best to spider down under her own strength instead.

It was a good thing that she did this. Grymawk was tired, the sun was aggravating his skin and eyes, and even if he wasn’t supporting her weight, gradually feeding out line for the little Man-brat was monotonous work. Casting his eyes out, he thought he could see the others waiting on the dusty yellow terrain below, but those images could just as easily have been the stark forms of little dark pines. His eyes were sun-spotting…unreliable. He had thought he’d seen more than one eagle the other day, but he’d been wrong, hadn’t he? And right glad he was of it!

A dark shape was moving on the landscape: an elongated, curving shadow, turning on its axis. Grymawk’s eyes focused and narrowed. He lifted them to see what was casting the shadow. “Shit,” Grymawk said, and dropped the rope. “Shit!” he cried, and grabbed it. At that moment the eagle screamed. It had seen him and was taking a course of immediate interception. “SHIT!!” he yelled, and dropped the rope again.

Out of a smooth glide and into an aggressive stoop, the eagle plunged toward the cleft, claws open.

Chapter End Notes

"Eagles are not kindly birds. Some are cowardly and cruel. But the ancient race of the northern mountains were the greatest of all birds; they were proud and strong and noble-hearted." The Hobbit, "Out of the Frying-Pan Into the Fire"

Where the eagles in this story may diverge, please ascribe it to their being of a non-Northern variety. But feel free to take what Grymawk says on the subject with a pinch of salt. After all, he doesn’t know everything.
Maevyn heard a shrill cry from overhead. She blinked and peered up, but the sun was in her eyes. Was that Grymawk? She yelped as a coil of rope struck her across the face, tightening her grip automatically in response. *What the—* Then she heard the eagle screaming, and her heart dropped into her stomach. *Oh no.* But wait a moment…they had killed…

*Of course she could also be counting on Daddy-Eagle to take care of business. But I think we would have met him by now, if there was a Daddy-Eagle.*

“STUPID Grymawk!” The length of rope was falling past her shoulder. Maevyn, who was locked in place where she clung, watched despairingly as the end whistled by, jerking like a mad thing before it disappeared below the level of her vision. She felt the sudden tug against her belly thereafter, as it reached its full length to hang below. Now that she knew she wouldn’t have the rope to fall back on, the stuff on her back became suddenly even heavier than it had been before, like the weight of some enormous bird settling on her shoulders.

*No.* She wasn’t going to think like that. What she had to do…what she had to do…”If I can just make it down to the ledge…” she whispered, and lowered her leg to find the next foothold.

-.-.-.

Good meat he had found to bear back for her: back for his mate, so hungry. Brood-hungry: craving the far-roaming flesh, horsemeat from the plains. A tender young colt: good eating.

He dropped it when he saw the two-legger at the mouth of their home. Screamed with anger to see an intruder: screamed with greater anger to see the intruder an Orc. Swung low in the air to take it, but it was small and quick: his talons caught air. Without the room to turn, and taken by a sudden foreboding—where was his She? where was his mate?—he roared on up the passage to their nest, and found atrocity.

*SAVAGED. DEAD.*

His cries of anguish echoed through the mountain—cries for his She, for his own noble one. Who had climbed the heights with him. Whose wings had beat with his; whose *heart* had beat with his. That great heart stilled forever.

*MURDERER! ORC MURDERER!*

He roared back down the passage again, but did not see the spawn that slew his mate. It would have fled then. Let it flee—he would find it.

He did not see the small figure emerge from behind a slab of stone partway along the passage as he passed.

Grymawk had some brains. He wasn’t going to make himself an easy target on the cliff face, or wait to be nabbed in the mouth of the fissure. When the eagle shot over him he scrambled after in the same direction it had gone, finding a refuge somewhat nearer the eyrie. Bloody bird might have seen him—the rock he had hidden behind was shorter than he was!—but the dim light and the frenzy of the eagle were to his advantage.
They’re stupider than the ones up North too, he thought. Little birds should not build their nests where they cannot see.

A quarrel was notched in his crossbow, but he had not fired when he might have. Let the bird find his bait! He might have some hope of surviving this if he could get the drop on the eagle while it was feeding on loudmouth tark.

The rope hanging from her belly bobbed thickly against her knee and the motion made her queasy. All she needed was for it to catch on something, or to get tangled between her legs, and…ooh, she could fall. She would have looked down to see if she was any closer to the ledge, but her neck was constrained by one of the many straps on her body. That and the weight behind the strap made it difficult to breathe. She would not free a hand to tug at it. She needed every ounce of flesh for the task she was about.

She hadn’t heard any screaming for a minute or two. She wondered if the eagle had eaten Grymawk, or simply snapped him in two with its sharp beak. Probably the latter—she didn’t imagine that Orcs tasted very nice.

“So then it’s one,” she told herself, gasping a little for breath. “One…from ten…that’s not so very bad.” Obviously she couldn’t take credit for Grymawk’s demise, but she tried to pretend that she could. It was the only way she could see anything good about the situation. The eagle would not be busy with the Orc for long. It was probably going to notice her, and when it did, she would be in the same shape as Grymawk. She had been in the eyrie too, after all. And the eggs were heavy.

There was a whoosh that sucked the air out of the immediate vicinity, and something walloped her from behind, and she fell.

She had a second’s impression of clear blue sky and fleecy cloud and angry raptor crowned in a bright sun-halo.

She saw this as she landed with a thud on her back and rocked there, like an overturned beetle balanced precariously on its carapace.

Well, that answered the question of the ledge. It hadn’t been so very far below after all. Not that this gave her any cause for relief. She was trapped on her back, buckled securely to the load that she was lying on, and there was a giant eagle half perched on her, one feathered claw resting on her dangerously. Two hard, curving talons arced over her pelvis: they tightened abruptly, holding her in place. Even in her fear-panic she could see that the male was slightly smaller than the female had been. But still big. Oh yes, plenty big enough.

“Orc!” demanded the eagle. “Where!”

When she heard the words spoken in that harsh scritch of a voice, she was stunned. It—it talked. It talks! But…eagles weren’t supposed to talk. Animals couldn’t talk, not like people! She thought back on the dead mother eagle again and there was another cold sinking in her belly: a whole new level of horror.

“Answer!” The heavy claw shook her roughly, rocking on her on her back, and she cried out, limbs flailing ineffectually. “I will rip your belly! Answer!”

He would do it anyway, Maevyn knew, just as she had known with Grushak, and she pushed aside horror for fierce calculation. The best course she could take would be to stall. She thought of the
three eagle eggs currently pinned between her and the ledge. She wondered if they were damaged or if somehow, miraculously, they were unharmed. The eggs. They were her best shot.

“He doesn’t have your eggs,” was what she cried then.

The bird’s double take might have been funny under other circumstances. “Eggs? What you say? What about eggs?”

“The eggs! He doesn’t have them!”

The eagle cocked his head, blinked without closing his eyes. Two translucent secondary lids slid sideways from front to back to front again, a brief sheen on the tawny irises and dark pupils—but his gaze on her never broke. It was an eerie, alien stare: more foreign and more unsettling than even the eyes of an Orc.

The eagle looked with sudden fierce intent down at the worm-prey squirming under him. Man-child he knew it to be: sexless and nameless, for these he could not see, and he had no care for name or sex in any case. He did not pause to wonder what this small one had to do with an Orc—it would die, just as the Orc would die. He was thinking of eggs, as he had not been before. He had been thinking of his mate: now he thought of the eggs they had covered with their bodies, alternating shifts, tending their unborn together as partners. Anger and grief for his dead She warred with a sudden, unexpected urgency: there were little ones depending on him. “What about eggs! Where are eggs! You tell me now!”

His talons tensed on her, and Maevyn knew that they had the power to crush bone. She would have to tread with care. “I can show you!” she said. “I can show you, if you let me up.”

A second’s hesitation and the claw left her body. She was too small to present any credible threat to him, after all.

Maevyn tried to pull herself free of the straps that restrained her, wriggling for all she was worth, but the angle she was at made it too difficult. Grymawk had been the one to secure everything on her body: when her hands fumbled with the straps she was unable to find the places to undo them, and they had no give to them whatsoever. The eagle, watching, hissed impatiently, but she was caught fast. “I…I’m trying!” she gasped out, and meanwhile her brain remarked on the ignominy of her current position, summing it up with a mournful, This is sooo stupid…

He made an aggressive humming noise and lifted his claw, extending a talon over her body in an unmistakable manner. This terrified Maevyn. The eagle’s sickle fore-claw might make short work of the straps, but would likely eviscerate her in the process. “No!” she managed, “I…I have something!” Her hand wormed its way into her pocket, finding her knife. She pulled it out and thrust it quickly under a strap bisecting her stomach: an upward sawing motion and she was able to sever the strap. That done, she made short work of the others.

She pushed herself up until she was sitting awkwardly on a pack that, she realized from the rounded contours beneath her rump, was the pack containing the eagle’s eggs. Looking up, she was confronted with seven feet of angry male eagle, neck feathers crested in an intimidating fan, head swiveling. “Eggs!” he spat. “You tell me where they are!”

Sitting on the eggs, staring at their angry Daddy, Maevyn realized she did not know what to do next. If she told him where the eggs were straight off he would make short work of killing her. On the other hand, if she tried to stall he would probably do that anyway.

The sharp beak opened and snapped shut. His meaning was not lost on her. “They’re in one of
these packs,” she temporized quickly. He started to lunge and she toppled backwards. “Wait! You need me to find which one! Waaaaaaait!” she wailed.

-.-.-.

Grymawk, edging his way cautiously into the sun, peered down. Below he could hear the Man-brat howling. She’s still alive? Huh. Well, at least she should continue to prove a distraction for the eagle. He could just make out the bird on the ledge, bristling bronze and gleaming in the sun. Carefully he hefted his crossbow and carefully he shuffled another inch forward.

-.-.-.

“Now!” the eagle declared. “Tell me which, now!”

Standing up, Maevyn brushed grit hastily from the backs of her legs and elbows. “It’s in one of these!” she said, kneeling beside the bundles and packs, which lay in some considerable disarray where she had shed them, while the eagle hunkered over her threateningly.

Her brain was rapidly turning over possibilities in her head. Not only did the eagle talk people-talk, but he seemed able to think like a person as well: able to change his mind, to understand her even in his rage and hear her out. Maybe this was her chance. After all, she hadn’t wanted to go up to the nest. She wasn’t the one who killed the mother eagle. Maybe she could say that. Say, Orcs were gonna hurt my friend. They killed my brother! I didn’t even want to be here! He probably hated the Orcs as much as she did. Maybe she could—

The eagle’s claws spasmed anxiously as he shifted his weight from one to another. The little worm-prey was clearly trying to delay. He was eager to dispatch it and to seek out the Orc that was still loose and was doubtless still nearby.

A strange sound overhead, high and keen; sudden pain as the arrow buried itself in his neck, piercing deeply! He threw his head back in a shriek of pain and fear. “ORC!!” screamed the eagle. “MURDERING ORC!!” His wings beat the air with the sound and the force of trees thrashing in a gale, and the child on the ground before him cowered. Its movement caught his attention and pain made him respond without thinking clearly. Orc! Threat! He went for it.

“Stupid STUPID Grymawk!” Maevyn moved fast, throwing herself out of the eagle’s path and rolling painfully on the stony ledge. Any stupid idea of somehow gaining the eagle’s sympathies disappeared—there was no way he would listen to anything she said in this frenzy! Now she could only think of her next move. Quick as she was up, knife ready, the eagle struck at her again: she aimed a hasty slash that she ended in mid-arc, barely evading the snap of a beak that would have severed her arm. Her knife was not the tool for this job. She needed to stay as far from close contact with the brute as possible.

Dodging another strike, she almost tripped over the answer to her prayers. When she’d cut her straps before Maevyn had also detached Grymawk’s gray rope safety line, and it lay in a forgotten heap at her feet. She grabbed a loop and flung it out clumsily, smacking the eagle across the face. He actually squawked. Shaking his head in a stupid way, he drew back a little, which made Maevyn more confident. Taking another swing, she thwacked the top of his skull.

This second blow seemed to knock sense back into the bird, though. Focusing on her again, he hissed, his head swaying like a snake’s. His eyes were almost hypnotic and so she did not look directly at them but in between, where the fine feathers of his forehead furrowed to the juncture of his beak in a diamond pattern. Oddly, not looking at his eyes helped her read him better: she dodged his next feint easily. But that was because he was trying to lower her defenses, or to tire her. He
could have taken her easily by now, she knew, and the thought that he was playing with her made her furious. Maevyn was sick to death of people playing with her! She whacked him again.

She still did not know the properties of Grymawk’s darts, or that some of his arrows were also envenomed. The eagle shook his head against a strange lethargy. He never thought to attribute it to the arrow in his neck, which angered more than hurt him at this point. The worm was turning on him. This was not acceptable. It swung the rope at him, and he caught the line with a snap of his beak, bearing down.

The sudden pull on the rope jerked Maevyn rudely forward. She let go but nearly lost her balance anyway, teetering dangerously within the eagle’s reach. He swung his head at her, the side of his beak connecting brutally with her ribs. She let out a yelp and slashed back with the knife, scoring the side of that narrow serpentine head, scratching the cornea of one large eye. She saw blood and felt a surge of glee to have marked him. The eagle screeched in disbelieving rage.

“The rope, you little idiot! Grab the rope!” A slight dark figure dropped onto the ledge. Grymawk was not holding his bow. Well, of course not—what good would that do at such close range? He couldn’t get a good shot from above: easy enough when his target was stationary, but then the girl had gone and gotten the bird all riled up. (Grymawk discounted the technical detail that, truth be told, his shot of a moment before had already done that. Whatever: she’d continued it.)

“Throw me the fucking rope!” he screamed with new urgency. The eagle had turned at the sound of his voice.

At first he wasn’t sure the little git heard him, but then she snatched up a coil and flung it over the creature’s body. Luckily one of the two rope ends happened to be part of the coil she flung: it whistled through the air and Grymawk caught it in his dark clawed hands. Sucking in his breath, he ran under the eagle’s raised wing, dodging a vicious peck in the process. “Back—the other way! Back!” he shouted as he emerged on the other side. She stood dumbly, infuriatingly for a second; then, catching up the length of rope remaining to her, she ran under the eagle’s other wing so that, between the two of them, they had traversed the fierce raptor in a simple crisscross.

The eagle shrieked as he felt the tough cord bite into the juncture of wing and back, of underwing and breast, tightening painfully on his body. This was not supposed to happen! They were smaller than he was! They were his rightful prey! Angrily he beat his body up into the air, but the constriction at the base of his wings afflicted their curvature and made him clumsy: it was a pitching, unwieldy take-off and he was only able to manage a few feet of lift.

Grymawk grinned at this measure of success, but his grin faded when he saw the girl make another pass under the distracted eagle. “…shit! Get out of there!” he hissed as she threaded her end of the rope around one of the eagle’s legs in what he recognized as a half-assed try at a hogtie. She scurried out of reach and turned, pulling hard on the rope. She was too puny to tip the bird herself, but the eagle’s own strength and size worked against him: his right wing was now partially hobbled to his right leg, and when he tried to beat his wings he canted dangerously.

Grymawk was no idiot and was not putting himself anywhere near that sharp beak. He started to unbuckle his bow again but the eagle, seeing what the Orc was about, swung his left wing and batted Grymawk against the side of the cliff. Stunned, Grymawk slumped to the stony ground. He saw the eagle’s narrow head approach him; heard the uncanny hiss from the open beak.

He threw up his arms in a pointless but instinctive move to shield his face…and a rock glanced off his elbow. Cursing in surprise and pain, he cradled the injured body part against his chest. The second rock struck its intended target and, with a wrathful cry, the eagle swung away from him toward the one who had thrown it.
“Hey! Hey!” yelled Maevyn as she threw her second rock. She hadn’t meant to hit Grymawk, but wasn’t going to waste time feeling guilty. She had a notion that, if she could maneuver the eagle toward the edge of the ledge, it might be possible to knock him off. Fettered as he was, he could become imbalanced, and she didn’t think that he could fly. “HEY!” she shouted, and pelted the bird again. He clacked his beak angrily, head swaying as he approached: the front part of his body undulated in a serpentine fashion, though the effect was somewhat ruined by the clumsy hop he took towards her.

Four rocks were all she’d been able to find. She had her knife in one hand, the rope coiled around her other wrist so that she wouldn’t drop it: now she cinched it up against her body and yanked. She might as well have been hauling on the mountain. No, her strength was nothing to the eagle’s—she would have to find some way to use his own against him. How, she would just have to figure up once she had him in position. In the meantime she continued to make herself as irritating a target as possible.

“Just a little further…just a little further,” she muttered. Glaring at the eagle, she made ready to sidestep his next attack, hoping that his lunge would send him over the edge.

Meanwhile, Grymawk did not plan to waste this opportunity. Scrambling to his feet, he finished unbuckling his bow, which was luckily undamaged by a close encounter with the mountainside, and quickly cocked a quarrel. The girl had the eagle out on the edge, and Grymawk's tongue found abode in his cheek as he took aim. It was readily obvious what she was about, trying to antagonize the bird into overextending itself. Grymawk clicked his tongue. Even addled with anger and pain the eagle would not be stupid enough to throw itself off a cliff.

Not without the right stimulation.

Whether the girl's plan would have worked or not would never be known, because at that point Grymawk fired, his quarrel slamming home under the creature's spine.

A scream, raw and livid, and the injured raptor lurched forward. With a jubilant cry the tark child jumped aside, dropping the length of rope in her hand—but both she and Grymawk had forgotten about the loop coiled around her wrist. As the eagle plunged over the side she was yanked bodily after.

Grymawk blinked at how suddenly it had all happened. He stared at the empty expanse of ledge before him. “…Shit.”

“Here’s a thought,” said Mushog. “What if Grymawk’s bought it and we don’t know and we’re just sitting here with our thumbs up our arses? What do we do then?”

Rukshash shrugged. “Enjoy the sensation.”

Mushog took a second to process that one—when he did, he guffawed loudly. Nazluk, in contrast, rolled his eyes. “Fools. When dusk falls and he hasn’t returned, it should be evidence enough he’s not coming back.”

“Grymawk’ll live. He knows I’ll kill him otherwise,” said Bragdagash dryly.

The others chuckled at this, save Pryszrim, who started to open his mouth but closed it again, befuddled. Most jokes went over Pryszrim’s head, and this one was no different. “I’m bored,” he said instead. “Who has the dice?”
Shrah‘rar, who had wedged himself into a cool spot between two large boulders, opened one eye, glaring. “No more! Enough with the dice! I’m having a hard enough time napping as it is…and when I close my eyes, I keep seeing little white dice rolling.”

Pryszrim looked hopefully at the others, but his face fell at their obvious disinterest. “There must be something,” he muttered, and looked around. His eyes fell on the slender form of Kurbag’s Squeaker, sitting a little distance from the rest of them. The Orc’s eyes narrowed, and he licked his lips. He stood up.

Eleluleniel had not been mindful of the Orcs and their banter. As the day wore on she stared at her knees and at the yellow stones beneath her feet. She was thinking of Maevyn, and that she would probably not see the younger girl again. She had only had her company a few brief days, but that was more than enough to show her just how lonely she had been among the Orcs. Maevyn had given her someone and something to think of beside herself. Comforting the other girl had been of some small comfort to her as well, and when she had lost Maevyn’s esteem it had been another, crueler kind of loneliness.

Eleluleniel was too wise to think she had regained that esteem. She knew that Maevyn, while sympathetic, could not help being repulsed by her. But even pity, however it might hurt, was something to lean on. At least someone knew of her pain, someone who actually cared. When Maevyn was dead, there would be nobody. It would be hard, returning to that loneliness. A tear slid down the Elf girl’s smooth cheek.

A shadow fell across her lap and she looked up to see Pryszrim smirking. And suddenly she had something else to worry about. When Kurbag’s lust was on him he generally had the forbearance to wait until the others were asleep, or take her somewhere quiet first. Otherwise, the sight of one of their own enjoying himself could quicken the others to similar desire, a mob assault ensue. Pryszrim’s hungry grin elicited ugly memories. No, she thought, and stiffened in alarm, not here... not now...

But Pryszrim’s hunger was of the more innocuous variety. Grabbing her pack, he unfastened the flap and began pawing through it. “Come on, isn’t there any bread left?”

Relaxing slightly, Eleluleniel said nothing. There was one loaf, but if he couldn’t find it she did not want to help him look. In the unlikely prospect that Maevyn came down alive, it would be there for her.

Grumbling, frustrated not to find what he was looking for immediately, Pryszrim completely upended the pack, dumping out its contents. A dark flash caught her eye and Eleluleniel dove forward with a cry, catching her tinderbox before it hit the ground. Kurbag had given it to her after a raid some time ago and she guarded it closely: she needed it to get the fire going whenever the Orcs set up a new camp. As she knelt with the precious object cupped in her hands, she saw a corner of the much sought-after loaf protruding from a fold of fur. She made a subtle motion to pull the fur over it but Pryszrim saw and kicked her hand away.

“Hah! Want it? You should have made more,” he exclaimed as he snatched it up. Salivating, he opened his mouth to bite—only to chomp down on air. After staring at his empty hand in pathetic dismay, he darted his eyes around wildly.

There was a low chuckle. Kurbag was surveying him from above, head cocked to one side as he tossed the piece of bread up and down. “You want it?” the half-Uruk asked. At Pryszrim’s fervent nod he made as if to hand him the loaf but then yanked it back, making the smaller Orc protest fitfully. “Oh Mushog, what should I do?” Kurbag called in mock innocence, turning to his fellows. “He says he wants it back.”
“Wants it back? Wants what back?” asked Mushog. “Let me have a look!”

“No!” squealed Pryzrim as Kurbag threw Mushog the loaf.

The Uruk caught it and grinned, turning it over and over in his dirty claws. “What, this thing? Pryszrim, you little snaga. This stuff is for thin-skins. Elves and Men and all their ilk.”

“It’ll kill you if you eat enough of it,” added Rukshash. Mushog dropped it into his waiting hands. Bringing it to his flaring nostrils, Rukshash snuffed deep and snorted distastefully. “Don’t you know what it’s made of?”

“Give it here,” said Pryszrim, moving toward them anxiously.

“Why no. What is it made of?” asked Nazluk, grinning as he got up and got in on the game.

Rukshash threw it to him. “Flour, of course. Flour all ground up fine. And you know what that’ll do to you if it builds up in your guts?”

“Come on, Nazluk, give it here,” whined Pryszrim, turning to him.

Nazluk held it a taunting several feet over Pryszrim’s head. “Why no, but I’m sure you’ll tell me,” he said to Rukshash, ignoring the smaller Orc’s desperate bids to snatch it back.

“It’ll swell up. It’ll turn into a vicious paste in your innards and sop up all the moisture until it ruptures your belly and comes oozing out your nose. It’ll split you open like a rotten fruit.”

“Ooh. That does sound bad,” said Nazluk, looking down at Pryszrim with a smirk. “Doesn’t that sound bad to you, Mushog?” He threw it back to the Uruk.

“Terrible,” said Mushog, and tossed it to Shrah’rar, who had wriggled out from between the boulders.

Pryztrim, seeing the loaf was finally in the hands of someone smaller than himself, growled and went for him, but Shrah’rar scuttled out of his reach and licked the bread as he ran. “Oh no! I can feel it working!” he declared as Pryszrim followed in angry pursuit.

The others were laughing raucously, Bragdagash included. Why not? It was good for morale—his Uruk-hai were bored to be sitting on their arses, while regular Orcs are never happy in daylight. Better bonding than bickering, even if it was all of them against Pryszrim. Especially when it was all of them against Pryszrim: the little fool provided a handy focal point that way.

Under his tree, Grushak snorted at the others’ antics but wasn’t really paying all that much attention. Hrahragh, in recompense for finishing off the beer, was scratching his back. The big Orc hunched his shoulders and hunkered back a little. Sun made him itchy and Hrahragh was handy with his claws. “Lower…” he muttered. As the Uruk complied Grushak looked off vaguely in the direction of the mountain. He was the only one who happened to be watching it just then, and so he was the first to see what looked like a tiny speck descending on a faint strand of hair from the high fissure. He blinked and squinted.

Hrahragh, breaking off his scratching, looked to see what had Grushak’s attention. His eyes, better than Grushak’s in daylight, perceived the small figure immediately, as well as the second figure at the mouth of the fissure itself. “Huh. Both alive,” he said. “Now you owe me.”

“We wagered nothing on it,” said Grushak in an absent fashion. So. The brat had survived, huh?
“It will be good now, eh?” Hrahragh offered. “You kill her, don’t have to wait on it anymore.

Oh, right. Reflexively the sound popped into his head of her squealing as he skewered her. He could feel the struggle of her body before her muscles slackened; see her disemboweled carcass; taste her blood in his mouth. They should have been pleasant thoughts, but for some reason his imaginings, though vivid, were half-hearted. Unrewarding. Grushak grunted, annoyed, as he watch the distant fleck’s slow progress.

And so he and Hrahragh were also the first to see the arrival of the eagle. “What the—” said Grushak, straightening.

“Not the same one,” said Hrahragh, narrowing his orange eyes.

There were murmurs from the others, who had also noticed the portentous winged shape. The two joined their fellows, and there were some tense moments as the group of Orcs and one young Elf watched what followed. That is, what they could see of it. Everything was taking place quite high up and some distance away: the struggle of doll figures. Sounds came of the battle engaged, mostly the sound of the eagle’s shrill screams carrying on the air. The Orcs muttered and fingered their respective weapons, while Eleluleniel bit her lip and then, with great slowness, knelt and began to pack away the items on the ground. She would not look, would not look. Would not look.

Of course, in the end, she could do nothing else.

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Maevyn fell against the raptor’s body and held tight as he plummeted, as the wind whistled in her ears and tore tears from her eyes, and the bird’s frantic thrashing bruised her: threatened to fling her into a freefall of her own. Screaming. They were screaming, she and the eagle both, in their mad descent. He writhed in the air, unable to rid himself of the rope that constrained him; his shrieking threatened to burst her eardrums, but that was the least of her concerns—in seconds every bone in both their bodies would shatter against the stony ground at the base of the mountain.

Even as she gripped the eagle she could feel the hilt of Demmi’s knife pressing into her palm, and she squeezed down on it. Oh Demmi...Demmi, I wish you could have seen the eagle, she thought incongruously. You never had a chance...

And with a sickening crunch, everything stopped.

Silent and black. It took her a while to realize that this was because her eyes were squeezed tightly shut. As the thought that she was still alive sank in, they fluttered open and she found herself sprawled on the eagle’s body. It had broken her fall. She closed her eyes again and clung to the prone mass, shivering.

After a moment she got up. The world pitched dizzily and she lost her balance: half sliding, half falling off the bird, she landed on her rump and bit back a shriek as a jagged stone jabbed into her backside. Getting up again, this time with greater jurisprudence, she took a moment to steady herself against the feathered carcass. Slowly, carefully, she began to walk around it.

Maevyn had seen enough dead animals in her life, and people too now, to know Death was a diminisher. Most things looked smaller when they were dead. But the eagle was somehow both smaller and larger than he should have been: pathetic and vast. She paced the outline of the body, feeling strange. The memory came to her of Demmi in the woods with her ribbon in his hand, and she clutched her little brother’s knife the more tightly.
She came to the head and was somehow unsurprised to find the sharp beak open and twitching slightly, the curled pink tongue protruding as the eagle panted. He was still alive. She had felt no heart beat beneath her, but the bird was still alive. If life this could be called. His body was contused and broken, his breathing painful and shallow. He was dying.

She stood by and watched, and felt a sense of regret. Regret, and shame. *This isn't what I wanted*, she thought to herself. And then the eagle opened his eye.

His eye was briefly glazed and unseeing, but somehow, incredibly, it came into focus and it perceived what stood before it. “I see you…” hissed the eagle as he held her with his tawny eye. “…Orc spawn. I see you. Little Orc…”

She froze, staring into the unnerving black pit of the avian pupil. Something broke inside of her. Something broke, and rage came with the breaking. She wrenched her knife back with a ragged shriek and bore down on the eagle’s lusterless eye.

Her blade sank in without resistance and her fist, closed around the hilt, followed under the momentum. The smooth membrane of the outer orb, punctured, spurted forth an issue of clear viscous fluid around her arm. Croaking with fury and disgust, she pulled back and struck again, stabbing harder, deeper. The sharp beak widened and gaped and the eagle twitched and died, but Maeyvn was unaware of anything but the sensation and sight of her arm, buried in this gelatinous mess. Snarling, she twisted the knife.

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That was how they found her. The dead bird’s eye was a pulverized mass and still she stabbed and gouged in savage fury, elbow-deep in a ruin of jelly and brain-matter. The Orcs paused in temporary confusion—Grushak moved first, lumbering forward and hauling her off the carcass. She turned on him immediately, swinging her knife; he caught her wrist and jerked it back and forth so that the blade fell from her suddenly nerveless fingers. She yelled and squirmed and spat like a cornered animal, but he had her fast, arms caught in his fists, body arced and dovetailing against him.

"…bloody fuck!" Shrah'rar exclaimed. "Will you look at the size of it!"

Rukshash prodded the eagle. "Still warm. It came down alive." He looked it over some, then threw a squinty look at the yowling brat in Grushak’s grip. "It would have died anyway, but she sped it along. Too bad for you, eh?"

Shrah'rar scowled and muttered something under his breath about how these little jokes at his expense were unfunny and stupid and tedious and anyway birds weren’t his thing. No one else was listening.

“She certainly didn’t do it on her own,” said Mushog, touching an arrow lodged in the eagle’s neck. “Grymawk had some part in it. Where is the little snaga anyway?"

"And where are my eagle’s eggs?” Bragdagash folded his arms across his chest and looked bemusedly at Grushak, who had his hands full with the brat. Growling, the big Orc had begun to shake her.

"Oi!" came a voice from overhead. They all looked up and were able to make out Grymawk peering down from some distance above. “Is it dead?” he shouted.

“Never mind that!” Bragdagash hollered up. “Did you get what I sent you for?”

Grymawk disappeared briefly before returning to the edge and flourishing one of his several packs.
“Three of them!” he hollered back.

There was a wide display of toothy grins at this. “Three of them,” Bragdagash muttered. “Three eagle’s eggs, that’s…not bad. That’s very good, actually.”

“More than I can carry without help! Oi, is she still alive down there? I thought I could hear her just then!”

The girl had finally gone limp, dangling from Grushak’s grip. Foam flecked her lips and the whites of her eyes rolled in the wake of his shaking her. It would be futile sending her up in this shape. In any case, Grymawk had a sufficiency of cord where he was - they determined he would lower the individual packs one at a time before climbing down himself. The others hung by to receive them, alternating between talk amongst themselves and cheerful curses and praise up at Grymawk. Rukshash and Shrah’rar set to butchering the eagle.

Grushak, staring at the girl, lowered her until she was a sagging, sick-looking heap on the ground in front of him. Releasing her, he stepped on a fold of her skirt but it was obvious she was in no shape to attempt escape. Hrahragh, who had wandered over to look at the damage inflicted on the eagle’s eye and head, came back and picked up the discarded knife, examining it curiously. He pulled one of his own throwing daggers and held the two alongside one another, marking the disparity of size and sharpness. Then he stood next to Grushak and together they looked down at the hapless tark child, who blinked and shivered and could have no idea what they were saying. “Seems a waste,” he said.

Grushak did not ask what seemed a waste. “Why? Because she killed some oversized chicken?”

“How many you know killed eagles?”

He snorted. “I doubt she could have managed on her own.”

“Hmm.” Hrahragh looked at the puny weapon in his hand. Laying it on the back of his hand, he began to roll it between and over his fingers, much as a juggler will walk a coin across his knuckles. “There are those who believe in totems,” he remarked idly. “Carry stones and trust in them, burn sigils in their skin. They might say she’s good luck.”

Grushak spared him a furrowed glance. “You believe in luck?”

A pause. A shrug. “Believe in luck we make ourselves.”

The big Orc gave a terse grunt, looking at the girl. He nudged her deliberately with one steel-shod boot. She flinched and he looked back at Hrahragh with sardonic eyes. “She doesn’t look so lucky to me.”

Hrahragh cocked his head. “She’s alive, yes?”

Grushak stared at him. Then he threw back his head and laughed full-throatedly. “‘Alive!’ Some luck!” He looked down again at his captive with a smirk. "You'd have me preserve her as a sort of charm, huh. Like an amulet, or tattoo warding off misfortune. But what if she's more trouble than she's worth, eh?"

Hrahragh shrugged again. “So kill her. Then she is no trouble at all.”

“Oh, I’ll kill her,” Grushak said. He opened his hand and Hrahragh put the knife in it. Getting down on one knee, Grushak surveyed the girl from his superior vantage point. She was panting slightly, eyes full of fear; she tried to scramble back but his knee was pinning her skirt; she grabbed
the material, yanking, but he caught her by the hair, jerking her head back to expose her throat, to let
him observe the pulse that beat there like a live thing trying to escape from under her skin. He
touched it lightly with the tip of the blade and she made a high sound and shut her eyes tight, hands
white-knuckled and arms taut as she pulled on her skirt. He pressed the flat of the blade against her
cheek, turning her face to one side. Her jaw was clenched and twitching.

“T’ll kill her,” he breathed, “but nothing says it has to be now.”

No great comment was made on Maevyn’s continued survival. It was Grushak’s business; anyway,
the others found her amusing. The story of her and Grymawk’s shared exploits had the rest of the
Orc-band laughing uproariously. Grymawk presented himself in an animated way that could be
irritating under many circumstances but, in the service of a decent story, became quite entertaining.
He was having a good time that night, talking and gesturing avidly. That, combined with the liberal
imbibing of alcohol and a general sense of accomplishment-by-association, made them all a merry
lot.

Orkish merriment can be a dangerous thing. Mushog snatched Maevyn up onto his knee, grinning to
see how she struggled. “Tiny thing, you are,” he remarked in Westron. “So you kill eagles, huh?”

She snarled at him and tried to free herself. His hands were rough and he smelled like Orc. Beyond
the ring of grins she could see Leni’s pallid face. The Elf looked absolutely terrified. Seeing Leni’s
terror, even if Maevyn’s fears did not run along the same lines, made her struggle all the more urgent.

“Here now, you leave off!” commanded Grymawk. “She’s my little pal, she is. Aren’t you, Bait?
Huh? C’mon over here.”

Mushog laughed and released her. She looked around quickly but she was enclosed in a circle of
Orcs and there was nowhere for her to go. And anyway, now that Mushog had let her go and she
had caught her breath somewhat, it didn’t look like any of them wanted to hurt her. Warily she did
as she was told, sitting next to Grymawk, who bumped his shoulder against hers in a companionable
inebriated sort of way.

They had set up camp for the night a mile from the place where two eagles died, where the trees
began again and there was some wood for a fire. The Orcs were not fond of trees but preferred the
cover they provided to completely open sky. Some meat still roasted on sticks near the flames.
Maevyn eyed it and wished she could have a bite, but Leni, though she had cooked it for the Orcs,
had eaten none herself and had told Maevyn that she shouldn’t either. Eagles were thinking
creatures and Leni was appalled at the notion of eating such. “Oh Maevyn,” she had whispered, “it
would be like eating the flesh of your own kind, or of mine.”

Maevyn didn’t think that should matter once the animal was dead. It wasn’t thinking anymore at that
point, was it? And surely killing it to begin with had been far worse. Killing the eagle…she didn’t
feel guilty about that, not really. Just numb. She could remember the black unreasoning fury she
had felt, and yet, try as she might, it was impossible to recall the full intensity. What she touched was
not the original rage but a kind of after-shadow on the mind. It was like something that had
happened to someone else.

And yet she knew that, if she had it to do all over again, she would do the very same. The thought
should have been upsetting. It wasn’t…and that was what bothered her.

Her thoughts were not as articulate as this, of course. Her mind was a swirl of darkness and
confusion. She told herself that what she’d done was killing and not murder. *Murder is a
wickedness, her da had said, but sometimes killing’s necessary. Sometimes people have to kill to live. It wasn’t murder if she was defending herself. But…defending herself from what? The eagle had been dying.

I see you. Little Orc…

Leaning forward, she put her arms around her legs and hugged them tightly. The Orcs were talking, forgetting her for the moment, and she listened to the rumble and spit of their strange growling tongue, trying to pick out anything she might recognize. There was very little, but after two days the sound of their speech had grown familiar to her. The fire crackled and popped.

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“I’ve never had eagle before,” said Shrah’rar. “It’s a good flavor.”

In a rare moment’s oversight, nobody made any of the filthy rejoinders they’d have come up with otherwise. Few among the others had eaten eagle before either, and Rukshash said it was so long ago for him that he had forgotten the taste. “There are fewer of them than once there were. I think what I had last was tough, but this now, it’s quite tender. Tasty.”

“It’s weird, but it makes me think of steak,” said Mushog. He picked his teeth crudely, dislodging a shred. “Gamier, though. Did you or Shrah’rar think to pack up some of the brain?”

“Pah. It’s bird. How much would there have been? Besides, the head was a lost cause after she was through with it.” Rukshash looked at Maevyn disapprovingly. “Waste of good food.”

“There’s better to be had than brain anyways,” said Grymawk, and belched, and got up. The others muttered agreeably at this. They were waiting on the liver with a sort of eager reverence. Grymawk had eaten no more than the portion he’d cut for himself up in the cave, packing it up resolutely after. He came back to the circle around the fire with a tightly wrapped packet that smelled highly appetizing.

Drawing his dirk, he cut the cord binding it. The scent was in all of their nostrils immediately: a heady, silty, faintly bloody smell made them slaver like dogs. He cut another portion for himself first, a bigger one than before, and let the rest go with a look of reluctance.

Passing it amongst themselves the Orcs ate with pleasure, savoring as Grymawk did, and were certain they could feel an eagle’s vigor entering their blood and coursing through their limbs. Proceedings became immediately wilder and louder as boasts were made and insults exchanged. Within minutes Kurbag and Mushog were engaged in an impromptu wrestling match that had the others shouting encouragement to both parties. Neither really wanted to have it out, though, and the combatants soon called a draw and returned to the fire, slapping each other on the back and laughing at the hoots of derision from their comrades.

“I’ve seen better matches between game hens,” said Nazluk.

“Don’t you mean gaming cocks? Hens don’t fight.”

“My point exactly.”

“That wasn’t a proper match, that was a grope-session!” someone else yelled.

“Hey, if any of you lot really want to take us on…” said Mushog over the jeers, and he and Kurbag both grinned eerily similar, dangerous grins. They were large, young and fit, and there were only three other Orcs among those present who would have made good opponents for them. But
Bragdagash was off-limits for this sort of tussling; him being leader, it could get serious too easily. Grushak was content to sit back and watch, while Hrahragh smiled enigmatically and made no offer. With sidelong smirks the two sat down again.

“There’s more liver,” Bragdagash reminded them all. He had appropriated it earlier when the second eagle was being butchered, and now he unwrapped it as Grymawk had done. The first liver had whetted everyone’s appetite and some of the Orcs drooled unabashedly, their chins shiny and slick with saliva.

Maevyn kept nervous track of what was going on around her, hoping to make her escape without looking conspicuous. When Mushog and Kurbag—whom she thought of, rather grimly, as Leni’s Orc—began to fight with one another, she tensed, thinking to move then, when everyone’s attention was elsewhere. It was over quickly, though, and she was both dismayed and irritated at the lost opportunity. When Bragdagash began to pass out the food again she watched the Orcs slobber in considerable disgust. They were horrid, and nasty, and vile, and so was the stuff they were eating. The enthusiasm with which they tore into it made her stomach churn. And rumble. Loudly.

Grymawk, about to bite into his, looked at her with a laugh. “Oi, haven’t you had any?” he said. “Well, I’ll fix that!” She wasn’t an Orc, she was Grushak’s little snaga tark brat, but she’d still had a part in killing the eagle. Whimsically he figured to himself that, like him, she should have had first dibs. Taking one last mouth-watering bite, he grabbed her hand and plopped the rest into it, smug to be so generous. The others laughed.

Maevyn squealed and, amazingly, did not drop the piece of liver. She stared at it in revulsion. It was pinkish-gray and black and bloody looking, and warm and sticky in her hand. “It’s not even cooked,” she said with a child’s fascination at something uncommonly gross.


“Uh…uh…” she stammered, still staring at the gory object. Her stomach was making noises. As revolting as the liver was, she was even more revolted at her stomach’s response.

Grymawk felt rebuffed. “Well, if you don’t have the sense to know what’s good—” he said, and made a move to take it back.

“Nar. Let her eat it,” Grushak interjected suddenly from the other side of the fire. “But she doesn’t want it!”

“So make her. You gave it to her, didn’t you?”

Maevyn glared at Grushak. “I don’t wanna eat it,” she said, his interference cementing her resolve. He growled dangerously. “Eat the fucking liver, Brat.”

She turned to give it back to Grymawk but he edged away. He could scent which way the wind was blowing and wanted no part of it. She glared at Grushak again and defiantly dropped the bloody thing at the periphery of the fire.

Grushak stood up, his eyes glittering. Not as tall as Bragdagash, or Hrahragh, or Kurbag, or
“You pick it up if you want it so much,” she said.

He grinned then, hard and eager. “Oh, you asked for it.”

Maevyn turned quickly, scrambling up onto her hands and knees so that she might scramble to her feet and make a run for it, but by that time he was already around the fire; trying to evade him, she was caught up and cast down heavily in the dirt. She coughed and spat out grit as she was manhandled roughly onto her back. Blinking burning eyes, she found Grushak leering down at her. “Oh lads…” he purred.

Suddenly other hands were on her, pinning her arms and legs. The Orcs were in the mood for amusement and here was some sport to be had. She struggled and yelled, but they only laughed. She felt dizzy and could not tell who was holding her: it was all a confusion of glowing eyes and jagged teeth. Someone grabbed her hair and she shrieked as she felt some of it yank free.

Dimly she was aware that Grushak had disappeared. Then he was crouching over her, holding the piece of liver she had dropped. “Open wide!” he said, grinning. She clenched her teeth in an awful grimace, but his grin only broadened as he caught her nose, pinching her nostrils shut.

Maevyn tried to pull free but the hand in her hair rendered her head immobile. Helpless, her wide eyes darted between the dreadful Orc and the noisome morsel he held pressed against her mouth. She whimpered behind tightened lips, knowing that she would need air soon. She was good at holding her breath, but after all of her struggling she had very little wind. She would die if she didn’t…take a…breath…now—

She gasped, and Grushak crammed the liver past her teeth. “Lat shakab-vras, lat buth’rubatug shakab-ha,” he breathed, and pressed his heavy hand over her mouth to keep her from spitting it out.

She thrashed, or would have thrashed if the others hadn’t been holding her so tightly; closing her eyes, she concentrated on not swallowing. Oh Mama, it’s horrid, it’s in my mouth, she thought, wanting to be sick…and not, at the same time. She hadn’t had anything to eat since that morning. And, distractedly, she realized that it didn’t taste all that bad.

No! She wouldn’t! She wouldn’t swallow! And it wasn’t as if she couldn’t breathe now. He was no longer holding her nose—she could breathe through that. But...“Down it goes, like a good girl,” crooned Grushak, and started rubbing her throat with his other hand, and, involuntarily, she began to swallow. She gagged and choked and coughed on the liver and, horribly, it went down. And stayed.

There was a wide chorus of hoots and she was allowed to sit up. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and was scared when she saw blood. But her mouth didn’t hurt, and she knew that it must have been from the liver. She licked the blood off without thinking. Realizing what she had done, she dropped her hands in her lap and shuddered.

“Oh, was it so bad as all that?” asked Grushak in a voice of syrupy concern. He was in a half-kneeling position in front of her, arms folded across his bent knee, yellow eyes amused.

She looked at him with narrowed eyes and a heart full of hate. “Fuck you,” she snarled, using a word that she didn’t understand but that she had heard a great deal in the past few days.

The Orcs really roared at that, including Grushak. Still chuckling, he leaned forward and pinched
her cheek, tweaking it cruelly. “Maybe some day when you can take it, Brat. Now, get up! On your feet.”

He stood, hauling her unceremoniously after him. She jerked away, folding her arms across her chest and staring sullenly at the ground. Grushak laughed and left her, returning to the fire with the others, while Maevyn stood, and stared at the ground, and listened as her stomach growled again. “Shut up,” she whispered to it, “shut up, shut up, shut up,” and wished, not for the first time, that she could just let herself cry.

Chapter End Notes

_Lat shakab-vras, lat buth’rubatug shakab-ha._ “You kill an eagle, you can sodding well eat it.”
The next day they started early and walked into the early afternoon. More trees, and the ground was fairly level, but the travel was harder on Maevyn than it had been the day before. She was stiff and sore and every step made her wince. Some of her blisters from yesterday were broken and bleeding—she could feel them rubbing against the thin soles of her shoes and she wanted to whine and complain, but didn’t want to be smacked. So instead she kept her mouth shut and glared: first at the ground, then at the Orcs. And then she glared at Leni.

Unlike the ground, which was inanimate, or the Orcs, who ignored her, the Elf girl eventually noticed. Turning puzzled eyes on Maevyn, she said, “What is it?”

“How come you don’t look one little bit tired?” Maevyn demanded crossly. “Don’t your feet hurt?” She had always been an active child, but living in a small village as she had, an extended hike such as the Orcs were making was foreign to her and hard on her body. Also, this morning there had been no reason to spare her arms and shoulders, and she was thoroughly laden with packs. Her back protested under the load.

“I have become accustomed to it,” said Leni. “We do a great deal of walking. And it is better than some other things. At first, I hated it because it took me further from my home. But since there is no way home for me now, I…I have grown to like walking. I see new trees and new creatures, and in seeing new things, I may forget. And the more walking now, the more energy spent, the less likely later…”

She shrugged and didn’t finish, but Maevyn took her meaning and made no comment, comforting or otherwise. She did not like to think about what Leni alluded to—it made her want to hurt something. Hurt Kurbag, but he was too big. Hurt Leni, though it wasn’t her fault.

That morning, she had hurt Leni anyway.

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It had been a bad night.

After Grushak, Leni came to her and gave her water, which she drank of deeply, saying nothing. Leni had led her, unresisting, to the bed of furs they shared, and there had held her, making quiet, meaningless sounds of comfort. Maevyn had lain stiffly in her arms for a time, but not a very long time. She was a child, and tired, and it did not take her long to fall asleep.

With sleep came dreams.

She knew that she was dreaming. She had never known she was before, not during the fact, and such lucid dreaming was novel to her. A voice spoke to her out of her belly, and she knew that it was the voice of the liver she had eaten. It should have been ludicrous, but she felt awed as she listened to it speak. “Dream, little daughter of the One,” it rumbled. “All who eat of me will dream, for such are my properties. Heroes will have visions, and the wicked shall know terror. Yet I do not punish or reward, for there is no judge but Ilúvatar. I am but the agent of dreaming, and you will find the dream of your heart through me.”

She looked and saw through her blouse and through her skin to find the walls of her stomach grown
transparent, and the contents of her stomach being slowly dissolved and digested, while the piece of liver floated in this disgusting soup, shiny and dark and seemingly unaffected by the acid in her stomach. Fascinated, she poked at her belly but her finger only met with the fabric of her blouse, and the transparency was gone.

“Can I dream whatever I want?” she asked.

“You can dream what is in you to dream.”

“Then I wanna fly.”

Suddenly a thousand thousand needles were bursting through her flesh in a thousand thousand needle-sharp points of exit. They shot out all over her body, covering her with a thick bristle of pinions. She screamed, not in agony but in terrible joy, as she vaulted into the air and continued to transform. Her fingers grew into long arching sickles flapped with webs of skin as her arms became wings. Her legs shrank and doubled up under her, while her arches of her feet bent and broke, her heels and toes curling tightly as her feet became claws. She whooped and swooped on the air, cavorting on the currents with the instant effortlessness conferred in dreams.

And then, below her, she saw a small shape. Immediately it awakened a hunger in her, and without thinking further she dove at it, talons extended—was nearly on it when she saw that it was her brother, staring up at her out of enormous eyes. She pulled up at the last minute, fierce heart pumping blood at an accelerated rate, talons clutching and grabbing at nothing, filled with a high terror at what she had so nearly done.

Nearly done. Hadn’t, though. She had realized in time. Sisterly smacks and childish roughhousing aside, she could never really hurt her own brother.

“Demmi, look!” she cried, sweeping low again, making broad circles over him. “I’m an eagle!”

“No you’re not!” he shouted up at her. “You’re not an eagle, you’re an Orc!”

“I’m not!” she cried indignantly. “Take it back!”

“Yes you are! You killed the eagle! You ate its liver!”

“They made me eat it!”

“Did they make you like it?”

“Shut up!” she yelled. “I could kill you!”

“So kill me! Go on and do it, Orc-brat!”

She screamed with rage and dove at him again, and again she pulled up just in time, beating her way into the sky. Demmi was a doll figure below, yelling taunts and mean things up at her before another figure came and silenced him for good. She could not see the Orc, but it was Grushak, she knew it. He had killed her mama and her da, and now he was killing Demmi for the second time. She would have dived at him but instead she flew upward, ever upward, and she realized with horror that she had lost control of her wings, and they were bearing her toward the burning sun.

She was not an eagle. She was not an Orc. She was a terrified child, and in her fear she had forgotten her own name.

She awoke with a jolt, her whole body jerking with it, before she realized that she was awake. Her
throat felt tight and uncomfortable, and she swallowed, and the last scrap of dream veil floated away like a feather of ash at the edge of a burning zone. Her tongue scraped thickly, dryly over her teeth, and her eyes fluttered behind sticky lids that would not open, gummed as they were with the sediment of sleep.

Lying there, eyes shut, mouth full of the sour taste of morning, she became aware of quiet breathing next to her. Leni was still asleep, and her body, where it curved against Maevyn’s side, was warm. It felt good. Maevyn pulled away, then forced herself to relax. It’s not her fault, she thought to herself, as she had thought before, and made herself inch close again. It’s not her fault. Her eyelids cracked tentatively as she turned to look at Leni…

And looked into the face of a dead person: slack, pallid, eyes wide and glassy and staring.

—oh no oh no no no please no, oh please please please please please—

Maevyn shrank away, her mouth working frantically, the strangled noises of nightmare springing unbidden from her throat.

Sense, abruptly, came to Leni’s eyes and they blinked at her. Maevyn uttered a little shriek. Leni’s eyes widened at the younger girl’s distress and she sat up. “What is it? What is the matter?”

Maevyn stared at her, paralyzed with fear and astonishment. “You—I thought—you looked…you looked like you were dead!” she finally managed.

Leni was offended. “Well, I like that! You are not particularly pretty when you wake up either, I will have you know.”

“But…but it wasn’t th—” Maevyn sputtered. “It was horrid! You were just…lying there, and your eyes…they were open!” And it had been like that moment, that horrible horrible moment in the clearing, when she found Demmi staring with his eyes like glossy beads…

“And?….Oh. Oh.” As Maevyn gawked at her, Leni began to laugh. “Oh no. Oh Maevyn, I am Elf. It is simply our way. No, no, dear heart, there is nothing wrong: we all sleep with our eyes open. Oh, you poor silly girl, you have worked yourself into a fret over nothing.” She laughed again.

For a second, maybe two, Maevyn’s confusion wavered in the direction of relief. A mistake. A simple mistake, that’s all it was, and Leni wasn’t dead at all. But faced with the Elf girl’s amusement, feeling ridiculed, and still haunted by Demmi’s lifeless gaze, her eyes narrowed. Who was she to make fun of Maevyn, to make light of the fear that had hammered in her chest? Who was she to laugh? And what might have been relief turned instead to anger. “Shut it! You just shut your mouth! It’s not funny. You don’t know what it looked like!”

Leni smiled. “All right, I am sorry, I did not mean any harm.” As Maevyn continued to glare at her, the smile faded. “Please, I am sorry—do not be angry with me. I did not mean to give offence.”

That stupid, stupid way of talking Leni had. I did not mean to give offence. So clipped and perfect. Well, she had, and who did she think she was, anyway, talking like that, like she was out of some ballad or tale? Just because she was an Elf. Well, she was no better than she should be. Letting herself be pawed over by Kurbag. Letting him do it to her the way a dog humps a bitch, or a ram a ewe, only worse, so much worse. Playing the ewe to an Orc. And she could look at Maevyn as she was doing now, her pretty face stupid and puzzled, as if it were Maevyn doing her wrong…

Leni was no longer laughing. “Maevyn…” she said softly, her voice concerned, and put her hand on
Maevyn’s shoulder.

Maevyn knocked it away, giving the Elf a savage look. “Don’t touch me,” she hissed, and Leni yanked her hand back as though it had been burned.

‘-.-.-.’

Though the specter of Maevyn’s violent reaction still hovered between them, this was the first that they had spoken—really spoken to each other, in sentences larger than one word—since that morning. Leni seemed glad that they were talking again. “You will become accustomed to all the walking. You can’t very well do otherwise. They will see to that.”

“Well, they stink,” muttered Maevyn. They were toward the back of the group, with only Hrahragh behind them, and he was so quiet that she had forgotten him. Remembering and looking back quickly, she saw him looking over his own shoulder in a similar fashion, keeping a flanking eye on the territory they had already covered.

Maevyn did not have Hrahragh’s knack for walking and looking backwards at the same time. She tripped suddenly and would have fallen if Leni hadn’t caught her arm. Maevyn heard the sudden snort behind her and her face burned, knowing it was at her. She wanted to shrug Leni’s hand off but remembered that morning and let it stay until the Elf removed it of her own accord, satisfied that Maevyn’s balance was restored.

“They do not like the walking either,” said Leni with rare archness. “The sun hurts them. At least it does the Orcs—the Uruk-hai, not so much.”

“The whaty-what?”

“The Uruk-hai. They like the sun well enough.” She inclined her head towards Shrah’rar and Grymawk, who were walking up ahead of them, their words unintelligible to Maevyn but their tone clearly complaining. “The Orcs, they favor the dark. The sun burns them. It is something they do not like about Bragdagash’s leadership, that he will have them walking in the daylight that they so despise. He will sometimes appease them by changing the hour of encampment and the hour of departure so the journey is in partial darkness. Then it is I and the Uruk-hai who must stumble and stub our toes for a time.”

She laughed with wry humor, and Maevyn laughed as well but was confused. She was fated to remain so longer, as just then Bragdagash called another day’s halt.

Stopping where they stood, all busied themselves with pitching a fresh camp. The Orkish chief told Leni not to bother digging a pit for the fire. “That means we will not be staying here,” she told Maevyn as he walked away. She added, “Most glad I am of it, for this ground is hard and packed. Though not so bad as yester-night’s, which was very stony. Did you notice?”

Maevyn had not. There had been other things on her mind, and she had not yet developed the eye for these things that Leni, by necessity, had.

As the two unrolled their bedding for the night, many hours early but not wanting to do it later, she took the opportunity to ask about her point of confusion. “What were you saying,” she asked, “about Orcs and Uruk-something?” She looked around her. “I thought they were all Orcs.”

“They are all Orcs,” said Leni. “Some of them are Orcs and some are Uruk-hai.” Seeing Maevyn look at her blankly, she explained, “Uruk-hai are Orcs. An Uruk is a special kind of Orc.”

“But I thought you said the Orc word for ‘Orc’ is ‘Uruk’?”
“It is. Well, perhaps I should say, it was. Once ‘Uruk’ meant any kind of Orc. But now it generally refers to those made by Curunír, for fighting during the Great War,” she explained.

“I thought Morgoth made the Orcs,” said Maevyn, who decided to ignore the newest reference to this ‘Curunír’ person entirely.

Leni nodded. “That is what the Eldar say. Morgoth made the Orcs from Elves, and then Curunír made the Uruk-hai from the Orcs.”

“So an Uruk isn’t an Orc, then?”

“No, no, no.” Leni had that face people get when they are trying to explain something they have long understood without ever having it explained to them to begin with, and which therefore seems too simple to require explanation at all. “Look, all Uruk-hai are Orcs, but not all Orcs are Uruk-hai.”

“Oh, all right. So if all Uruks are Orcs, and if the Uruks were made from the Orcs and the Orcs were made from Elves, does that make Uruks Elves?” Maevyn flinched at the expression on Leni’s face. “Or…or not…?”

Unbeknownst to the two of them, Orcs of both breeds were looking in their direction in annoyance.

“The first Orcs were created from Elves. The relationship ends there,” Leni annunciated slowly and clearly. “The Uruk-hai are Orcs that were changed by Curunír, but they are still considered to be Orcs, just a different kind.”

Maevyn scratched her head. “Are the Uruk-hai the same as Uruks or are they something else?”

Frustrated, Leni dropped her face in her hands. In a faint and muffled voice: “‘Uruk-hai’ is a plural of ‘Uruk’, so you do not say ‘Uruks’ to begin with. There are no Uruks, there are Uruk-hai. ‘Uruk’ used to mean any kind of Orc, but now it only means the special kind created by Curunír.”

Maevyn turned all of this information over in her head. It was very confusing, but she thought she was starting to understand what Leni was talking about. “Let me see. So when ‘Uruk’ meant ‘Orc’ all Orcs were Uruks and all Uruks were Orcs, and now some Orcs are Uruks but not all of them are, and the Orcs that are Uruks are called ‘Uruk-hai’?” Surprisingly, saying it out loud, it actually made a little sense.

Leni, on the other hand, looked at her in a blank fashion. “Maevyn, I have no idea what you just said.”

Suddenly something grabbed Maevyn from behind. She squawked in surprise as she was yanked unceremoniously to her feet. Wrenched around, she found herself confronted with Hrahragh’s ringed face. Gripping her with one large hand, he brought his other hand up to thump himself on the chest. “Uruk,” he growled. Catching her shoulders, he turned her forcibly to look at the very large Orc called Mushog. “Uruk.” He turned her again to face some of the other Orcs. “Orc. Orc, Orc, Orc, Orc,” he barked, jabbing an index finger at Shrah’rar, Pryszrim, Grushak, Rukshash and Grymawk in rapid succession.

He turned her again. “Orc,” he said, pointing this time at Nazluk, who, startled, defaulted to the sneer that was his favorite expression. Maevyn didn’t have a chance to see as she was roughly turned to face Bragdagash. “Uruk.”

Another jerking revolution and she was facing Hrahragh again. Orange eyes peered down at her. “Understand?”
Rigid in his tight grasp, she nodded her head quickly. He released her and Maevyn sat abruptly, all the strength gone out of her legs. “Well,” she heard Leni remark hesitantly, “it is short, but it is an effective explanation…”

The Uruk grunted. “Why say many when three words do?”

Chapter End Notes

_Curunír._ Saruman's name in Sindarin.

Just can't bring myself to omit that exchange about the Orcs and the Uruk-hai. It makes me think of too many unwieldy forum discussions. Feel free to mock and disprove chunks of Leni’s explanation - that's half the fun!
After Maevyn’s terse education in the difference between Orcs and Uruk-hai, she began to watch Hrahragh as she had before. She watched him so single-mindedly that she didn’t realize, at first, how he watched her in return. As soon as she did it made her nervous: she had thought she was very clever never looking at him directly, never saying what she didn’t want him to overhear, but she knew nothing could escape such direct scrutiny.

Not long after settling in for the day, Kurbag came for Leni. She and Maevyn were sitting breaking wood for the fire: he stood over the two girls, watching their activity for a moment before saying, “You can do that later. Here. Get up.” Maevyn’s lip immediately curled in a snarl he paid no heed as he eyed his cornered quarry. Leni’s face became unreadable, her eyes dull and vacant. She stood slowly and he took her shoulder, drawing her un-protesting in the direction of his choosing.

He towered head and shoulders above her. Watching them leave, Maevyn understood the futility of fighting something so much bigger than you. But logical comprehension was one thing—at gut level, she watched the slender girl follow where the half-Uruk led and was as angry with Leni as she was at Kurbag. Grushak was mean to Maevyn, tried to make her do things that she did not want to do, but at least when he did she fought him. He hurt her when she disobeyed, but knowing she had fought was some balm for her bruises.

Stupid Leni. Why won’t you fight?

While the small girl stared after the disappearing Kurbag and his Elven maiden, Hrahragh was watching her. On impulse he picked up one of his daggers, tested its balance, and threw it. It struck home in the dirt near Maevyn’s knee. She gave a start, looked at the dagger and than at Hrahragh.

Pick it up,” he said blandly. She hesitated but stood, picking up the dagger and turning it over nervously in her hands. “Bring,” he said, standing up as well.

Perhaps because his tone was so matter-of-fact, she did as he said with no trouble, though she stopped just outside of reach. “Clo-ser,” he said. She inched forward and held the dagger out to him. His eyes narrowed and he snarled, swatting it out of her hand. She yanked her arm back, startled by his action, though he did not make a move to touch her. “Not know how to give knife?” he growled but, seeing the confusion in her eyes, relaxed a little. “Pick it up,” he said again. She did so quickly. “Hilt first,” he said, holding out his hand. Gingerly she took the blade of the dagger in her fingers and held the weapon out to him as he had asked.

“Better,” he said, and took it.

She capitalized on this brief exchange and lingered, watching as he took up each of his throwing knives in turn and examined them. He had selected a nearby tree on which to practice his aim—after appraising the final blade, he turned and hurled it with deadly accuracy. It struck with a solid thwock at approximately the level of a man’s head. It barely even quivered: it had sunk in several inches. He grunted.

“You have good aim,” Maevyn said, and marveled at her boldness.

Hrahragh turned and gave her a sardonic look. “You know my thoughts, then? What I aim for?”
“Didn’t…didn’t you hit what you were aiming for?”

He snorted. “Question is if I hit it again.” He jerked his head in the direction of the dagger. “Fetch.”

She hurried to do so, standing on tiptoe and jiggling the hilt to loosen the blade and work it free. She had a sudden apprehension that, as she did this, he might decide to continue his target practice with the daggers still in his reach. He didn’t, waiting patiently instead until she returned with the one he had thrown. Then he threw it again. It struck not two inches from the same spot it had struck before. This time he continued to throw the rest of the daggers, one after another, till they formed a tight circle of bristling hilts.

Maevyn thought that if a real man had been standing there, he would not have had much of a face left. The thought should have horrified her. Instead she felt oddly excited. *If I could do that,* she thought to herself, *oh! What I wouldn’t do then!* And immediately the image flashed into her mind of Grushak, falling to his knees, clutching at the dagger in his throat. It was an oddly bloodless image: as she realized this, her brain promptly filled in the inky spurt of Orkish blood welling between his fingers.

Hrahragh’s nostrils flared, catching the scent of the girl’s eagerness. He watched her as she eyed the dagger-studded tree. He still had one left.

Maevyn stiffened as she felt something touch her shoulder. Hrahragh had tapped it with the hilt of the remaining dagger. As she blinked at him he held it out to her. “You try,” he said briefly. Her face brightened with excitement. She took it and faced the tree, starting to draw back her hand, but saw Hrahragh out of the corner of her eye with a pained look on his face. “Nar, nar,” he said, shaking his head but making no attempt to show her different. His words made her stop anyway and consider what she was doing.

She looked at the knife in her hand and pictured the way Hrahragh had thrown its fellows. Her hand was curled around the hilt and she knew that if she threw it that way, the weight of the hilt would only make the dagger fall and it would thud to the ground not so very far in front of her. To travel any distance, it needed spin. Taking it in both hands, she positioned and then repositioned her fingertips along the blade, closer to the tip. Holding it pinched between her fingers in this fashion, she took aim once again.

When she threw the dagger it made a dazzling dark wheel in the air, and she cried out as it struck the base of the tree. Thrilled, she looked at Hrahragh. The Uruk scratched his jaw but offered neither praise nor criticism. “Fetch,” was all he said, and she ran and gathered all the daggers up, and brought them to him, and handed them back to him one by one.

The last, however, the one she had thrown, she withheld for a second. He gave her a sharp look, eyes narrowing again. “Knife,” she said quickly. “What is the word?”

He contemplated her in turn. “Thauk,” he said at length.

“Thauk,” Maevyn repeated.

She had forgotten Leni and Kurbag, caught up in the excitement of learning something new. Before Hrahragh grew tired of it he taught her many more such words. He taught her ‘tree,’ and ‘throw,’ and ‘thrust’; he taught her ‘blade’ and ‘dagger.’ She sat at the fire afterwards and said them under her breath: “*Dru, hodh, shati,*” she muttered, “*pros, kurtil. Thauk.*”

She was still saying them when Leni returned to the fire, not looking very pretty at all. Her eyes
were swollen and bruised—she had obviously been crying. They widened a little at what she heard coming out of Maevyn’s mouth. With effort she kept from speaking in haste. “Maevyn, what have you been doing?” she asked carefully.

Maevyn kept saying the words as if she had not heard the question. Then she looked at Leni. “I’ve been learning stuff,” she said, and there was challenge in her voice.

Stuff you wouldn’t teach me. And what have you been doing, huh?

“Krir,” said Maevyn, looking at her. “Pros, nugis. Daumab.”

Chapter End Notes

Flasug. Speaking.

Krir. Pros, nugis. Daumab. "Slash. Cut, stab. Hurt." Yes, pros is the word for both "blade" and "cut." I could have used plag for "cut" instead, but liked the happy accident of pros.
Maevyn began to pick up Orc-speech with a speed that appalled Leni. Her strange session with Hrahragh was only the beginning—after they had stopped each day, and Maevyn had done whatever work needed doing, she would sit on her heels, ready to abandon Leni at the earliest opportunity. Hrahragh ignored her while he tended matters of his own; after a time, though, he would give her a glare. “Why make eyes at me?” he would demand. “Come be useful.” He would have her serve as a retriever for his daggers then, or set her to sharpening the instruments of his killing. And, offhandedly, he would teach her Orkish.

*Kil* was sky. *Gur* was stone. They were surrounded by wretched, horrid *gith*.

He did not let her throw a blade again. She did not care. Words, she knew instinctively, could be a weapon. The little girl was intent on learning all she could. It was not only from Hrahragh, though—as many as he gave her, he was still under his own limitations. Nothing daunted, Maevyn began looking elsewhere for answers.

First she seized on Grymawk: after their shared experience with the eagle he was not unfriendly and he liked to talk well enough. Simple two-word exchanges, however, proved difficult. Running lists of words, one against the other, and pairing those in the Common Tongue with their Orkish equivalents was not Grymawk’s idea of good conversation. He soon told her to shut up and get lost.

Maevyn’s interest in learning their tongue had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the Orcs, though. At this point an unexpected volunteer stepped forward: Mushog, another of the tall Uruk-hai. Surprisingly, he seemed happy to teach her anything she wanted. Even unprompted he would name things for her. Maevyn couldn’t believe her luck! In her eagerness, she missed the wicked grin attending many of his answers…

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“Ah, *mir pau-at dagrishurr!*” declared Maevyn when Leni passed her the drinking skin. It was a hot day and they had been walking for a while: she was looking forward to quenching her thirst.

The Elf girl, who had just taken a sip, choked and sputtered. The Orcs immediately before and behind them started laughing.

“What?” said Maevyn, confused. “What is it?”

“Maevyn, you just said…”

“What?”

Leni bit her lip. “Never mind. Just…it is better that you do not say it again.”

“*Nar*, don’t hold back,” said Rukshash, still snorting with amusement. “Tell us more about how much you love goat-piss.”

“…I didn’t say that!” said Maevyn indignantly. They only laughed again and her face burned with the slow, horrible conviction that this was, in fact, exactly what she had said. But she had practiced that phrase, waiting for the opportunity to use ‘water’ in a sentence. How…?
“Mushog…” she realized under her breath.

“Yes?” He called drolly from several Orcs behind, hearing her easily with his pointed ears.

Maevyn gritted her teeth in a fierce scowl. “What’s ‘water’?” she asked Leni tersely.

The Elf girl said nothing.

“Water? Skai! Better to drink the goat-piss!” declared Rukshash. “Nar jut pau—poshak shafrenaum jut-ishi. I don’t drink water, not when I can help it. Fish fuck in it.”

“I like water well enough,” said Grymawk. “Better in this heat than beer. On a day like this, beer just makes me thirstier.”

At this a debate sprang up: water or beer on a warm sunny day? Unlike Grymawk, most of the regular Orcs were inclined towards beer, largely as a means of coping with the effects of daylight. “Beer makes you warmer,” Shrah’rar summed it up nicely, “but you don’t care as much.” On the other hand the Uruk-hai, when they were up and doing, preferred something that would not muddle their senses. The conversation was effectively routed when Pryszrim volunteered that he liked milk.

There wasn’t even laughter. There was just silence. At length, Grushak spoke up. “Just where the fuck have you been getting milk?” He had a mental image of Pryszrim sidling up, Shrah’rar-fashion, alongside an unsuspecting heifer.

“I find buckets of it sometimes when we’re on a raid,” said Pryszrim, encouraged by the fact that, for a change, they weren’t laughing at him. This should, of course, have been a warning.


"It's good," he said defensively. "Especially when it's still frothy from the milking."

"When it's still frothy…” The big Orc had a strange look on his face. Suddenly he snickered.

“What?” asked Pryszrim.

“Here now, how do you know that’s milk?” said Mushog. “I mean, if you’re just randomly drinking out of strange buckets…”

“But what else would it be?” asked Pryszrim, scratching his head. Grins of malicious glee were passing amongst his fellows at this point. It fell to Nazluk, always delighted by the bearing of ill tidings, to suggest a different possibility. “Nar,” said Pryzrim, shaking his head, “it was white just like milk, I swear it was.” What Nazluk said couldn’t possibly be true. Semen, after all, was black.

“You idiot,” said Nazluk, “animal spunk is white! Isn’t that right, Shrah’rar?”

Shrah’rar, skeptical, began, “Yes, but it’s pretty easy to tell spunk apart from—” Nazluk glared at him and he quickly said, “Yes, white, just like milk.”

Pryszrim was looking ill.

“Don’t know what you’re so upset about,” Rukshash scoffed. “Garn, you were happy enough to drink it when you thought it was milk. They both come out of a cow…er, out of kine, at any rate.”
Traumatized, the gullible Orc had begun to moan softly. They laughed and continued to torment him with false comfort, and with loud musings on why a farmer might keep horse or bull ejaculate in a bucket.

Maevyn, who understood little of what was being said, both because of her age and because the conversation moved in and out of Orkish, tried determinedly to follow the sense of it. All she knew was they were talking about something nastier than either goat urine or water. Eleluleniel, unfortunate enough to understand considerably more, walked close-mouthed and silent, her eyes fixed on the way ahead. Conversations such as this were a large part of why she did not want to teach Maevyn any of their speech—though it was true the Orcs were filthy in any tongue…

Around noon they came to a river. The Orcs were aware before they reached it, catching the scent of running water up ahead. Passing through the last of the trees that hid it from their sight, Bragdagash called a halt and they stopped and stood on the mossy embankment, gazing with varying degrees of interest upon the river slipping by before them. It was not overly broad, perhaps some ten yards across. Tree cover shaded either side, but sun shown brightly on the middle way and there the water glimmered greenly. It flowed so smoothly it looked utterly still.

Bragdagash picked up a stick and threw it out into the river. Marking where he began, he kept pace on the bank with the stick as it floated along, counting under his breath as he went: “Ash, shun, gakh…krak, djor…” Reaching ten, he decided that it had not traveled all that far. “Current’s not bad,” he said, strolling back to address the others. “We’ll stop here for a bit, have us a little swim.”

“Fuckin’ all right!” Mushog crowed. “I haven’t had a bath in ages!”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” his Chief commented dryly.

“D’you reckon there’s pike in there?” Kurbag had stepped up to the edge and was peering down into the silty water.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” said Mushog, shedding his tunic. Hrahragh had already divested himself of loincloth and chain mail shirt and now strode purposefully into the water, quite nude. Mushog, fumbling with the lacing at the front of his breeches, grimaced in good-natured resentment at the other Uruk. There was something to be said for traveling light.

While the three Uruk-hai and one half-Uruk assayed the river, their fellows on the shore eyed it with distaste. Orcs hold no love for swimming, nor for bathing, nor, indeed, for anything involving their immersion in water. Most Orcs are not made for it, built as they are with squat dense bodies that make keeping afloat a challenge. Nor were such activities their custom when generation upon generation of cavern-bred Orcs had it pounded in to steer well clear of water.

For water there was aplenty in the hidden recesses of the world. Ageless bodies of brackish water stood in silent, dripping caverns. Underground trickles made their way through earth and loam till they came to carve their unhurried, inexorable passage through living stone; underground streams fed fathomless seas where cavefish swam, their eyes grown over with scales in blackness no eyes might hope to penetrate; also there were other things more slimy than fish. Orcs did not go lightly there, where strange shapes heaved themselves up over the edge of chiselled shorelines, and made wet glimmering paths on silent stone: paths that meandered and led back into the dark pools from whence they had come.

No, it did not pay to go swimming in the dark, and the Orcs liked water warmed by nasty noonday sun no better. Besides, generation upon generation of cavern-bred Orcs had developed their own
brand of personal hygiene.

“Let’s break out the oil then, boys,” said Grushak. He looked at Maevyn and his eyes narrowed. “Oi, what are you about, eh?”

Maevyn had made a funny little squeak when the Uruk-hai began stripping down in front of her, and had immediately trained her eyes on the leafy branches overhead. “What?” she asked, still staring skyward.

He growled and cuffed the back of her head. “Knock it off,” he said, "and put that crap down, and give me that pack you're wearing." Sullenly she began removing the various articles of equipage he had piled on her earlier; Grushak, grown impatient, yanked her to him and began pawing through the pack in question. She squirmed and stood taller, clearly unhappy with the strain on her armpits. He ignored this and rooted around until he found what he was searching for. Withdrawing the small clay vial of oil, he released Maevyn with a grunt.

She pulled away as quick as she was able, turning and glaring at Grushak. Then she looked around at the other Orcs and saw that they too were removing similar vials from their gear and withdrawing to comfortable places back in the heavier shade, where there would be no chance exposure to sunlight.

Out in the river, Kurbag had discovered some soap root growing wild along the bank. "Here," he called over to Mushog, "something to soap your dick with, and don't say I never did anything for you."

"Shit, I hold no truck with this lathering nonsense," said Mushog. "That's for those snaga up on the bank. Plain old water's good enough for me."

"'Snaga’, is it?" came a voice from the shade. Rukshash jeered at Mushog: "Water's the stuff for you, eh? You're cocky now, friend, but just wait until one of those pike in there has a nibble on something near and dear to you."

"The only pike in this river is me," said Mushog with a predatory grin, and he knifed sideways into the water.

Rukshash laughed. "Did you hear that? You'd best be watching yer arse, Kurbag."

"Believe me, I am," muttered Kurbag. Sudsing his tough hide, he kept an eye on the faint eddies where Mushog had submerged. He had bathed in the Uruk’s company before. Mushog pinched.

On the bank, Maevyn was cringing. The regular Orcs were also taking off their clothes but were not getting in the water—and some of them were completely naked. It was not a pretty sight, and there seemed to be nowhere safe for her to turn her eyes. Feeling insecure, she looked to Leni, but Leni was nowhere to be seen. Alarmed, she cast about for the Elf girl urgently, her frantic eyes passing over dark bodies in varying stages of undress before she realized that Leni must have taken the opportunity to quietly slip away. Feeling abandoned and betrayed, Maevyn hugged herself miserably. Her reluctant gaze wandered back to Grushak.

The big Orc had stripped to the waist. Focused on the task at hand and unmindful of anything else, he spilled some of the oil from his vial into one hand and began to smear it on his arm, working the greasy stuff thoroughly into his skin. He oiled the full length of his arm, from shoulder to elbow and the crook of his elbow, elbow to wrist and the back of his hand, and the underside of his arm as well. Maevyn stared all the while, wondering what he was doing. Then, taking up a curious curving metal implement, he positioned it at the top of his shoulder, and she gasped in horror as he slowly
flayed the length of his arm.

Or seemed to. A broad gray peel curled up and over the top of the scraper, and Maevyn thought at first that he was taking his skin off. It wasn’t the Orc’s hide, though. It was a thick scum of grime and sweat and dead skin that he had scraped away, in a single unbroken shaving, from shoulder to elbow.

Oil there was as well as water in the deep places of the world, and it was this the Orcs had learned to use instead, smearing it on themselves and then scraping the loosened filth from their bodies.

"Ahhh…time enough it’s been, and no mistake." Maevyn, still in shock, looked at Rukshash just as he dropped his trousers, and just in time to see something that she really had not wished to see. She closed her eyes and whimpered softly.

Rukshash glanced at the girl and snorted. “Here, what’s your problem? Never seen a dick before?” He cackled at her obvious discomfort. Stepping out of his trousers, he eased down onto his haunches with a sigh, his bent legs sprawled before him. Being older, it was easier for him to start at the bottom and work his way to the top. He poured some oil into his hand and spat in it before rubbing the stuff together between his palms.

“Why do you do that, anyway?” rumbled Grushak.

“Makes it go further, of course.” Rukshash ran the heels of his palms over his thighs, massaging the crude mixture into his leathery skin. “Besides, they say that there is nothing better than your own emissions to open up your pores. I’d jerk off first, but spit is quicker. Great Eye, but I have needed this…” He groaned and leaned forward, massaging his sore calves.

Maevyn, knowing that she was going to have to open her eyes sooner or later, opened them and was relieved to see nothing more disturbing than the old Orc’s back and skinny shoulders. She looked around again, hoping to find that Leni had come back from wherever she’d gone off to, but the Elf girl had not returned.

Sighing, Maevyn sat down on a stray sleeping roll and watched the river, where the Uruk-hai were swimming, their brown bodies gleaming in the sun—save for Kurbag, with his dark gray skin. This had confused her till Leni made brief explanation of his half-breed status. Maevyn wondered how that worked out: which parent had been Orc, which Uruk. She wondered what girl Orcs might look like, and if they were as ugly as boys. She had never thought about it before, but of course girl Orcs must exist or where else would new Orcs come from? Just pop out of the ground? That would be stupid.

What the Orcs were doing was disgusting, but swimming looked nice. Maevyn could not swim—she had often waded and played in the stream near her home, but the stream had not been deep enough for more. She thought that it was something she would like trying, if it weren’t for the big naked Uruk-hai in the water, nastying it up…

"Garn, where's that bloody Nazluk got off to, eh?" complained Rukshash. "I need him to do my back."

"I can do your back," said Grushak.

Rukshash turned his head and give him a disparaging look. "With those great mitts of yours?" he asked skeptically. "Friend, I would fight alongside of you against any foe, but your hands are not Nazluk's. Say what you will about that one, he has a clever touch…" Rukshash trailed off as his eye fell on the bored child gazing at the river. "Here now!" he said suddenly, making her jump.
"Girl! Scrape my back."

Maevyn gawked at him. "…no!" she managed, outraged.

"What do you mean, 'No'? You're not doing anything."

"I don't wanna." She could think of few things more disgusting than scraping an Orc's back.

Rukshash smiled a slow smile. "'Don't wanna,' eh?" he murmured softly. "Oi, Grushak!"

Maevyn's eyes widened. She looked quickly at the bigger Orc.

"Hmm?" Grushak was dislodging another strip of grime.

"This little snot here says she won't scrape my back."

He lifted his head, his yellow eyes locking on Maevyn. "Do what he says, Brat."

Maevyn started to fold her arms across her chest, but when Grushak made a partial movement toward her she sprang up and stalked over to Rukshash. Grushak subsided, returning to his own scraping but keeping an eye on the pair of them.

Rukshash cackled. "Hurrr, change your mind, eh? Thought you might. Now, let me see your hand." He caught her by the arm, his nails digging into her flesh. Maevyn gritted her teeth but endured his grip. Forcing her hand open, Rukshash studied her small palm, running one gnarled finger along the creases in it. "Aye, these will do," he said. "Soft hands."

"They're getting harder," she said, glaring. She was proud of the callous she had started to develop.

"Hah! You think so, eh?" He gave a dismissive snort. Then he took his vial of oil and dripped some on her hand, and spat on it too despite her protests. He continued to grip her wrist for a moment, leering at her. "Make it good," he said, "and I might just do something nice for you some day." He licked his lips. Maevyn stared at him, feeling sick. He chuckled and released her. Placing his hands on his knees he leaned forward, his back curved and anticipatory.

Extremely unhappy, Maevyn got behind Rukshash and stared at the terrain before her. Closing her eyes she took a deep breath, then opened them again. It hadn’t gotten any prettier. His skin was like a toad’s, rough and irregular, and he had a number of boils. A gang of vicious weal-like scars crisscrossed his back: the aftermath of a bad flogging, or more than one. The vertebrae of his spine jutted out as he hunkered forward, making an impatient noise in his throat; the flesh at his sides folded in deep leathery creases. Rukshash had a paunch, but from behind he looked almost emaciated.

Gingerly she placed her hand against his back. It was hot and abrasive to the touch: gritty almost. She began to move her hand in a circle, working the oil into his hide as she had seen Grushak do. "Both hands if you please," came the mocking voice of Rukshash. Irritated, she rubbed her hands together, before, placing both against his back, she started to scrub harder. The Orc clucked disapproval: "Now now. Gentle is as gentle does." She grimaced and slowed her pace, returning to the circular motion she had made before, this time with both hands.

Rukshash didn’t say anything for a while. Then he moaned. "Lower," he murmured, "go lower." Maevyn gave up on defiance. Kneeling on the ground behind him she leaned forward, continuing to rub the oil into his back. When she went lower she found a place at the small of his back where the muscles beneath were bunched and tight: instinctively she kneaded with the balls of her fingers and the heels of her hands until those tight muscles quivered and relaxed. Rukshash whimpered,
sounding almost as if he were in pain. “Ohhhhh...that’s nice...” he said hoarsely.

Maevyn froze. With a clenched jaw she finished working the oil into his skin. “Done,” she said abruptly. “I can go now, right?” She was getting up, not waiting for permission.

Rukshash swiveled to face her: “Not a chance.” Picking up the scraper on the ground beside him, he extended it to her. She started to reach for it and he pulled it away, his good eye narrowing. Perhaps he had noticed the sudden gleam in her own eyes. “Have you used one of these before?” She stared at him in sullen silence. Watching her, he thwacked the implement against his hand. “It’s blunt, see? Doesn’t cut. Now, you could try to use it like a knife, and if you did it might even hurt me a little. Mostly, though, I would just be annoyed. You wouldn’t want to annoy old Rukshash, would you?” Maevyn was stubbornly silent. At length she shook her head. Smirking a little, he handed the scraper to her.

Maevyn studied the implement briefly. The ‘blade’ of the scraper was of some black, dull-looking metal: curving, flat, set in a cracked wooden handle. It had edge enough to lift and scoop away excess oil and dirt. It was also, as Rukshash said, not something she could use as a weapon. Not after what he had said, anyway, when she knew that he was watching for her to do so. Laying the curve of the scraper against his back, she slid it down experimentally. A long shaving of gray scum curled up and over the back of her hand. Maevyn stopped what she was doing immediately to shake it off but it dangled like an obscene gray slug—gagging, she shook her hand until it fell away.

She jumped up and threw the scraper to the ground. “No! I’m not doing this any more!!”

“Oh Gru-shak...” sang Rukshash in a lilting voice.

Behind Maevyn, she heard the big Orc growl a warning. Slowly she knelt again. Trembling a little in anger and disgust, she picked up the scraper.

Rukshash settled forward again with a warm chuckle. The scraper licked his back in a satisfying stroke, followed by a second just as good. His skin tingled a little as long-stifled pores were opened and began to breathe. Eyes half shut in a kind of floating bliss, Rukshash thought of Nazluk’s clever hands. He thought with some amusement that, with a little practice, Grushak’s brat could be even better than Nazluk.

When they stopped Nazluk had eased his pack off his shoulders with the rest of them, looking forward to a rest. The sight of the Uruk-hai taking to the water earned a snort of derision from him, particularly when he saw Kurbag heading in as well. Just about everything that Kurbag did annoyed him, really, but there was no denying that this swimming thing was particularly obnoxious.

“Cupping and scooping, Kurbag poured a casual handful of water over one shoulder, spilling silver down the dark slope of his back. Nazluk’s mouth went dry as dust. His fingers twitched at his sides.

Lip curling suddenly, contemptuously, the Orc turned away from the river, reaching into his pack for the oil he kept there. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a slender figure slipping quietly into the trees. No one else appeared to notice. Nazluk’s eyes narrowed and he very nearly barked an order for her to stop. Then he smiled unpleasantly. No. He had already removed his boots, and his tread was light enough when he meant it to be. No, he would follow her. He wanted to see where
She walked and was glad of solitude, of unmolested movement as she passed through soft tree-
murmur. There were no coarse words, no cruel hands, only the quiet doings of wood-life: distant
birdsong, small rustlings in the undergrowth, the faint sound of the river slipping by through the trees
to her left, just out of sight. The Orcs did not bathe often—when they did, she always took the first
opportunity to put some distance between herself and them. It was safer that way, so that the
combination of their nakedness and her presence did not give them any ideas. It also afforded her a
chance to bathe on her own, if she could find a place nearby.

She was lucky and came upon just what she was hoping for: a creek, a little tributary of the river, not
too far from where she started walking. It was knee-deep and quite clear, not like the silty water of
the river, and she could see the smooth stones of the creek-bed as if through glass. Eleluleniel knelt.
Sliding her hand into the water, she lifted a palmful and brought it to her mouth, and held it behind
her lips, and tasted how good it was after weeks of water from musty drinking skins or, when she
was truly desperate, heavily diluted Orc-draught.

Still kneeling, she bent and splashed water over her face, once, twice, thrice. The water was cool
and good on her skin and she was glad to feel the dirt lift away, allowing her pores to breathe. She
sloshed it over her bare arms until they were smooth and white, and looked at her pale skin
wistfully. It wasn't often that she was able to wash herself in this fashion, and it was long since she
had been able to take any great care of her body and appearance. She wished that she might step
into the creek and crouch low, immersing to her shoulders, washing herself all over. But getting her
clothes soaked and staying in them was folly, while removing them altogether was an even more
troubling prospect. There were still Orcs nearby.

She compromised, stepping out of her battered shoes and into the creek, seating herself on the mossy
edge. With tightened lips she inched down lower: closing her eyes, she dashed water between her
inner thighs until she felt clean. Then she sat back again, drawing the folds of her ragged dress down
over her knees, and was content to remain thus for a time, her eyes still closed. Somewhere in the
trees a woodlark sang, its unearthly trill making her smile. She sat feeling the cool suck of the water
around her legs and sighed for the simple pleasure of it.

It wasn't often she was able to wash. She was grateful for what she had. She even hummed for a
little while but stopped, feeling as if this were too much, as though she indulged in luxury.

After a time she thought of Maevyn and felt guilty. She really hadn't forgotten the other girl, but had
wanted some time to herself—away, too, from Maevyn's increasing strangeness and roughness. It
distressed her to see Maevyn becoming thus…yet, it was not good to leave her alone long in the
company of the Orcs who made her so.

Eleluleniel rose, not without regret, and stepped up onto the bank. She stood a moment, feeling the
air cool on her wet legs, before slipping into her shoes. Turning the way she had come, she froze as
she saw an all-too-familiar figure leaning against a tree, arms folded across his chest.

"By the Dark Lord. What is that reek?"

She stared at him, feeling helplessly, horribly cheated. Disappointment left her undone. Her
interlude beside the creek was utterly spoilt; the peace, the solitude of her brief escape, the quiet
beauty of her surroundings—they had never been real. He had obviously been there and watching
for some time.
“Trying to wash him off, Elf? I can still smell him on you,” the Orc said, his eyes glittering with malice.

She didn’t say anything.

“Oh yes, his musk is all over you. Almost strong enough to cover up your own woodsy green scent, Elf. But not enough, oh no, not quite strong enough for that.”

“What do you want, Nazluk?” Eleluleniel asked quietly, though she knew that saying anything would provoke him.

“What do I want?” A quiver passed through Nazluk’s body. He took one step towards her, then another. “You want to know what I want?” Six steps closed the gap between them. She stiffened, but he did not touch her, circling behind her instead. “I think you can guess what I want.” She could feel his hot breath on the back of her neck. His voice was husky with excitement.

Her blood went cold in her veins. “Your strength is greater than mine,” she heard herself say distantly. “There is nothing stopping you.”

“That’s not quite true though, is it?” he whispered. “There’s our…precious…Kurbag…”

“Kurbag. He has never stopped any of you from taking me.”

Behind her, Nazluk gave a harsh bark of laughter. “Take you? Where do you think I want to take you, Elf? Think I want to have you here under the trees, in these shaded day-lit hours, in this summer air that we are breathing?” His thumbs grazed her collarbone as his hands slid over her shoulders. “Far rather than my cock,” he said dreamily, drawing her against him, “in the hot recesses of your body—” his hands shifted to encircle her neck, “—would I sink my hungry knife in your soft innards. I would press it—” his calloused fingers kneaded her smooth skin, “—into your belly to the hilt.” In a hoarse whisper: “And deeper!” His grip tightened briefly, then loosened, and his hands chafed her throat gently. “I would rather bury my blade in you than my cock. I would rather hear your squeaking stop, than hear it accompany my grunting. Take you, little Elf?” He laughed again darkly. “I want to kill you, not fuck you.”

Eleluleniel felt sick. She closed her eyes, trying to will her heart to beat more slowly as it fluttered frantically in her chest. The Orc continued to hold her against him. She heard his slow inhalation and shivered as he exhaled.

“Ahhh.” He chuckled softly in her ear. “Frightened? Dear little fool. Didn’t you hear what I said? There’s Kurbag, and Great Eye knows why, but that one has some kind of fixation on you and he’s bigger than I am. Killing you outright might prove detrimental to my health, and I don’t like to risk that. Maim you, maybe?” A jagged claw scraped her cheek, making her flinch. Nazluk’s breathing was ragged. “Pretty little Elf. Perhaps if you weren’t so pretty. He might not like you so much if you weren’t so pretty…” His hand dropped to cup her right breast. The gesture was coldly nonsexual, which made it somehow more disturbing. “If I ripped your tit off, now…that wouldn’t be pretty…” His hand flexed and she could feel his talons pricking.

She was trembling uncontrollably now, and when he released her abruptly she fell. He walked around to stand in front of her, and she stared at the ground, her hands clutching at loose soil and loam. She could feel the aura of hostility he emitted, radiating like waves of heat from his body: a hateful savagery he was keeping barely under control.

“With my luck the scars would only make him hornier,” he muttered. She looked up to find his eyes fixed on her but unseeing, his ugly Orkish features twisted with a deep disgust that made them even
uglier.

Somehow, that blank gaze inspired a foolhardy courage in her. “Kill me, then,” she whispered. There was silence. Nazluk’s sour eyes refocused on her. “Kill me,” she said again, more firmly. “You want to. Use your knife. Slit my throat.” Her voice rasped oddly in her ears. “Look you. I will not struggle.” She pushed herself shakily to her knees, squeezing her eyes shut and craning her head back to offer easier access.

Stillness. A heavy snort. She opened her eyes to see him shaking his head slowly, a humorless half-smile on his thin lips. “Little liar. Lie to yourself if you must, but don’t lie to me. If you really wanted to die, you’d be dead by now.”

He turned and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Gith. Greenery.

Mir pau-at dagrishurr. “It is good to drink goat-piss.”

Nar jut pau—poshak shafrenaum jut-ishi. “I don’t drink water—fish fuck in it.” Credit goes to W. C. Fields: I only made it Orkish.

Ash, shun, gakh…krak, djor… “One, two, three…five, six…”

…also there were other things more slimy than fish. “There are strange things living in the pools and lakes in the hearts of mountains: fish whose fathers swam in, goodness only knows how many years ago…also there are other things more slimy than fish. Even in the tunnels and caves the goblins have made for themselves there are other things living unbeknown to them that have sneaked in from outside to lie up in the dark.” The Hobbit, “Riddles In the Dark”
“Mushog.”

“How?”

“That’s a little friendlier than I like.”

“Mmmm.”

“Mushog… OI!” Kurbag let out a sudden yelp, whirling on the Uruk. “Piss off, fucker!”

“But I’m not doing anything,” said Mushog. Kurbag glared at him. Turning, he began to wade in the direction of the bank. “Oh, come on,” Mushog shouted after him, “can’t you take a joke?” He received nothing but a snarl and further splashing in response as Kurbag sloshed ashore. “I guess not,” said Mushog, smirking a little. Look around him, he gave Hrahragh a thoughtful look. Hrahragh gazed back steadily. His face was completely impassive, but Mushog’s eyes quickly moved on. They settled instead on Bragdagash, who was sluicing his shoulders. Mushog grinned. “Hey Chief, need any help there?”

The taller Uruk glanced at Mushog. “Let’s see. Can you keep your hands above the water?”

“Oh, I think that I can manage that,” he said with the faintest of leers.

“Then we should get along famously.” Bragdagash smiled a dangerous smile. “And of course we’re all friends here, so there is no need for my standing on ceremony. Anything touching my nipples will be simply ripped off, no questions asked.”

“…ah,” said Mushog. He scratched his neck hesitantly. “On second thought, I think I’m going to swim a little more.”

“I think that is a very good idea,” agreed Bragdagash. Hrahragh snorted.

On shore, Kurbag shook himself like a dog, scattering bright droplets of water on the green grass. Padding over to his pack, he hunkered down and unfastened the flap, rummaging around inside until he had found and pulled out a crude comb of carved bone. At least Kurbag thought it was bone—Rukshash had told him once that it was ivory, carved from the yellow-white tusk of a downed mûmakil. Kurbag had no way of knowing the truth of this. He had never seen a mûmakil and, while Rukshash had endeavored to describe one to him, Kurbag had dismissed the older Orc’s descriptions as exaggeration. Nothing that big could live, surely. Teeth the length of a tree? What would be the point of that—the beast wouldn’t be able to chew with them. What, were they just there to look pretty?

No, enough for him that the comb was of some kind of whitish hard stuff and that it served him well. He had found it on a dead man once, and when the opportunity to use it came along it was nice to have on hand.

Settling comfortably in the grass, he began to run it through his wet black hair, fastidiously working out the tangles that he found. The others used their claws for these, and that lout Mushog in particular made short work of them—a snarl for Mushog was generally answered with brief use of a.
knife, and never mind the clump of hair he lost in the process, or the ragged way that it looked afterwards. Kurbag’s comb had thoroughly spoiled him. Some of the teeth were broken but it had been that way when he first found it, and it was otherwise sturdy and a thorough pleasure to use.

The sun had shifted to the opposite bank so that its slanting rays reached him even under the trees. Kurbag shifted on his bare ass, turning away from the river, humming in his throat as the bright sun warmed his back and began to dry his wet shoulders. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. Facing the deeper wood, he cocked his head at the sight of the Orcs there and what they were about. There were several of them gathered in close around Squeaker’s little friend, who had evidently been put to work oiling and scraping Shrah’rar’s back. The young girl looked distinctly sulky. Shrah’rar, on the other hand, looked as though he never wanted to get up again. Kurbag couldn’t remember the last time the smaller Orc had looked so blissful—not without the involvement of livestock, at any rate.

Kurbag’s ear flicked and he turned his head to see Nazluk emerging from the trees, a look of dour satisfaction on his face. That satisfaction vanished abruptly when he saw Kurbag. Nazluk stopped and stared at him in disbelief. “Oh, that is just too cute!” he expostulated, putting a hand on one hip. Kurbag looked at him oddly before he realized Nazluk was referring to his comb. “Give over, Nazluk. You’ve seen me use it before,” said Kurbag in a bored tone of voice.

Nazluk, having nothing really to say to that, put as much disgust into his responsive snort as possible. Resolving to ignore Kurbag, he headed in the direction of his fellow Orcs, faltering only briefly when he saw what was going on. He stopped beside Grushak, who was watching the business in front of him with silent amusement. “What’s going on here then?” he asked, though the answer was obvious.

Grushak grunted but it was Rukshash who made reply: “We’ve discovered this one has some unsuspected talents,” he chuckled, jerking his head toward the girl. “Sorry, Nazluk. You missed your chance at me.”

“Oh?” Nazluk threw the child a thoughtful look but shrugged. Nazluk often complained and spoke darkly of Kurbag’s own captive and her continued presence among them, but he was not particularly annoyed by Grushak’s tark-brat. He did not view it as the same situation. She was no Elf, and Grushak was not Kurbag. Of course Nazluk, always looking for an edge in any situation, kept half an eye on her anyway; he knew that Kurbag’s Elven bitch was fond of her and he figured this could come in handy down the pike. Otherwise, though, he gave her no great thought. And if she got him out of doing Rukshash’s back, well, that was fine by him.

“Oh, Nazluk?”

Nazluk glanced at Grushak.

“Scrape my back?” Grushak asked in Orkish.

Well, evidently he hadn’t gotten off entirely. “What, you don’t want your tark to do it?” asked Nazluk as he took the vial and the scraper Grushak handed him and got behind the big Orc.

Grushak laughed at that. “Hah! Her? She’d take my hide off,” he said with a chuckle, leaning forward comfortably. Grushak was under no illusions about the animosity that Maevyn felt toward him. Even if she hadn’t told him frequently that she hated him, he had eyes and a perfectly good nose. The smell of her hatred was part of what made her so amusing—that and her bloody-minded stubbornness, which was nearly a match for his own.
Nazluk’s dry palms slid over Grushak’s back, his skinny fingers taking an initial assessment of the tension in his muscles. Rukshash was right when he said that Nazluk had a clever touch: his tongue was sharp but his hands could be damnably pleasant. It was not enough for him to oil and scrape. When Nazluk touched a fellow’s back his inerrant fingers seemed to effortlessly find and soothe away every sore spot. His pacing was always leisurely, his manner always thorough. Grushak had asked Nazluk once why he took such pains; why he took his time and didn’t make a quickie of it as the others did. Nazluk’s answer had been a nigh incomprehensible mutter and Grushak didn’t press it. Whatever Nazluk’s reasoning, he went about the business of scraping your back in a way that felt very good indeed.

There was another bonus too: on such occasions he was always very quiet, saying little or nothing by way of his usual sarcasm. Unless, of course, you made the mistake of talking to Nazluk. But Grushak had no intention of ruining this with conversation.

He heard the vial as it was uncorked, the faintest burble of oil escaping the mouth of the vessel, and then he heard the brisk rasping sound of Nazluk’s hands. Nazluk had slicked them and was rubbing them together, warming the oil with his heated palms. Placing them against Grushak’s back once more, he began to massage the big Orc deeply.

“My turn!” crowed Pryszrim as he replaced a reluctant Shrah’rar in front of Maevyn.

Maevyn scowled. “My hands are sore,” she said, defiant. “I can’t feel my fingers.”

“Ouch,” remarked Grymawk less than helpfully. He was waiting to have his back done after Pryszrim.

She glared at him. “My arms are sore, and my shoulders, an’ my back hurts too.”

“I could do your back,” said Rukshash, who was sticking by in a proprietary sort of way. “’Course, you’d have to take your shirt off for that!” He cackled.

Maevyn had flinched at the suggestion, realizing the same thing. She was young and didn’t have anything to be seen there, but she was still scared when she thought about Leni. Leni, after all, was not so very much older in a way, and the Orcs had shown no scruples with her. Anyway, Maevyn liked the idea of an Orc touching her even less than she liked touching the Orcs. They were forcing her to do their backs, but at least when she was doing the touching she had some control. She made no further comment on her back hurting. Instead, she glared at the back of Pryszrim’s neck. If looks could kill, Pryszrim would not so much have died as been instantaneously vaporized. There would have been nothing left of him but the lice.

As she rubbed his back Maevyn began to squeeze and pinch the Orc surreptitiously, but when Pryszrim squirmed back with enthusiasm she gave it up for hopeless and just returned to rubbing the oil into his skin as quickly as possible. “I hate you all,” she muttered under her breath.

Pryszrim sighed happily.
Grushak was in a similarly good mood. Leaning back into Nazluk’s cunning fingers, he shut his eyes and shifted a little, the muscles in his powerful shoulders rolling pleasantly as Nazluk kneaded and manipulated them. It felt so good his pleasure was translating into response elsewhere. “Fuck, I’m hard,” murmured Grushak.

“Too bad,” said Nazluk absently.

“Lend a fellow a hand?”


“Now now, lads, take it to the bushes if you’re going to be like that,” said Rukshash.

Nazluk rolled his eyes and Grushak chuckled, his own eyes still closed.

Foregoing questions of Mushog’s exuberance and of just how that stick had found its way up Nazluk’s ass, there was no buggery among the members of Bragdagash’s band. It wasn’t that they had the scruples of their Elven or Mannish counterparts, but it was just stupid to screw your shield mate. Brought all kinds of complications into play, issues of power and dominance. Resentment and grudges were inevitable, and the havoc it could play with larger group dynamics was just not worth it. There was nothing wrong with a casual jerk among comrades, though, and a helping hand with a fellow Orc’s dick, as with scratching or scraping or a dozen other friendly gestures, was generally given and received with the same casual good humor.

Too bad about that stick up Nazluk’s ass. He had never given a sign of wanting to engage in that sort of thing, not in all the time Grushak had known his company. It really was too bad, especially when his hands were so very good.

Grushak toyed with the notion of taking Nazluk’s advice and unfastening his own breeches. Feeling comfortable enough as he was, he decided against it—and, in so deciding, refrained from inflicting a whole new world of revolting on Maevyn. She sat not so very far away, obliviously, angrily scraping Pryszrim’s hide, unaware of the bent of Grushak’s thoughts. Unaware she’d just been spared a level of nasty that would have thoroughly trounced Pryszrim’s lice, and might even have supplanted the traumatic memory of Rukshash’s back.

Eleluleniel cleaned herself a second time after he left her, numb from the encounter. She brushed soil from the knees of her dress and washed it from her fingers, ran a wet palm over her throat and collarbone and shoulders and, lifting her hair out of the way, over the back of her neck as well, trying to forget Nazluk’s hands and the hate that had been in them. As she made these ablutions she could hear the last words he had spoken to her. He had said them in the coldest terms of his dislike, but she could still hear the ring of truth in what he said.

She didn’t want to go back, thinking of his eyes on her and the contemptuous twist of his mouth. She forced herself anyway. She had been gone for too long as it was. Better to go back before Kurbag came looking for her.

When she returned to the impromptu camp by the river the Uruk-hai were just coming up out of the water. She waited discreetly behind a tree as they passed by: Bragdagash with his long stride, and then Hrahragh, idly scratching one shoulder with his dark claws. Kurbag, she had seen, was already on the bank. That left only—

“Boo,” came a guttural voice from behind her. She started, whipping around with wide eyes and a
pounding heart, and her shoulder slammed painfully against the trunk of the tree. Mushog roared with laughter at her dismay. “Hiding, then?” he asked with a mocking gleam in his golden eyes. “See anything you like?” She flinched and the nude Uruk laughed again, dropping his hand to waggle his flaccid penis at her obscenely.

Sneaking up and terrifying the wits out of her was evidently all the cheap thrill that Mushog was looking for just then. He made no move to molest her, chuckling as he passed her by. As he sauntered past Kurbag he jabbed his thumb back over his shoulder. “Were you looking for Squeaker? She’s behind that tree.”

Kurbag glanced sidelong in the direction Mushog had indicated. He’d been wondering where the Elf had gotten off to. “So that’s where you are then, eh? Come here.”

Biting her lip she did as she was told, stopping a little distance from him. She did not like to come closer. She did not like to be near Kurbag, particularly when he was exposed, but he flicked his hand in a come-hither gesture and she stepped reluctantly within his reach.

He didn’t touch her, cocking his head as he looked her over. “You washed,” he said.

She looked at him warily. “Yes.” Of course she had washed. Kurbag was not a fool but he did have a habit of stating the obvious. The other Orcs sometimes mocked him for it, though he took it in good humor. It seemed to be part of his natural volubility, this business of conversation without purpose: talk for the sake of talking. Eleluleniel had never understood how any one living person could talk so much and say so little.

What he said next, though, surprised her. “I need to get you a new dress. That one is nearly worn to pieces.”

It was the same dress she had been wearing when first he had captured her, on that long-ago day, in those other trees so far away. Once it had been a simple adolescent’s gown: a long garment pleated beneath the bosom to hang in sedate folds on her body. The kind of simple dress appropriate for an Elven maiden who is no longer a child but is not yet a young woman, a girl more than ten years and less than twenty from her majority. It had not been one of her better dresses but she had liked it well enough and had worn it for walking and for the out-of-doors.

Now it was dingy and stained, the long skirts soiled with travel and many miles walking, with dirt and with worse than dirt; the sleeves were ragged, sullied with rough treatment from the Orcs as well as mundane wear and tear. Long she had taken pains to clean it and to keep it at least somewhat presentable, using whatever she could for the purpose. The task was a hopeless one, though she kept it up out of habit. Elven fabric is woven beautifully and strong, but even the fabric of Elves, subjected to such continuous abuse, will degrade under the punishment. It was no longer a dress she wore but tatters: tatters that, at one time, Eleluleniel would have thrown away without a second thought, disdaining even their use as rags.

And yet it was her dress. It was still her old dress, all that she had to clothe her body and all that she had of her old life. She watched unhappily as Kurbag toyed with the material of her skirts, appraising it critically and paying no attention to her. “Must you?” she asked softly.

“I’ll find you something when next we raid,” he said, running it through his fingers. “It should be easy enough to find a few your size. Won’t be a problem.”

Eleluleniel heard women screaming in her head: saw faceless cowering forms, unmoving bodies, smashed trunks, strewn clothing. No problem at all, she thought faintly. Said out loud, rather helplessly, “But it is mine.”
He looked up, eyes narrowing at her reaction. “You do see that it’s dirty, don’t you, Squeaker?” he asked as though he spoke to a child or to one whose wits were failing her. “I thought your folk like to be clean. That’s what I’ve always been told anyway, that you Elves are such sticklers for being neat and tidy and all that.”

She was struck by the absurdity of the exchange: of being told with great patience, by an Orc no less, of the customs of Elven cleanliness. She began to laugh, half bitterly, half with genuine amusement.

Kurbag, not knowing why she laughed, looked at her with baffled interest. “Sit,” he said, tugging on her skirt.

And suddenly it was no longer funny.

Eleluleniel closed her mouth and looked around them, but there was no one in their immediate vicinity. The nearest Orcs were Hrahragh and Bragdagash, who were sprawled indecorously in the grass, sleekly enjoying the afternoon sun. She did not know why she looked around thus, as though someone would help her. Instinct, she supposed, though what use instinct was, she did not know. There was no real way to keep Kurbag from doing what he wanted, when he wanted it. His solid inevitability wearied her to the marrow of her bones.

“Sit,” he said again, and she sat slowly. He was naked but not aroused, and his interest in her at that moment did not seem to be lustful, for he did nothing more than touch her hair. It was matted and unkempt but he stroked it with every sign of appreciation, running his fingers through her pale tresses. When his talon snagged on a tangle he made a grunting sound and picked up his comb. Rather than pulling her to him he scooted up against her. She sat un-protesting as he began to comb her hair. “Pretty thing,” he murmured close to her ear, and she stiffened, but he said nothing else for the moment, concentrating on the task before him.

Squeaker’s hair, pretty as it was, presented difficulties for Kurbag. It was not like his own, which was quite inhuman: like the thick dark strands in the tail or mane of a horse, tough and coarse. Squeaker’s hair was equally inhuman, but so fine in contrast that it didn’t feel quite real in his hands. It was also easily damaged. He lifted a bright lock carefully, delicately in one clawed hand. Holding it away from her scalp so that he wouldn’t pull on it by accident, he ran the comb through in a gentle but insistent way until the individual strands hung smooth and free of entanglement.

It humiliated Eleluleniel to be treated in this manner, as if she were some living doll with which he amused himself. She would have infinitely preferred to use the comb for herself, but they had been down this road before. She knew from experience that he wouldn’t give it to her, taking an Orc’s characteristic pleasure in control. She did not like him touching her hair but he was not hurting her, and her hair needed the care that he was showing it. For these, and for the chief reason that she had no real choice in the matter, she sat silent under his attentions.

Sat, all unconsciously, with the same straight shoulders and folded hands with which she had once been accustomed to sit as her older sisters brushed and braided her hair. They had liked it for its coloring, which came from her grandmother and had skipped a generation. Her parents and her other sisters were dark. How she had loved her sister Alageth’s long black hair. It had hung at the older girl’s back like a silken curtain and, when Eleluleniel had been a very little girl, nothing made her happier than when Alageth would consent to sit and let her little sister brush her long black hair.

“Hey. Hey.”

“What,” grumbled Maevyn.
“You stopped,” Grymawk complained.

She sighed and began to rub again. She had paused when, glancing up over the Orc’s shoulder, she noticed Leni standing in front of Kurbag, her back to Maevyn. As he drew the Elf girl down Maevyn’s eyes widened, but when he did nothing sinister she felt some measure of relief, and a small resurgence of irritation. She was resentful of the way that Leni had abandoned her earlier. She wondered what Leni had been off doing while she had been left behind and trapped into scraping Orcs. Something Elf; no doubt. Probably singing or picking flowers or talking to bunnies, or all of the above, the whole time that Maevyn was suffering.

Well. At least Grymawk wasn’t as bad as the others. They had groaned and made other disconcerting creepy noises under her hands. Grymawk uttered little exclamations of pleasure from time to time, but mostly he just talked. Maevyn paid him no mind. She finished oiling him and picked up the scraper, laying it against his back.

“There,” said Nazluk a few meters away. “Done.” Standing, he thwacked the scraper against Grushak’s olive-colored hide, surveying the end product with a critical eye and with grim satisfaction in a job well done.

Grushak lay back abruptly, making Nazluk utter a sharp oath and step aside to evade his considerable bulk. He shifted and rubbed his body against the ground. His back felt tender and raw: sensitive as an Orc just spawned. The cool crushed grass was soothing after the faint sting of the scraper.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Nazluk bitterly, “I clean you up and you roll around in the dirt. That makes perfect sense.”

“Shut up, Nazluk,” said Grushak comfortably.

“Shut up,’ he says. Well isn’t that always the way of it? ‘Shut up, Nazluk’ and never so much as a ‘thank you’ for services rendered…” Nazluk muttered as he began to strip down himself, baring skinny shoulders, a narrow chest and a wiry whipcord torso. When he stepped out of his trousers he folded them and sat, laying them across his lap in an oddly discreet manner.

This was a peculiarity of Nazluk’s to which the other Orcs had become accustomed, not without some initial jeering. They’d once had a notion his balls were missing, he was so finicky about his privates. And yet, in the inevitable forced intimacy of a small band of Orkish raiders, that kind of thing would not have stayed hidden for long. A glance while pissing, a flash while scraping—the other fellows were going to see your dick. Nazluk had the regulation number of bollocks, and his dick was intact too: real as life and twice as ugly. There seemed to be no discernable reason for his secrecy, but it was such a longstanding practice of his that the others barely took notice anymore.

His crucial bits covered in this fashion, Nazluk smeared oil on his arms in a perfunctory way before he began to scrape it off.

“I don’t know how you can stand to marinate yourselves like that,” said Mushog, who had wandered over in the direction of the smaller Orcs. “You stink of oil.”

Maevyn looked up at the sudden loud voice to see Mushog standing, legs spread, practically in front of her and Grymawk. Taken off guard, she squeaked and quickly redirected her eyes. She had nearly become impervious to the nudity of the regular Orcs—couldn’t very well do otherwise, trapped among them as she had been for the past hour or so. But at least, scraping their backs, she was behind them. Mushog was facing in Grymawk’s direction front-on: that meant Maevyn had gotten a full frontal view.
If I never see another Orc’s thing again, it’ll be too soon...

Mushog noticed the girl’s reaction and was delighted. Immediately he dropped into a loose, dripping squat in front of her and Grymawk.

“Yes, because splashing around in the drink is so much more dignified,” Nazluk was saying dryly.

Mushog chuckled, rocking on his heels as he waited for the tark child to lift her head again. He looked oddly boyish at that moment, like a teen boy gearing up for a prank rather than an Uruk seeking to expose himself to a hapless nine-year-old.

“Garn. What’s water do that oil doesn’t do better?” asked Rukshash. “Oil makes your skin supple. Gives you a nice healthy sheen.”

“Voj mir thag mushof agh shemator sharkū-hai. Jut mir nar sharkū agh mir shoʃat.” He grinned, thinking to get Maevyn’s attention with the Orkish. What he got was a stream of invective from Rukshash on young Uruk shits who thought they knew everything and had all the brains of pig dung.

Maevyn was sitting with her head bent forward, her nose almost brushing Grymawk’s spine. She started to look up only to see Mushog waiting for her, all leering anticipation. She lowered her face again immediately, ears burning.

“Hey, what are you doing back there anyway? Are you going to finish scraping my back or what?” asked Grymawk plaintively over his shoulder. Looking forward again, he sighed. “Mushog, will you get that thing out of my face? I’m having my back scraped here—you can play with the tark when I’m done.”

Mushog snorted. Rising to loom over both of them, he gave himself a deliberate tug. Grymawk ignored it and Maevyn had fixed her eyes narrowly on Grymawk’s back. Mindful of his addendum, she made a slower go of it. Grymawk didn’t object, possibly recognizing a move to delay, probably just enjoying the more leisurely pace and the long, slow licks of the scraper.

Grushak, unbeknown to either Maevyn or Mushog, had propped himself up on one elbow and was watching the Uruk with an inscrutable gaze. Mushog was hovering near Maevyn, clearly bored out of his skull and looking to entertain himself. He smelled horny, but Mushog always smelled horny. It didn’t necessarily mean anything. Still, Grushak decided that he had better make something clear. “Oi. Mushog.”

“Hmm?”

“Katu.” He laid a hand on the grass beside him, palm down.

Mushog ambled over readily enough. “Something on your mind, Grushak?” he asked, licking his lips.

Grushak smiled, a trifle dangerously. “Rrau, Mushog.” As Mushog dropped into another squat, Grushak said, “Nar kurvanug shara-foshan.”

“Aw! Why not?” said Mushog, though he had no interest in doing that to the little tark: not really. Anyone could see she was not ripe, but Mushog was in a playful mood, enjoying his game of threat and intimidation. “Mir dafrim. Sharagru baj mir smakafṣog.” He turned his head to leer at Maevyn again.

“Lat molva sharagru kaun. Snaga-rim agh nar mir vadokan.”
Grushak’s voice had taken on an edge. Mushog shrugged. “Nar voskor kurvanat sharagru. Shum sma.”

“Nar kurvanug,” Grushak reiterated.

“Nar kurvanug, yes, all right, fine!” He gave Grushak a resentful look but did not go so far as to bare his teeth. Snaga-Orc though Grushak was, Mushog was no fool. Grushak might not be as tall as him, but he was built like a mountain: a mountain that fucking moved. Mushog’s sense of self-esteem was healthier than average, and he thought highly of his prowess as a fighter. He thought he might be able to take Grushak, but he didn't like to bet on it.

Grushak grunted and settled back, while Mushog sat by sulkily. The others had been watching and listening with interest, waiting to see if the two would come to blows. There was some disappointment that the matter had been resolved without bloodshed. "I was looking forward to a good row," said Rukshash. "Little brat. You certainly cause enough trouble."

"I didn't do nothing," Maevyn muttered crossly, irritated not to know what was being said when they were clearly talking about her. She wished her Orkish was further along. She had understood something about Mushog collecting ears in baskets, but didn't think this sounded right. She sensed somehow that Grushak had protected her, which was annoying. She did not like to be in his debt for any reason.

As she finished Grymawk’s back she had a chance to look over what she had done. Much like Nazluk, she found satisfaction in what she saw. It was the first she’d had an opportunity to study the end results, really—seemed like before, every time one Orc was done, another plopped down in his place. Having a chance to look Grymawk over, she was surprised by the difference from when she had started. His skin, previously mottled and dark, was several degrees lighter in shade: an ashy gray color. His back was smoother than Rukshash’s and he bore no scars, which may have been partly why it was so much more tolerable on the eyes. There was not a trace of dirt or other Orc crud to be seen. He looked… clean.

He’s cleaner than I am, she thought with wonder. This gave her a queasy feeling in her stomach. Suddenly she stood outside herself, looking with disgust at the girl with the bedraggled clothes and tangled black hair, the girl with greasy hands and grime on her face and on her brown arms and legs. The last time her hair had been brushed was the last time her mother had brushed it; the last time she had washed was when her mother had been boiling laundry outside their house and had made her and Demmi scrub behind their ears.

She had not washed behind her ears—had not washed any part of her body—in days. It was no wonder she was filthy. Maevyn was dismayed to realize that she was dirtier than an Orc.

As if he could read her thoughts, Grymawk started snuffing the air. He turned and looked at Maevyn. “You stink,” he observed.

She stared back at him.

“No, I mean, you smell truly foul,” he said. “Aren’t you going to clean yourself?”

“What, this little one? Take her pretty clothes off around us nasty horrid Orcs?” Rukshash fingered her sleeve with a wicked chuckle.

Maevyn yanked away angrily. “Quit touching me!”

“We’ve oil a-plenty. Go ahead. We won’t look, we promise.” He smirked.
Like she would believe that. “No!”

“Skai,” he said, shaking his head, as if with a sense of profound regret. “Doesn’t know what’s good for her. And yet here she’s been so good to us. Doing our backs so nicely, with nary a sigh nor complaint. Demands some sort of good turn, now doesn’t it?” Rukshash looked at Shrah’rar and Grymawk with a slow smile. “I could hold her down while you two used the oil…”

Maevyn was horrified. She was even more horrified to hear Grymawk saying, “Well, she is very rank…”

“NO!!” Maevyn shot to her feet. She shouted it in high dudgeon but could not help the sudden alarm mixed in with her fury. Their broad nostrils fluttered and flared as they caught the scent. They could smell it on her, like dogs…but what could she do? She could not simply will her fear to dissipate! Grymawk and Rukshash were both rising, as were Shrah’rar and Pryszrim. Maevyn began to back away—

—and bumped right into Mushog, who was standing behind her. “Now lads, lads…” he crooned, catching her before she could escape. “Anyone can see she wants nothing to do with your oiling and your scraping and your nasty, nasty hands…”

It was Mushog’s hands that terrified her at the moment—his hands, and his nakedness, and his uncovered thing, which she could not see but which she knew was behind her. She began to struggle frantically but he had caught her in his muscular grip. Horribly but effectively he tucked her under his right arm and, arm wrapped tight around her own arms and upper torso, held her pinned against his side, no matter how she yelled and kicked. And she was doing plenty of both, though it was to no avail. Mushog only laughed and began to walk away with her under his arm.

Wrenching her head around and staring back in disbelief, Maevyn could see the other Orcs watching them leave with so much shrugging and indifference. Grushak, who she thought had protected her earlier, only looked after with something like amusement on his ugly face. She had thought she was safe. She was wrong.

“You’ll thank me for this later,” said Mushog, “when you aren’t dwelling in your own reek.”

Maevyn did not comprehend his words: at that instant she saw Leni’s face as they passed her and Kurbag, and the look of distress in the Elf girl’s eyes smote Maevyn to the very heart. “Let me go!” she cried, writhing in terror. “Let me go, let me go, LET ME GO!!”

“As you like,” said Mushog cheerfully. And shifted his grasp on her. And, with another laugh, threw her into the river.

The panic she had felt in his arms was nothing to the panic she felt now. She screamed, but there was no sound—water immediately filled her mouth and went down her throat. Bubbles of precious air escaped into the water around her. Her wide eyes darted through the murky gloom: it was green and glimmerlit, pale light slanting through particles of floating silt. She was completely disoriented, unable to tell up from down. She thrashed and kicked, but her legs were tangled in her skirt.

She could not breathe. She was drowning. She was going to die.

Something caught her by the hair and hauled her up out of the water. She broke the surface sputtering and flailing. Hrahragh dragged her into the shallows, still by the hair, as she kicked and splashed and choked. Releasing her, he looked down at her with faint contempt. “Fool snaga. Drown in four feet of water?”
Four feet? That had not been four feet. She was sure it hadn’t. But she was unable to protest, was too busy vomiting, hands buried in thick river slime. As she coughed up a mixture of water and bile, she could hear jeers and cruel commentary at her expense. Orcs of both breeds were on the riverbank, watching her and laughing. Not surprising, really. Her limp hair and the sodden clothing plastered to her trembling, dripping body made her looked like a half-drowned rat.

“You see?” Mushog was saying loudly. “And all I had to do was throw her in. You can’t do that with oil!”

Chapter End Notes

Voj mir thag mushof agh shemator sharkū-hai. Jut mir nar sharkū agh mir shofat. “Oil is for dry skin and ugly old folk. Water is for the young and good-looking.”

Katu. “Here.”

Rrau, Mushog. Nar kurvanug shara-fosha. “Sit, Mushog. No fucking the Man-brat.”

Mir dafrim. Sharagru baj mir smakafsog. “Good sport. The girl would make a nice snack.”

Lat molva sharagru kaul. Snaga-rim agh nar mir vadokan. “You’ll break her open. She’s my slave and is no good dead.”

Nar voskor kurvanat sharagru. Shum sma. “I have no desire to fuck her. She’s too small.”

Nar kurvanug. “No fucking.”
Kurbag was laughing as hard as any of the others. He did not stop Eleluleniel as she broke away from him and hastened to Maevyn, only hesitating as she came to the edge of the embankment. Hrahragh was standing in her way, staring down at the little girl retching in the water; he turned with a faint huff of disgust and strode up the riverbank, and Eleluleniel took his place at the water’s edge, crouching and extending her hand to Maevyn. “Come now, out of there, come with me, come.” Her voice was quiet but urgent, anxious. The longer she crouched there, the likelier one of the other Orcs might think of pushing her into the river as well.

Maevyn, coughing, reached up weakly and caught at the Elf girl’s hand. Eleluleniel helped her up out of the water. “There now, do not look at any of them, just come with me and we will get you dried off,” she said. Maevyn was in no condition to deny her. Hurriedly the Elf girl shepherded the dripping child away.

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“STUPID Mushog. Why’d he have to go an’ do that for?” Maevyn said, her voice muffled. Leni had her kneeling at the edge of the river and was cupping handfuls of water over her hair to rinse out the silt. As Maevyn knelt there, staring down at the water with her wet dark hair dripping around her face, she dwelt angrily on the injustice she had suffered. Tossing her in like that hadn’t even gotten her clean like he said it would. If anything she was even dirtier, river muck in her shoes and on her legs and on the hem of her skirt, and she felt as if half of the river were sloshing around in her eardrums. Whimpering, she pawed at her right ear like a dog.

“It pleases him to be cruel. Keep still, there is dirt at the back of your neck.” Leni sighed. “If only we might hang up your clothing so it could dry out…but…” She did not continue. Around them the trees were green and thick with summer foliage, and birds sang somewhere close by, but they could also hear the brutish voices of the Orcs back the way they had come. Leni had said that they should not go out of earshot.

Maevyn turned her head, casting a pitiful look over her shoulder. “Couldn’t we just do it anyway? It isn’t like they’re here to see. And I’m cold…” For all the warmth of the summer air, Maevyn was shivering in her wet garments. She made a move to shrug out of her blouse but Leni put a hand on her shoulder, shaking her head. Maevyn subsided unhappily. “I hate this.”

“I do not like it either, but that does not change the way things are. Come now, lean forward again. There is still silt in your hair.”

Frowning, Maevyn faced forward again and looked down. The trees came right down to the edge of the river here, and they were at a bend so that even though she could still hear the Orcs from time to time if they raised their voices to one another, they couldn’t see her or Leni and she couldn’t see them. That was just fine by Maevyn. If he was here right now, I’d smash his stupid face in, she thought, imagining how she would serve Mushog for the way he had treated her.

Of course, she wouldn’t. They could do things to her, do things to Leni, and she couldn’t do anything back to them. Not yet. Nor could she disobey them, not directly. If Grushak himself were to call for her to come back right this minute, she knew that she would do so. There was no other choice—none that would not get her hurt, or dead. Knowing that made her even angrier than Mushog throwing her in the river: the sense of her own helplessness was infuriating. She was no better off than Leni, not really. Not where it counted.
She glared down at her reflection as it wobbled blackly on the surface of the water, but she couldn’t keep glaring for long because she could see Leni’s reflection as well. The Elf girl looked calm and untroubled that moment as her face bobbed over Maevyn’s in the water, all of her attention on the task at hand. It wasn’t always a look that Maevyn got to see. She kept quiet for as long as she could, until the blood was rushing to her head from keeping it down so long. “I’m getting dizzy,” she announced.

“Then I have very good timing,” commented Leni. “Up you come.” She slipped her hands under Maevyn’s arms, helping her sit back. “That is better now, is it not?”

Maevyn opened her mouth to answer her but sneezed instead, suddenly and loudly. She hadn’t realized it was coming and the unexpectedness made her laugh.

Leni did not. “You are getting sick!”

“No I’m not. I sneeze all the time without being sick. I only ever get sick in the winter.” Maevyn wiped her nose with the back of her hand, hoping she looked confident when she said it. This was not an argument that would have worked with her mother.

“Oh.” Leni looked dubious. “I suppose I must rely on your judgment. I have no experience in these matters.” Maevyn cocked her head and Leni explained, “My kind do not become ill. That is to say…there are those Elves who have become very sick from poisoning. But we do not suffer from the illnesses of Men and beasts.”

“You mean you’ve never had a cold?” Leni shook her head. Scandalized, Maevyn burst out, “Now that’s not fair—everyone gets colds! Why should Elves be any different?”

“We were made so?” Leni offered. She had to repress her laughter at the younger girl’s outrage; she had the feeling that Maevyn wouldn’t appreciate it.

Maevyn looked sulky anyway. “I don’t see why you should get everything,” she complained. “You live longer, you don’t catch cold…”

“Yes, I am very fortunate,” said Leni with faint sarcasm. At the same time Maevyn’s sneeze still had her worried. “We really had better get you dried off. If I had been thinking, I would have brought one of the bed-furs with me to wrap around you.” She hesitated, then stood up. “Stay here for now and I will be back in just a moment.”

“Are you sure?” Maevyn did not like the idea of Leni going back alone. What if Kurbag delayed her or one of the others decided to pick on her again?

The Elf girl shrugged. “I think it should be all right. I shall slip out to the packs and slip back again, quickly as I can. Just wait here.” She turned and started back.

Maevyn watched until she didn’t see her anymore. Then she watched some more. When Leni didn’t come back she sighed and slumped a little where she sat. So they’d gotten her, then. But the voices that she heard through the trees didn’t sound especially boisterous, so whatever it was that delayed the other girl wasn’t anything too bad. She hoped not, anyhow.

Looking down at her muddy knees, Maevyn frowned. Well. Here was something that she could do something about, at any rate. Getting up, she eyed the water dubiously: after her close encounter with the river she felt wary of the water in a way that she hadn’t before. Still, it wasn’t like she was planning to jump in, just rinse off her legs a little. Pulling off her shoes and lifting her skirt up over her knees, she stepped down into the shallows, kicking either leg slowly through the water. The dirt
loosened and swirled away with the current. She lowered her skirt so that the hem touched the water and began scrubbing the folds of it together. She hoped that Leni would return with the fur; otherwise she was just getting herself wetter to no avail. Though at least her clothes would be cleaner…

She was just turning around, ready to climb up onto the shore again, when something caught her eye. The bank was lush with plant-life: ferns and other green growing things that grew low and thick-spread near the water’s edges. Spumes of green leaves brushed the surface of the water, creating gentle ripples. Several yards down the bank the brown branch of a fallen tree extended into the river, cutting its surface at a jagged angle. A yellow thing was bobbing in the water, just downriver from the log. While the surface of the water dimpled around the object, the distance between the yellow thing and the log never widened.

The little girl’s eyes gleamed in responsive interest. Glancing back one more time to see if anyone was coming, she began to wade along the edge of the bank, carefully making her way toward the log.

When she reached the place where the log crossed the water she put her hands on it to brace herself and looked toward the thing she had seen: a round painted wooden bobber, big as her fist. It floated serenely on the surface of the water, keeping its place despite the current. Too far from the log to reach it, even if she were to climb all the way out, but she cast her eyes along the log anyway, and her close scrutiny was soon rewarded. A thinner branch forked upward from the main branch some six feet out over the water, and at the crux she saw the knot of hempen twine that had been tied to it. The twine ran down into the river at an angle, cutting into its own reflection in the water. Maevyn knew at once that this was what the yellow bobber was marking.

She looked around as if she might see whoever had put the twine in place, then threw her leg over the branch. Sitting astride the fallen log, Maevyn rubbed her hands together. She didn’t know why she did this but it seemed the thing to do. If she’d bothered to think about it she would have remembered that this was what her da had often done to gear himself up at the start of a task. Placing her hands before her, she leaned forward, flexing her fingers.

Across the river a kingfisher trilled: a continuous throbbing note. Maevyn scowled, tongue wedged in the pocket of her inner cheek, and began scooting forward along the log.

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On the other side of the river bend, Eleluleniel had been spotted almost the instant she approached the packs. “Oi, Squeaker, bring us some grub! Starvin’ over here,” came a volley of voices, and she found herself drafted into fetching food for the snaga Orcs, who were still relaxing in the shade.

A clutch of them were playing at dice, including Pryszrim, who was so hopeless at the game that even Shrah’rar couldn’t be bothered with cheating him. He hunkered low, totaling up his points out loud while the others watched with flattened ears and bored expressions on their faces. “Three, three and four…four and eight…and two make…”

“Oi, can’t you hurry it up?” asked Grymawk. “I’m going to grow old and die before it ever comes round to my turn again.”

“You just shut up, Grymawk,” said Pryszrim. He paused. “Where was I?”

“Four and eight and two,” droned Nazluk, rolling his eyes.

“Oh right.” He hunkered forward again. “And three, and three…and two…”
“Don’t you lot ever tired of playing at that?” asked Grushak. “I can stand a fifteen minute bout here and there, but you’ve been at it longer than that now. And I never thought it was your sort of thing.”

This last comment was directed at Nazluk. He looked confused, then indignant. “I’m not playing! But I can’t very well help hearing them, now can I?”

“And two…and two…” Pryszrim was muttering under his breath. “And two…”

“Make six!” Nazluk exclaimed, turning on him. “Two and two and two are six! For fuck’s sake!”

Pryszrim cowered, dropping the dice. “But what about the eight from before?” he whined.

“What eight from before?” Nazluk snapped at him.

“I don’t know! I can’t remember! Why did you have to interrupt me, I was almost at the end!”

Pryszrim was whimpering, a terrified blank look on his face. All of his careful sums had gone entirely out of his head.

“Oh, that’s perfect, now you’ve made him lose count!” said Shrah’rar. “Now we’re going to have to start the whole bloody thing over again. You and your fucking mouth, Nazluk.” He glared daggers at the larger Orc.

“Why should I care? It’s a stupid game anyway,” said Nazluk, glaring right back.

“Oi! Don’t make me separate you two,” rumbled Grushak. There was a mocking glint in his yellow eyes.

Nazluk snorted at that but settled back on his arse anyway. “Where’s that worthless Elf bint, anyhow?” he complained. Then he heard her soft tread and turned, narrowing his eyes at her. “Moving a little slow, are we?” he asked, his voice quiet but pregnant with evil.

“I had to look among the packs,” she said carefully in response. They had been in a jumble, suggesting that others had been poking through them at some point earlier, possibly looking for the meat then. While there was plenty of flesh, she was looking for the dried tough jerky that did not have to be cooked and which the Orcs tended to like as a snack.

“Feh. It shouldn’t have taken you that long,” said Nazluk, his eyes narrowing further.

She didn’t say anything to this. He was right: it hadn’t. Food was not all that she’d been looking for. She did not say this, holding out a scrap of meat. He snatched it from her in annoyance.

“Ha, I rolled a six!” said Grymawk, looking pleased, then regretful. “Too bad we’re not playing at Six Horseman.”

“I like Black Riders more,” said Shrah’rar. “Six Horseman leaves too much to chance.”

“It’s still the harder game, though,” said Grymawk. “I think that Six Horseman came first. Black Riders is just an easier version.”

“Black Riders…why’s it called that anyhow?” asked Pryszrim.

“Why are you so ignorant?” asked Shrah’rar, bestowing a withering look upon Pryszrim. “It’s because of the whotchercallits, the Nine, those cunts that were His favorites during the War.”

“Ai! Don’t call them that,” said Grymawk, looking alarmed.
“Why not? They’re gone now, right? Can say what we like about them now, can’t we?”

“I don’t care,” said Grymawk, shivering. “I’ve heard too many stories about those fellows. And everyone always said it was bad luck to talk dirt about them, that they would know about it. Can’t break old habits.”

“Aye?” Shrah’rar gave a shrug. “Well, can’t wake the dead is what I say. Here, Squeaker, I’m thirsty. Fetch me a skin of beer, eh?”

“Me too,” said Grymawk.

“And me!” Pryszrim looked hopeful. “Do we have any bread?” This last drew the usual round of catcalls from his fellows.

Eleluleniel, who had been hoping to get back to searching for something Maevyn could throw around herself, sighed, turned and started back toward the packs. She did not notice Grushak’s eyes on her. “Hey,” the big Orc said abruptly, “Squeaker.” She paused and looked at him and he gestured for her to come closer. She did so, eyes lowered. Grushak wasn’t someone who generally gave her trouble, but she had a healthy fear of him anyway. “Where’s the Brat.”

“She is not far.”

“She still wet?” Eleluleniel nodded. “Bring us drink and then go fetch her something she can dry off with. Stupid if she takes sick after Mushog’s little prank.” Surprised, Eleluleniel looked up at him. Grushak’s eyes narrowed. “Well, go on then.”

Eleluleniel could hardly believe her good fortune. Outwardly, she only nodded briefly before she went to the packs.

Grushak watched her go, then turned his head to look in the direction of the Uruk-hai sprawling in the sun. He scratched his jaw briefly before reaching for his shirt.

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Bragdagash was on his back, arms behind his head, lazily enjoying the chance to cool his heels. It wasn’t often that they came across an obscure stretch of river like this. Rivers were often frequented by Men: fisher-folk, or travelers, whether on the river or along it. Not that Bragdagash and his lads tried overly hard to avoid Men: they relished a bloody bout as much as the next self-respecting Orc. But fighting was one thing, a casual dip in the drink another. Bragdagash didn’t care for the kind of interruptions Men brought when he was taking a bath. There were other times they’d come on stretches of water like this that he had, reluctantly, chosen to pass on by. Man-smell or signs of trapping along the banks, lines rigged up at the water’s edge, old fishing pots and such...these were warnings that he heeded. The others grumbled sometimes, but a joke on their chief’s part or, if that didn’t suffice, a flash of his fangs was generally all it took to keep them in line. It was his job to think about these things, after all. His responsibility.

There was a rangy insinuating smell in his broad nostrils and he didn’t have to look to know what it was: Mushog, sprawled in the grass not far away. He didn’t say anything but someone else did.

“Phew! You’re fine one to talk about reek, Mushog. Maybe someone ought to toss you in the river.” Despite his words, Kurbag didn’t actually sound disgusted. It wasn’t dirt that Mushog smelled of but his own unadulterated musk. Bathing had only made it stronger.

“Smell like rutting horse,” Hrahragh put it aptly from Bragdagash’s other side.
Mushog laughed. “Hurr. Flattery will get you everywhere, friends.” His already rough voice was somehow rougher, breathier. There was the faint but unmistakable rasping sound of grass on skin.

Bragdagash glanced sidelong to see exactly what he suspected, that Mushog had rolled onto his belly and was rocking his hips lazily against the sun-warmed earth. “Dig a hole first, why don’t you?” he said dryly.

Mushog grinned and ran his tongue over his teeth.

A shadow fell over Bragdagash as something interposed itself between him and the bright sunshine. He looked up at the one standing over him. “Yeah?” said the Orc chieftain agreeably.

“Boss.” Grushak looked mildly uncomfortable as he stood over the Uruk. A sliver of sun was peering over his right shoulder. For all his bulk, Grushak was no more partial to sun than any of the other snaga Orcs. “We keeping camp here tonight or we movin’ on?”

Bragdagash pulled an arm from behind his head and scratched his jaw, thinking about it. “Not by the water. Somewhere nearby, just a bit more sequestered. We’ll pick up and shift when the sun is behind those trees.”

Grushak grunted, looking at the trees on the far bank. “Fair enough.” His eyes dropped to the leather pack that lay near Bragdagash’s head. “So then. How is the little brood anyhow?”

Though the sun still dripped its gold, the air seemed suddenly cooler. Bragdagash frowned. “…Fine.”

Grushak nodded, his face impassive, but Bragdagash could sense his amusement. “Good to hear, Boss,” was all he said as he lumbered off.

Still frowning, Bragdagash reached behind him and caught hold of his leather pack. Hauling it over, he wedged it comfortably between his arm and his body. He closed his eyes again, then opened them, turning his head to squint at Hrahragh, who was lying near him in the grass. The Uruk was looking at him—more specifically, at the pack that he held cradled against his side. Bragdagash’s arm tightened. “What,” he asked flatly. He already knew what was coming.

“Nothing,” said Hrahragh, still looking at the pack. He flicked his orange eyes up at Bragdagash. “Mother.”

Bragdagash gritted his teeth. Hrahragh’s tusks showed in a slow grin. He himself was not laughing, but that didn’t matter. Bragdagash could hear the sniggering behind him. He turned his head, glaring at Mushog and Kurbag. “Why don’t you get it out of your systems, then?” he suggested in a dangerous voice.

“Mum…”

“…Mama…”

“Mumsy…”

“…Mummykins…”

“Finished?” he demanded, sitting up and settling the pack firmly on his thighs.

Mushog looked at Kurbag. “I can think of a few more—how about you?”
Their chieftain growled ominously and they both subsided, smirking.

The eggs of eagles have this in common with those of other birds: they require warmth and protection. Orcs are poor substitutes for the comforts of parents or nests, making likelier predators than protectors. Bragdagash was neither happy nor comfortable playing at clutch mother, yet that was exactly the role in which he had found himself, nursemaiding the eggs he’d had Grymawk steal from the eagles’ nest five days before. Keeping them warm wasn’t a problem; his own powerful heat took care of that. Transportation was trickier: at first he had rigged up a kind of crude sling in which to carry them nestled against his muscular body, but the jokes that the others made had gotten to be too much for him. Grymawk’s initial solution, keeping the eggs in a pack thickly lined with feathers and rags that served both to cushion and to insulate them, had finally proven the best.

Grymawk, in fact, had seemed to have the right idea about a number of things, but Bragdagash knew his lads and, while he had a healthy respect for their abilities, he also knew their limitations. Grymawk was the smallest of his Orcs and not someone who could be expected to protect his precious cargo from the rowdiness of the others. On the other hand, there was no one among the larger Orcs whom Bragdagash trusted to be gentle with them. That left only himself, and that, unfortunately, meant a steady stream of gibes at his expense. Only his size and authority afforded him any protection.

“The joke’s wearing thin, lads,” he said, giving Mushog a particularly pointed look. Mushog was the most frequent offender.

“What? He started it!” Mushog protested, pointing at Hrahragh.

The other Uruk only shifted comfortably on his back, a faint smile still lurking at the corners of his broad mouth.

Technically Grushak had been the one to start it this time. Bragdagash narrowed his eyes. “I don’t really care who started it, I’m finishing it.” He looked around at each of them in turn to emphasize his point before settling back again. It was different now, though. The grass that had felt so good beneath his back was coarse and ragged now, and the sun, which had given him such pleasure, was behind a cloud. Bragdagash glowered up at the blue sky and thought that, had he realized in advance all the trouble the eagle eggs were going to cause him, he would never have sent Grymawk after them to begin with.

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The kingfisher bobbed on a low-hanging branch, a blue jewel of a bird with a rosy belly and a sharp black beak. Its head swiveled constantly, keen eyes darting between the two-legger on the far shore and the water beneath. It was watching for the tell-tale glimmer of a fish, but the activities of the girl on the other side of the river distracted it. Trilling, it hopped further along the branch.

Maevyn was over the river, her lower legs hanging in the cold wet. She’d knotted her skirt up over her knees so the hem wouldn’t trail in the water, and the rough bark of the old log scraped her skin. It's just like climbing a tree, she told herself firmly. It was climbing a tree, really, just out instead of up. Still, she avoided looking down, keeping her eye on the thin brown cord where it bit into the branch jutting up just a few feet in front of her. She did not want to think about the current, though she could feel it against her legs. It was not strong but she was leery of the deep water and the pull of it made her nervous.

Suddenly, behind her, she heard her name being called with quiet urgency. Unable to turn around, she called, “I’m here.” There was silence for few moments. She could hear the rustlings of something moving through the undergrowth on the bank behind her. Then:
“Maevyn, what are you doing? I told you to stay where we were,” Leni called in an anxious whisper.

“You didn’t come back,” said Maevyn. “Anyhow, I wanted to see something.”

“Come back before you fall in.” The Elf girl’s arms were full of the thick fur that she had carried back. Casting about her, she found a spot covered with springy moss and quickly laid it down.

Maevyn ignored the order. She had reached the branch now where the twine had been wound and then knotted around the limb. Locking her legs tightly round the log, she continued to hold on with one hand, bringing the other up to touch the twine. It felt taut against her fingers, and she could feel the faint thrum of the river’s current, tugging on the twine and whatever it was attached to.

“Maevyn,” Leni called again, standing where the log bridged earth and river. Then she hesitated. “What is that?” She too had espied the narrow cord.

“I dunno.” Maevyn tugged on it experimentally. Holding tighter with her legs, she took her other hand from the log so that now she was gripping only with her knees. Catching at the twine with both hands, she began to pull. There was little give at first but she pulled steadily and gradually she felt whatever it was at the other end beginning to come free of the river’s mucky bottom.

“Oh, be careful…”

“I’m being careful,” she said, aggrieved. “It’s heavy though.” She gritted her teeth, gathering loops of thin cord about her hand as she slowly drew up the object.

A second two-legger had appeared on the far side of the river, but the kingfisher ignored them both. Below the branch it perched on it had spied the quicksilver flash of a tail. It was still for a full second, then pitched itself down into the water, clearing the surface a bare instant later with its catch fast in its beak. Landing on a different branch, the bird’s head bobbed with the thrashing of the fish it had caught; with an expert snap of its head the kingfisher slapped the fish against the bough, repeating the act until the minnow’s struggles weakened. Pitching its head back the kingfisher gulped down its meal, then flew away.

Below the green water, Maevyn could see the wobbling dark shape of whatever the thing was approaching the surface. “Here it comes,” she muttered. There was a loud *glub* as it came up out of the water. She pulled hard: it was much heavier now that it was out of the water, but she kept winding up the twine and presently the object was in her arms. She did not examine it at great length, not immediately, for Leni was calling for her to come back, and Maevyn herself didn’t feel comfortable where she was. Holding her prize to her chest, still unable to turn around, she began to squirm backwards to shore.

Five minutes later she sat bundled in the musty fur that Leni had brought, studying the curious contraption resting on her lap. It was wrought of closely woven twigs, fashioned like an elongated wicker basket. There were two large black stones inside of it. “Someone put these in here to weigh it down,” she said.

“Of course,” said Leni. “It is a trap of some sort, for catching fish.” She had wasted no time in stripping the other girl of her clothing and now she was wringing out Maevyn’s wet skirt, twisting it repeatedly in her slender hands. First she twisted one way, then another, and then she shook it as if she were airing it out, and then she hung it over a shrub next to Maevyn’s blouse. She had little hope that it would dry fully before Maevyn had to put it on again, and there would be nothing they could do about the wrinkles, but it was still better than nothing.
Maevyn continued to examine the trap. Knowing what it was in no way diminished her curiosity. She had not lived near a river in her old life, had never fished, and she was not familiar with such things. “So the fish swim in through this part, but then…but then, then don’t they just come out again?”

Leni came and sat down beside her. “No, look.” She put her hand on one end of the trap, near Maevyn’s own hand. “You see how it is wide here at the mouth, and then it tapers inward? It is easy for the fish to go in but harder for them to go out. Because of the way the wicker bends inward, you see?”

Maevyn understood, looking at the thin twigs bending in at the mouth of the trap. She pushed her fingers through the mesh and touched the peeled wicker tips and found them very sharp indeed. “So they scratch themselves up if they try to get out. And they just swim around inside the trap until the person that set it pulls it up again.” Not smart enough to realize a few scratches were better than what was in store if they stayed where they were. “There are no fish in it now. Maybe they swam out after all?”

“Or perhaps it was only laid in the past day or so.” She frowned as she looked at it.

Maevyn knew that Leni was wondering the same things she was: wondering who had set the trap, and when they had done it, and where they had come from, and when they were coming back. It gave Maevyn a weird feeling too, and she realized why. This was the first sign she’d seen of other people since the Orcs had taken her from her village. Aside from Leni, at any rate, and Leni didn’t count: she was in the same situation Maevyn was. It was strange, this far away from everything Maevyn had ever known, to handle something come of her own folk. More than anything, though, it made her feel excited. Someone had set this trap and left it, and someone would probably be back.

“Wouldn’t it be fine,” she said, looking around as if that someone were there to hear them, “if the person who put this here came back now? Or if we stayed here until they did, and…” Maevyn traveled off. From around the bend came the sound of Orkish laughter, carried faint but clear and raucous on the water. They’d want to pick up and leave soon enough, and they would find the two girls in short order to take them when they did. Even if someone were to come, what chance did one person, or even several, stand against ten well-armed Orcs?

“It is probably better to put it back again,” said Leni. She took the trap but held it as if she couldn’t quite bring herself to do so.

Maevyn didn’t want to either. The trap had filled her with hope, and with the delicious sense of private wisdom that their captors did not share. Surely it was an opportunity of some kind if they were only smart about it. “What if we put something in it? Something for the person to find.”

Leni looked thoughtful. “There is nothing with which to write a message,” she said. “And the water would ruin it if there was.”

Maevyn wasn’t thinking of writing. She didn’t know how. “More rocks, maybe. They may not say anything but they’ll show we were here, or that someone was at any rate.” Thinking of it made her eager. Holding the fur bundled tight around her she got up and started looking for likely stones. Leni did not, and Maevyn ignored her as she stooped repeatedly to pick up stones, irritated that the Elf girl wasn’t helping.

Leni only continued to sit with the wicker trap in her lap and that thoughtful look still on her face. At length she stood, setting it to one side, and went into the trees. Returning with a slender stick, she stooped beside the fallen log and began to make careful marks in the exposed earth beside it.
Maevyn kept gathering her stones but glanced at the Elf girl from time to time. After a minute or so she drifted over. Picking up the trap she dropped her stones into it with a rattling patter, then stood squarely behind Leni and looked down over her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“I may not have paper or pen, but I can still write after a fashion. Perhaps, if the fisher comes back, he will see this message…at least, if he does not step on it and the rain does not wash it away.” She pressed harder with the stick as if to ensure against this.

“What does it say?”

“I am writing our names. Eleluleniel and Maevyn were here this day: Eleluleniel, daughter of Fírhador and of Thalawen, and Maevyn… Maevyn, what were your parents’ names?”

“Why?”

“So I may write them.”

“What good’s that gonna do? They’re dead, they’re not gonna hear about it.” Maevyn’s voice was flat.

Leni glanced up at her. There was pity in her eyes. “All right,” was all she said, and went back to making her marks.

Maevyn waited for a moment. “What are you saying now?”

“I write that we are held by Orcs, and how long we have been held. I write that we travel with our captors, and the direction in which we travel…And now I am writing all of it again, but I am writing it in Cirth instead. I am writing in as many ways as I know how so that whoever finds it can read it one way if not another.”

“It says all of that?” Maevyn was very impressed. She looked more closely at the marks Leni had made, but they remained mere scratches in the earth. “What if they can’t read at all?”

Leni shrugged. “Then I will have tried, at any rate.” She murmured aloud what she had just written: “…are held against our will…” Then smiled with sudden mischief. “And I write that we are sorry about filling his trap with stones.”

Muttering, embarrassed: “I can empty it out again…”

“No, do not.” Leni looked at her directly, and her face was completely earnest. “There is nothing to say when this person will be back, or if he will see my message. You were right. Anything to show we have been here.”

Maevyn’s ears reddened at the warm approval in her voice.

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Her clothes were damp when she put them on again, but at least they weren’t soaked, and they’d been warmed almost to skin temperature under the sun. When she and Leni returned to the impromptu camp Maevyn was relieved to find that the Orcs had also dressed in the meantime, with no naked bits to be seen. The sun had reached the far bank now, and Bragdagash had given the word that they were to move on.

In the business of picking everything up again there were few jokes made at Maevyn’s expense. Rukshash referred slyly to her “little dip in the drink,” and Grymawk remarked, without a trace of
sarcasm, that it had made a definite improvement. “At least now you don’t stink as much,” he said and seemed oblivious to the glare that Maevyn gave him in return.

As for Grushak, he called her over and, when she was within reach, caught her by the arm. “Shut it,” he said when she protested, and patted the material of her blouse front and back in an unhurried way. She squirmed beneath his heavy hand and he grunted. “Dry enough, I suppose. Next time, don’t be so clumsy.”

Her mouth opened, any number of indignant words springing to mind—*Clumsy?! I didn’t fall in, he THREW me…!*—but she held her tongue.

Grushak gave her a sardonic smile that showed he knew exactly what she was thinking. “Good girl,” he said, and began buckling the various packs and supplies onto her back. He did not stint, bringing her right to the limit of what she could feasibly carry and still walk at the same time.

She’d gotten used to this over the past few days but she didn’t like it any bit more than she had at the start, standing tense and sullen as he loaded her body down. This time she comforted herself with the thought of a trap filled with smooth pale stones submerged in a green echoing silence, and the memory of Leni’s mysterious markings by the river. She stood and then she walked, and with all that she carried of Grushak’s she carried that knowledge as well, and it went some way toward lightening her burden. Leni labored under her own encumberance but as they walked the two girls would looked at each other from time to time with the shy pleasure of a secret shared.
Lessons and Assignations

Chapter Notes

For the first two days they exchanged whispered conjectures about the fishing trap and Leni’s message by the river. After that they did not mention them so much. The excitement had left Leni first: when Maevyn brought them up she would talk in turn but it would be wistfully, without the former optimism, and this in turn dampened Maevyn’s own enthusiasm. It also made her resentful.

Sometimes Maevyn felt like she could talk with Leni and laugh with her. Other times it was like a black thing occupied her body and she could barely stand the sound of the other girl’s voice. It was worse on those occasions when Kurbag had her, when Leni wouldn’t even look Maevyn in the face afterward and Maevyn was filled with impotent rage. Then she would go watch Hrahragh with his daggers, or pester him or Mushog for more Orkish.

Mushog was not Maevyn’s favorite Orc after the river incident, and he had proven unreliable as a teacher. Still, she kept using what he gave her and asked him for more. Mushog would grin as he supplied the answers to her questions: he was still the most forthcoming of her sources, even if half of what he told her was made up. It got so that she could tell when he was lying, or thought she could anyway, from the way his head would cock the littlest bit to the one side, or the way the corner of his mouth would curl back. That usually meant he was coming up with something nasty to tell her in place of the real meaning. Then she knew to avoid that word because it wasn’t reliable. Sometimes he would slip one past her, though, or she would make a mistake of her own, and then the others would jeer at her and she would go away from them mortified.

Leni could not understand it. “Why?” she asked Maevyn finally, unable to restrain herself any longer. “Why do you look to him for instruction in this? He does not lead you right. You know this.”

“Don’t got no choice.”

“No choice? How can you say that?”

“Because you won’t tell me anything,” Maevyn snapped at her. “You know when I’m saying stuff wrong, and you won’t help me! He’s the only one who’ll tell me anything. How else am I gonna learn if I don’t listen to him, huh?” Leni did not say anything. Maevyn looked at her challengingly but Leni had dropped her eyes to the dough that she was working beneath her hands, and her mouth was set in a thin line. Maevyn muttered to herself under her breath. For all that Leni was so soft-spoken she could be incredibly stubborn.

Why must she be so stubborn? the Elf girl wondered despairingly in her turn. I do not understand these Men. Not at all.

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“THE FUCK YOU ARE!!” roared Bragdagash. Normally laid back and fairly easy-going as a chief, he had taken a hostile stance and his teeth were fully bared at his subordinate.

Pryszrim cowered. "But Braggy, I was just pointing out that we have three. What's the harm?"

"The harm is that I would kill you!”
The conversation at hand was of eagle eggs—more specifically, the fine breakfast that one of them might make. Pryszrim backed away cringingly. "No need to be testy about it. It was only in fun."

Bragdagash was still growling at him: ducking his head quickly, the smaller Orc scuttled away like a whipped cur.

Prysrim might have been making a joke, but Bragdagash had been dealing with the consequences of his egg scheme for a while now. It was true that eagle eggs were highly prized in certain quarters up North, so long as they remained fertile and in one piece. He’d been doing his best to keep them that way: carrying them everywhere, turning them—shit! He even slept with them at night. And put up with constant jests about his parenting skills. Pryszrim’s little joke, if joke it truly had been, was the last straw.

“Mmm, lad.” The lead-in hung on the air, as if the speaker savored making Bragdagash wait. “It sounds like you’re starting to lose your sense of humor.” Bragdagash turned to bestow a particularly dark look upon Rukshash, although it did no good at that moment as the older Orc’s eyes were closed. He was, at that moment, sprawled under a nearby tree, comfortably propped against its dark trunk. Unmindful of Bragdagash’s death-glare, he only continued, “You know that once that happens you’re really in trouble. Just a bit of advice.”

“Keep it for yourself then,” Bragdagash said. He paused, then, adjusting his stance, said gruffly, “Anyway, come over here. I need you."

Rukshash’s good eye opened slowly. “That time again, eh Missus?”

Bragdagash snarled, but it was half-hearted. “Enough, old one. I’m not taking any lip from the others and I’ll be damned if I take any from you.”

Rukshash grinned and got to his feet. Rolling his bony shoulders to loosen them, he ambled over in Bragdagash’s direction. The tall Uruk towered over the gaunt Orc with his powerful frame: Rukshash, un-intimidated, only clucked and gave the pack Bragdagash carried a playful pat as he walked by. “Let’s bring them over by the fire, then.”

Kurbag’s Elf girl and Grushak’s brat happened to be there at that moment. Squeaker had the good sense to vacate the premises, but Grushak’s brat dilly-dallied in a sullen way, so Rukshash aimed a kick at her to hurry things along. Scowling, she moved a few yards off before promptly turning and crouching down in a rebellious fashion, watching them. Rukshash, having achieved his immediate purpose, ignored her. Settling himself down, he patted the warm earth in front of him.

Bragdagash set the eggs down one after another before the backdrop of weak orange flames. Dropping down into a squat, he rested his wrists on his knees, watching the old Orc set his ruined hand against each in turn and examine it intensely. Rukshash thrust his tongue into the pocket of his cheek. “Easier when it’s dark,” he said, but when Bragdagash asked him if he could tell or not he nodded. “Still good.”

Bragdagash grunted. He had no idea how Rukshash was able to make anything out through the thick leathery shells or what it was he saw, but he trusted the other Orc not to take the piss out of him. Not when it counted anyway. Settling on his arse beside Rukshash, Bragdagash eyed the eggs in a brooding way.

Rukshash gave him a sidelong look. “You might just as easily set someone else to carrying them, you know.”

“Skai. Like I can trust any of those lads,” muttered Bragdagash. He was neither happy nor comfortable in his role of clutch mother but there was no one else with whom he felt safe entrusting
his charges.

Rukshash glanced past him. “Who mentioned the lads?”

Bragdagash looked that way to see Maevyn watching them with her dark eyes. “The brat? Don’t be
daft. These things are worth a lot to the right people.”

“Not her. The Elf bint.” Bragdagash’s brow furrowed. Rukshash shrugged. “Need gentle
handling, don’t they? It don’t come much softer than that.”

Bragdagash was skeptical. “Too soft. I don’t just need a carrier, I need someone who can watch out
for ’em too. What happens if the boys get rowdy?”

“Ah, but she’s yours for that, I reckon. I know that one. You give her something helpless to watch
out for and she’ll fight for it, though it mayn’t be with her fists.”

“What else is there?” said Bragdagash. He said it in a way that suggested he didn’t expect an
answer, and Rukshash didn’t offer one. Bragdagash settled back, studying the eggs. “Still, I
suppose you’re not usually a fool. I’ll think about it.”

“Bragdagash wants you to watch those eggs,” announced Maevyn, flopping down next to Leni.

“Does he say so?”

“Nar. I heard him and Rukshash. Says he’s thinking about it.”

The Elf girl shrugged. “I suppose we shall find out soon enough.”

“You’ve already gotta do everything, though. Carry, fetch, keep the fire going, make their food for
them, do whatever they want. They’re his stupid eggs.”

“Well then. Perhaps I shall tell him I am already too busy.”

That made Maevyn go quiet for a moment. “You’re joking,” she said at last.

Leni’s shoulders shook with silent amusement. She had taken some of the dough they’d made with
her when she left the fire and was forming it into little loaves to bake when they could get back to it.

Maevyn put her arms behind her head and watched her. “Buk snaga-kjani,” she remarked at length.

“Very well, you do not have to eat it.” As soon as Eleluleniel said it she frowned. She generally
made a point of not acknowledging what Maevyn said when she spoke in that tongue, and had not
meant to reply.

Sure enough: “Hah! I got it right!” Maevyn crowed.

“It is no great accomplishment,” the Elf said quietly.

Maevyn only grinned, pleased to have tricked her. “You should just tell me everything you know.
It’d be easier.” Leni gave her a measured look but said nothing. “Fine, don’t tell me anything then.
I don’t need you for that.” Maevyn looked around, and her eyes lit up as she noticed Grymawk. He
was shaping a fresh arrow shaft with his keen knife and seemed otherwise unemployed.

Eleluleniel’s face was serious as she watched Maevyn leave. Nothing good can come of it, said her
misgiving heart. And: I know, she thought in response. But what is there to do? She will not listen to me, and I will not be her teacher.

“Oh no, not you,” Grymawk said when he saw Maevyn.

“I just wanted to know—”

“You just want to know. You ask too many questions. Why can’t you bother someone else? Hold this.” He pushed the peeled birch shaft into Maevyn’s hand and stooped, pulling a dry shaft from the bundle of slender stalks at his feet. Grabbing the first shaft back from Maevyn he compared them both. “This lot didn’t do so good,” he muttered, dropping down in a squat to slip both back into the bundle.

Maevyn dropped down as well. “What’s the word for arrow?”

“Shaugit.”

“Bow?”

“Bogi. Or lak, that’s another.” He wasn’t looking at her, rummaging through his pack instead.

“Is there a difference between them?”

“Hah! There we go, I knew there was still a bit of gut left from before.”

“Is there a difference?” she asked again. “Between bogi and lak, I mean. Do they really mean the same thing or are they two different kinds of bow?”

“Go away.” Maevyn quieted but remained crouched there, bobbing a little on her heels. Grymawk turned, eyed her, and stretched out a skinny arm to prod her suddenly on the breastbone, toppling her backward with a squawk. “Bogi is a crossbow, that’s what. Lak is a longbow: bogi is what I’ve got on my back. Now scarper.”

Rubbing her rear resentfully, Maevyn did so. She didn’t want to go back by Leni, though, and the Elf girl’s I-told-you-so. Instead she wandered out to the edge of the little campsite, kicking at the dirt. If Mushog were here she would go to him, but he wasn’t, and Grymawk wasn’t in the mood to help. It galled her having to rely on them: it wasn’t as if she was any happier seeking help from the Orcs than Leni was, after all.

But I still think it’s better to know things, Maevyn thought. To know what they were saying, to know the way they thought. If only there was someone who would teach her, who would answer her questions and not tell her the wrong thing as a joke, or tell her to go away.

A sudden clout to the back of her head: “Here, what do you think you’re about, eh? There’s work enough for idle hands. Think you can do whatever you please?” Nazluk, who had come up suddenly behind Maevyn, aimed another smack at her as he passed her by. She ducked, scowling after him and rubbing her head, but her stomach rumbled at the sight of the dead rabbit hanging from his wire snare.

The food the Orcs had taken from her village was long consumed, and the meat from the eagle had gone tough and stringy before it, too, vanished down their gullets. Now their diet was what they were able to catch. Most of the Orcs were competent hunters, but a fistful of squirrels or doves or a rabbit or two did not go very far. Killer had first dibs, followed by the others, and there was rarely any left for Maevyn or Leni.
It was not unbearable. Leni did not like meat so much anyway and the Orcs ate more of it than Maevyn ever had in her old life. In her village animals were primarily kept for the produce of their bodies—milk and cheese and wool—or for ploughing and carrying in the case of the drought animals. Benard’s family had kept pigs, which were slaughtered in the fall. Fall and winter were the seasons for cured pork and for the beef and mutton of older animals not likely to make it through the winter, or the young rams and the bull calves not kept for stud or steer. Meat in summertime was meat out of season and infrequent, to be parsed over several days in the family pottage.

Far from home, and following the overwhelming abundance of those first days, Maevyn and Leni relied on other sustenance, mainly the crude bread they made when they had a stable camp and time to spend grinding and baking. Pryszrim might steal a loaf here and there, but there were also the edible mushrooms that Leni identified and the little wild onions, so strong eaten raw, that became tender and good when eaten hot from the fire. Maevyn liked to put her hand up in front of her face and breathe on it to smell the onion afterward and watch how Leni’s nose wrinkled in response. It was fun to rile her.

Less fun was the time with the berries: they had been tart, with an unexpected sweetness like nothing Maevyn had ever tasted before, and she had eaten nearly a bushful despite Leni’s warning. She realized her folly later when her belly began to cramp and then when she made her first hurried forays into the trees. There was no keeping a thing like that secret from the Orcs and they found much amusement in Maevyn’s predicament. “There she goes again!” they called, hoots of laughter following as Maevyn scurried away from the camp.

It was sort of funny, she admitted to herself later, and Leni, who had warned her after all, had as much reason to laugh as any of them. Instead she maintained a tactful silence, making Maevyn lie down and chew a piece of sour root while she rubbed the younger girl’s back and cramped belly. Maevyn didn’t know if the root did anything but the slow circular movement of Leni’s hand was soothing.

Burnt bread and mushrooms, onions and berries, and other things too that Maevyn would never have thought palatable until Leni showed them to her. It was in some ways like Mother-Wisdom, like the kind of gathering that Mama and the other women of the village used to do on the village outskirts or in the woods.

“Did you always know how to do this?” Maevyn had asked the day before as Leni broke off a piece of fungus from a low tree trunk.

Leni shook her head. “We picked fruits and berries when they were in season. My family did not have an orchard but others did, and when the time came for picking all of the neighboring homes would come together to gather the fruit.” While Maevyn imagined what it would be like to see many Elves in one place, Leni went on, “We did keep a garden in the back: trellises for climbing roses, and a few beds for flowers, and a kitchen garden for lettuces and carrots and other good food plants. My mother thought that cabbages were as lovely as roses because of their many folds. I liked going out into the garden with her. I used to love the garden…”

There was a shadow in her eyes. Stay away from gardens, thought Maevyn. Out loud she said, “But how did you learn which wild things were safe to pick if you didn’t do it before?”

“I learned because I was hungry,” Leni answered simply. She had shared very little of her initial time among the Orcs and Maevyn didn’t want to know much more than Leni wanted to tell. Enough to understand that they were bad days and that the other girl had been very hungry, even starving. “Kurbag fed me sometimes, but sometimes he forgot, and when he did remember I could not always eat what he provided. He learned in time what I could stomach, and I began also to teach myself. I
thought, ‘Often my folk have had to go without. I can learn.’ And I did learn, but it was hard. I had to be very careful.”

They had been quiet for some minutes, continuing to forage, when Leni said suddenly, sharply, “Do not touch that!”

Maevyn’s hand jerked back. “What? What’d I do?”

More calmly: “The plant you were about to pick. It stings.”

Maevyn blinked at her. “Course it does, it’s a stinging nettle. You’ve never had them before?” Before Leni could stop her Maevyn reached forward, firmly took the nettle by the stalk and twisted it up. “See, if you brush against it it’ll sting, but if you just go on and grab it it’s not so bad. Then once we get it hot by the fire the stinging will go away and we can eat it.”

“I would never have known,” said Leni, looking like she didn’t believe it. But there were other nettles growing nearby and with Maevyn to show how, Leni was soon picking them as easily as she had.

Eating the toasted greens later, the Elf girl had been surprised at how good they actually tasted. Maevyn, pleased to have known something that Leni didn’t, tried to be cavalier. “My mama used to put them in a soup and it was good enough, but I liked to play with ’em more. They grow thick around privies. I used to pick ’em and whip Demi’s arms with ’em.” Seeing the look on Leni’s face: “What? He would whip me back…”

“I think,” Leni said carefully, “that my parents would not have accepted that kind of behavior.”

“Nor did my mama neither,” said Maevyn. “That’s why she smacked us all the time.” She said it matter-of-factly and could not understand why Leni only looked all the more horrified.

The brat and the Elf might get by on greens and roots and tree bark, but Orcs eat meat. Bread was for slaves, or for sports like Pryszrim, or for cases of direst necessity. They were a long way from that: the summer woods teemed with animal life and hunting was good enough that they didn’t go to bed hungry. Still, the lads were grumbling. Quite aside from the question of flesh, they were getting restless, itching for a good fight, and Grushak and Bragdagash both knew that they would need an outlet for their energy soon, before it turned to squabbling.

“Snaga Orcs are whining again,” Grushak told his chief. “Saying they’re tired of squirrel.”

“They’re not the only ones,” said Bragdagash. “I’ve been hankering for beef these past few days.”

“Isn’t there maybe something we can hit up out here? That last village was a while ago…”

“We’re not in country I’m overly familiar with, but there are supposed to be Men in these parts. Here…” Bragdagash shrugged his muscular arms out of the pack he carried and held it in front of him. Squatting, he opened the pack and teased out a piece of folded leather nestled between two of the ovular shapes inside. Grushak hunkered down next to him, wisely refraining from any jokes about the chief’s eggs, as Bragdagash unfolded the piece of leather. His yellow eyes followed Bragdagash’s claw as the Uruk’s black talons grazed the crude representations of trees.

Grushak had never asked Bragdagash about the map, about who the Uruk had robbed or killed to get it, and Bragdagash had never offered any details. The others didn’t know about it and neither had Grushak until Bragdagash had taken him aside one day, produced it without ceremony, and together
they had worked out where they were. He’d put it away afterward, again without comment, and Grushak had not questioned him or mentioned it to anyone else. He knew that Bragdagash had shown him the map in confidence and would find out soon enough if he violated it.

Orcs rely in large part on instinct, on smell and sight, memory and word of mouth. Writing and other representation is the medium of Men and Elves. Dirty drawings produced by the fire, or obscenities, *we-were-here* scrawls cut into trees and naked stone, these are acceptable, but anything more complicated invokes suspicion and distrust. If others knew that Bragdagash took counsel from a scrap of leather, something outside of the sun and the stars and his own inner gut, it could undermine his authority.

That was a stupid attitude by Grushak’s reckoning. How could reading a map be anything other than useful? Unless the map was wrong. Anyhow, it made sense enough to him. Like Bragdagash he had fought in the War, albeit under a different Master, and he remembered how heavily their mostly Mannish officers had relied on maps and written correspondence. The Uruk-hai had had more to do with Man-business than other Orcs, and that was probably how Bragdagash first came to use them.

Grushak wondered if the map itself dated from that time, from back during the War. If so, how reliable was it? Mountains might not move, but farmland? Villages? This was only the second time he’d ever seen Bragdagash’s map and the thought hadn’t occurred to him before.

“We’re here,” the chief was saying, tapping a shaded area. “When we get past the trees in the next two days the land will slope here, and go to gully. When that happens we’ll know we’re heading in the right direction. Past that, if we follow the spine of the earth, it will take us to this—” He held his thumb against a roughly rectangular mark, then took it away.

Grushak gave it a due glance, then shifted his gaze to Bragdagash. “And you think they’ll still be there?”

“Been five years.”

Huh. There went Grushak’s theory about a war-map. On the other hand, he felt more confident knowing that it was so recent. “It’s good,” he said. “When we get past the trees in…two days?” He pressed the tip of his forefinger flush against the map for a measurement, looking to Bragdagash for confirmation. Bragdagash nodded, and Grushak grunted and twisted the digit sideways, halving the distance he’d just indicated. “Then a day from there to the village, yeah?”

“’S’right,” said Bragdagash.

Grushak grinned. “That’s real good, Boss. Three days, we can get by on that. Time enough to think happy thoughts.”

Bragdagash smirked a little as he folded up the map. “We’ll give it till we reach the tree-line. Then I’ll send one of the lads up ahead to reconnoiter. See to it everything is where it’s supposed to be.”

“What do you think,” said Bragdagash, some minutes later as they started back, “of Kurbag’s Elf holding onto these fucking eggs? Rukshash reckons she’d do for it.”

“Huh.” Grushak thought about it briefly. “I can see why he’d think so. Don’t get much softer than that one.” The chief started laughing: evidently Rukshash had said exactly the same thing. That made Grushak snort. “Hmph. Y’know, the other advantage is if you put the eggs with her you’ve also got Kurbag to discourage the others from getting too rowdy, and he’s not liable to do nothing stupid neither.”
“True enough. Well, I’d welcome the chance to fob ’em off and sooner rather than later. This next bit of action I want in on as well. I wasn’t there for the fun last time. My sword is thirsty.”

“Hard to spill guts while you’re playing Mommy, eh Boss…”

“Fuck you up your hairy arsehole, Grushak.”

There was a smell of roast game when they got back to the camp. The hero of the evening was Pryszrim, who had limed six wood pigeons: these, together with the rabbit bagged by Nazluk and some more of Grymawk’s squirrels, promised to make a decent meal. Two of the birds were already spitted and staked beside the fire, while the rest were being plucked by the Elf and the Brat. The two girls were having a hard go of it at that point, crowded as they were by the Orcs attracted by delicious smells.

Pryszrim was part of that eager knot, basking in the praise. Pushing his way through the others, Bragdagash looked at the birds and then at the Orc he had bellowed at earlier that day. “Really? You?” he asked. Pryszrim looked proud but wary as he nodded. “Not bad,” said Bragdagash with real approval. “Not bad at all. Of course, I’ll be expecting twice this number tomorrow night.”

Pryszrim beamed, then as the words sank in his ears drooped and an aspect of horror came over him. “Wait, Braggy, wait, what?”

The others laughed and Shrah’rar smacked him on the back. “He’s shitting you, Pryszrim.”

“Oh.” Pryszrim laughed belatedly as well, but he still looked worried.

Bragdagash chuckled and patted him on the head, a gesture that would have infuriated anyone else but went further toward making Pryszrim relax: the smaller Orc’s back and shoulders loosened and he grinned like a dog. “All right then,” said the chieftain, looking around. “Let’s take it out of sniffing range, eh? There are matters we’ve got to speak on and that,” referring to the roasting pigeons, “is bloody distracting.”

Grushak did not immediately follow the others, holding back for a moment to address Maevyn, who was still pulling feathers. “Step it up Brat. We’re all hungry and I don’t anticipate this is gonna take long.” She was bent over the bird and gave no acknowledgement that she had heard him. The big Orc frowned. “Hey,” he said, and rapped her head with his heavy knuckles, causing her to exclaim and cover her head with her arms. “Glad I have your attention. Mind me or you’ll receive worse.”

She looked up at him then, eyes blazing, but he had already turned away. Gentle fingers settled on her arm and she turned to see Leni looking at her and shaking her head. Maevyn held back the many rude things she wanted to say at that moment and silently picked up the pigeon she had dropped. She amused herself by pretending it was Grushak, jerking feathers out with morbid satisfaction, and would have gutted it afterward with enthusiasm if she’d only had a knife. Instead it would have to wait for its disembowelment by one of the Orcs. She thought, not for the first time, of Demi’s little knife, but she had not seen that since the time with the eagle. It might be that it still lay there in the stones at the base of the mountain…but she knew better. Grushak had it, sure as the blood in her veins.

“…keep going as we’re going, veer a little to the northeast, and we’ll come to a place where the earth drops away,” Bragdagash was saying to his band on the other side of the clearing. “Once we get there I’ll be detailing two of you to scout ahead.”

“What’ll we be looking for, Boss?” somebody asked.
“That’s for me to know and you to find out when I’m ready to tell you. You want to ask again, go right ahead…”

“Oh no, that’s quite all right,” said Nazluk dryly and there was amused agreement. Bragdagash obviously wanted to play it close for now. Besides, it was heartening to know that they had a definite destination, even if their purpose, for the moment, was known only to the chief.

“Good then. Now that that’s settled you lads might as well go back to leering at those meats. Except for you, Kurbag—I’ve got something I want you on.”

“Yeah, Braggy’s dick,” said Mushog in an audible whisper, elbowing Kurbag in the side. Kurbag, not expecting it, rubbed the offended area and glared at him.

Bragdagash looked at the Uruk and gave him a dangerous smile. “Don’t you know, Mushog? That’s reserved for your big mouth.”

They all laughed, Mushog as hard as any of them. “After dinner then, Boss?” he said with his usual cockiness. They dispersed, Mushog swaggering off to the warmth of the fire and the enticing smells that came from it. “Here little birds,” he crooned, swooping down on the pigeons that remained to be gutted. “Your time has come.” He picked up one of the carcasses, holding it by the neck almost delicately between thumb and forefinger. Smirking sidelong at Maevyn, he said, “Know the word for pigeon, Brat?”

“Zog,” she said flatly.

“What a dirty look you’re giving me, when I’m only trying to help. And you’re wrong, by the way. Zog is bird. Plumub is pigeon.” He drew the knife at his hip and laid the bird across the palm of his hand so that its head hung over the side. His encircling thumb pressed against the soft breast feathers.

She was suspicious but he sounded serious. “Plumub,” she repeated.

“Aye. So what do you suppose pigeon guts would be?”

Maevyn stared, weirdly transfixed as he slit the lower belly open and started scooping out the innards. “Plumub-hosh?”

“Thaaaaaat’s right. See? You’re not so stupid after all.”

“She will be if she listens to you,” said Shrah’rar, who was dressing another of the pigeons. “I’ve heard some of the lines you’ve been feeding her, that shara-foshan. Lat foshan kri sha-bagal mubushug…”

“So you teach her then.”

Shrah’rar snorted. “What for? She’s not my project.”

“Hey Brat,” said Mushog, leaning in close to Maevyn. “Here’s one you should know. Shrah’rar ha far hombaur dagr’ob jashatob. That’s easy enough to remember, isn’t it? It even rhymes…”

“Oh, very funny,” said Shrah’rar. “So funny I forgot to laugh. Here, Squeaker, pass me one of those spits.” He dropped a handful of viscera on the burnt outer perimeter of the fire. It hissed and sizzled in the embers. The Elf girl handed him a pointed stick on which he neatly skewered the bird and staked it over the fire.
Mushog had noticed the expression on Leni’s face. “You don’t like my little lessons, do you?” he asked her with a slow smile. There was no safe answer as they both knew; the Elf said nothing. The Uruk’s grin widened. “You needn’t speak: I can see it well enough. You should be glad, you know. There are other lessons I could be teaching her.” He put his hand on Maevyn’s shoulder.

Maevyn jerked away from him. “Sod off!” she snapped.

“Come off it, lad, you know you don’t like your meat that young,” said Rukshash, who was sitting nearby.

“Soon enough,” said Mushog in a cheerful way. “And you know the saying: when they’re old enough to bleed they’re old enough to breed…”

“I’d cut it off if you tried,” Maevyn told him fiercely.

Mushog laughed. “Ooo-oooh, so tough you are!” He held up his hands in mock appeasement.

“Mushog, quit mucking around,” said Grymawk, coming over to the fire. “You’re holding up dinner, the way you carry on. Squeaker, you’re to go by Bragdagash. He’s calling for you.”

“Aw!” said Mushog as she stood. “Don’t go, we were having so much fun.”

“What’s he want her for, then?” asked Shrah’rar.

Grymawk shrugged. “Is it my business? No, it’s not,” he answered himself before anyone could say otherwise. He took the spot the Elf girl had just vacated, making himself comfortable.

Eleluleniel picked her way past the other Orcs. Seeing Bragdagash and Kurbag standing near one another, and remembering Maevyn’s words of earlier, it was easy enough to guess at what was coming. Bragdagash held the pack in which he carried the eagle’s eggs before him. As she approached, he held it out to her.

“Take this,” he said and she did. Where he was able to use his hands to carry it, she had to use her arms, hugging it to her chest. Bragdagash looked down at her thoughtfully. It was plain to see that the pack was heavy for her, but nothing she couldn’t handle. “Now set that down and look inside… you see those in there, Squeaker? You’re looking after them from now on. Keep ’em warm, keep ’em from being jostled, keep ’em safe. Kurbag’ll be trucking his own kit in the meantime, so do a good job and you enjoy a few weeks’ lighter load. Any harm comes to them, though, and I’ll see you get worse than a beating. Understand?” She nodded, carefully closing the pack up again, and Bragdagash looked at Kurbag. “Let’s see about getting it cinched on her.”

They had her stand for a few minutes while they tested and adjusted the straps on the pack, fitting them to her shoulders and back. Once Bragdagash decided that it was secure and made her take it off and put it on again a few times, he grunted. “That’s a load off and no mistake. Now let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

-.-.-.-

“Still hungry, eh?” said Nazluk in a tone that came off, intentionally or not, as snide.

Grushak was watching Pryszrim with a brooding look on his face. Pryszrim had finished eating his prize, the plumpest of the pigeons he had caught, and was licking his fingers with messy enjoyment. Grushak was not so enthusiastic about pigeons: too much picking and dithering with fingers, and anyway, it took heavier fare than pigeons to make him full. “Let’s hope we take a deer in the next day or so,” he muttered, “or I may have to eat Grymawk.”
Grymawk choked a little mid-swallow. “Now why say a thing like that?” he complained. “That’s not at all funny.”

“I thought it was,” said Nazluk. “It amused me anyhow.”

Annoyed, Grymawk opened his mouth but was interrupted by Bragdagash, who told him to go relieve Hrahragh from guard duty. “You’ve not taken it for a few nights now and he should get a bite before everything is gone, knowing how fast you lot bolt things down.”

But Hrahragh, when he came, only smiled disinterestedly at the wood pigeons. Little wonder, for a pair of leverets swung from his hand. He laughed at the other Orcs’ surprise. “By myself all day. I get bored.” He had already skinned and gutted them before coming to the fire; now he spitted them and set them to roasting.

Grushak’s stomach rumbled. He had to ask. “Here now, friend. Are you really eating both of those?”

Hrahragh turned his head to give Grushak an amused look. “What you have to trade?”

“Beer or my hand. Which will you take?”

Hrahragh laughed. “Thirsty more than horny just now. Drink is good.”

Grushak grinned, pleased at the prospect of proper victuals. “Oi Brat! Bring us two drinking skins here.”

Maevyn was under the trees with Leni, where she had joined the Elf after the Orcs began eating. No meat would be coming their way, after all, and both girls were interested in looking at the eagle eggs that Leni had been charged with. The Elf had taken them each out of the pack and had placed them in the nestling folds of the sleeping furs. Together they looked at them in the faint light available. No details were visible, only the dark ovoid shapes could be distinguished in the gloom.

Maevyn was subdued, remembering the eagles again, the eagle mother in the cave and the eagle she had killed. Putting her palm against the egg, she ran her hand over the leathery exterior. It felt like it had before, and like something else too. “When I touch it it makes me think of something,” she said out loud, “but I don’t know what.” Leni didn’t have a chance to say anything in response; just then they heard Grushak call out from the fire. Maevyn sighed gustily. “Hold on, I’ll come back,” she said as she got to her feet.

It took some stumbling and fumbling through Orkish belongings to find the skins. When she brought them to the fire Grushak was chuckling about something and didn’t notice her at first. “There you are,” he said when he did. He didn’t sound cross. It was obvious that he was in a good mood at that moment. “Come on, give them here.”

She did as he said but did not leave immediately, mesmerized by that wonderful smell. Little meat as she had eaten of late, the smell of the young hares crackling over the fire made her mouth water. Suddenly the burnt bread she had eaten earlier seemed wholly inadequate.

Mushog was also eying the spits with interest. “Oi, Rukshash, which are you more partial to? Rabbit or hare?”

“That’s easy. Rabbit is generally more tender, but young hare? Mmm, that always tastes a treat.”

Grushak snorted. “Eyes off, friends. Hrahragh and I already have an arrangement.”
“Awww…”

“…it’s no fair…”

“You’re a great bloody wanker, Grushak,” came the general chorus.

This assessment did not seem to cause him any undue concern. The spits came off the flames and the hares came off the spits. As their fellows watched ruefully, the two Orcs tucked into their meals, Grushak with single-minded pleasure, paying little attention to anything else, while Hrahragh ate more slowly, pausing often to let his tongue wander over his lips and the juices running down his chin. He had had a long day and, while it didn’t bother him to be alone for long periods, it was good to relax and enjoy his meal.

The others, already basically satisfied by their earlier repast and evidently resigned to the fact that they wouldn’t be having any part of this new bounty, shifted their conversation to other matters. Maevyn continued to watch from the periphery, telling herself that she was just doing it for the Orkish. She ticked off words that she recognized in an automatic sort of way but she couldn’t seem to make herself process larger sentence fragments. Running beneath the mechanical litany she was remembering how Mama would cut the rabbit up small and put it in the big pot over the fire, and she put all those herbs in too, and somehow that only made the rabbit smell even stronger so the whole house smelled like wild rabbit. How all day she’d stir in a little water, just from time to time, and sometimes she’d set Maevyn to doing it, which was one of the only chores Maevyn had really liked because she could lick the ladle when Mama wasn’t watching…

Hrahragh, feeling himself under scrutiny, turned to see Grushak’s brat a little distance away. She was watching with a dejected woebegone look on her face, an unguarded expression such as he was not accustomed to seeing from her. It made him think of the look a young wolf might give its pack leader, waiting for a go at the scraps. He grinned and elbowed Grushak.

Grushak looked at him, glanced back at the Brat and snorted. “Aw,” he said sarcastically. “Puppy.”

Hrahragh laughed outright at that, it was so closely akin to the image in his own mind. Jolted from her reverie, the girl looked at them with an indignation that made it even funnier. She turned sharply on her heels. “Hoi. Girl,” Hrahragh called out to her. She turned back slowly to see him nodding at her. She hesitated, then approached him stiffly, all hooded eyes and aggressive stance. Hrahragh tore one of the forelegs from his hare and glanced briefly at Grushak, who shrugged. The Uruk turned to Maevyn and smiled, holding out the offering.

Resentment didn’t stand a chance against hunger. Attempting nonchalance, she sidled closer and took the proffered meat with her fingertips.

“Aa-owwwwww!” exclaimed Shrah’rar, who had watched the exchange. “What in fuck, Grushak…”

“But don’t look at me,” said Grushak. “I didn’t give her anything. Ungrateful as that little bint is, it’s Hrahragh’s own affair what he does.”

Mouth full of the savory meat, Maevyn was annoyed. What had Grushak ever done that she should be grateful for? Anyway, while she obviously hated all of the Orcs, Hrahragh was probably the one Orc, aside from maybe Grymawk, that she hated least. He was still watching her with his interested orange eyes: there was no word for “Thank you” in Orkish and she wouldn’t have used it if there had been, but she searched for something to show that she appreciated the food. She knew there was a way to say that. It was full of…full of…“Shum bagal-dhomaj maush-ishi.”
There was a pause as the interest in Hrahragh’s eyes turned to incomprehension. Maevyn had just hit one of his own gaps in the language, at least as spoken by the others. “This word is not mine,” he said at last, turning to Grushak. “What is this dhomaj?”

Grushak turned around slowly and stared at her. “What did you say?” Lifting her chin, Maevyn repeated herself. Grushak looked at the partially eaten food in his hands, examining it closely before looking at her again, eyes narrowed. “Care to try that in Common?”

“It tastes good,” she said a little defiantly. She could tell now that she’d said something wrong, both from Grushak’s reaction and from the sniggers around the fire, but without knowing what it was she wasn’t about to let Grushak intimidate her.

“Enough of this shit,” he muttered, getting to his feet. There was a loud guffaw from the other side of the fire and he bestowed a withering look on the one responsible. “Mushog, shut up. Your little games have ruined my appetite.”

Snickering: “But after all, all she said was…” He trailed off as Grushak took a step toward him. “I don’t give a flying fuck,” Grushak said deliberately. “You may think that was cute, but I don’t. Shut up before I tear you a new arsehole.”

Mushog didn’t say anything. Grushak turned toward the Brat. There was this to be said for her: she wasn’t trying to run. Of course, if she had it would only have been worse for her. Swallowing visibly, she tried to stand straight as Grushak stopped barely two feet away. Holding out the hare he’d been eating, he asked her conversationally, “What else did you want to tell me about this, hmm? That it tastes like runny dog turds, maybe? Or did you have something more creative in mind?”

“So what did I say, then?” she had the nerve to ask.

“Don’t know, huh. Didn’t no one never tell you to keep your mouth shut if you don’t know what you’re talking about?”

She was expecting the cuff but that didn’t make her prepared for it. Nothing could prepare her for Grushak’s heavy hand, which was like being hit upside the head with a sack of potatoes. Her hands flew up in front of her as she staggered back.

“Now stop that,” he said, pulling her hands away and pushing them down against her sides. He looked down at her and grunted. “Foolish little tark. Been letting you take lessons from others long enough, I suppose. Stand up proper.” She did so and he let go. Her right ear was a fiery red where he’d clouted her. “Now what was it you were trying to say again?”

“It tasted good,” she mumbled. He clocked her again. “OW! What?!”

“I asked you a question, Brat. Try talking so I can hear you.”

“It tasted good,” she said more loudly, glaring at him.

Grushak could hear the titters come from behind him, and he couldn’t repress a nasty grin of his own. “Better,” he purred. “Now here is what you would say. Mir shigog. Tastes good. You understand that?”

When she didn’t answer immediately he made as if to hit her again. “Yes!” she shouted. “I understand!”
“Then say it.”

“Mir shigog.”

“Now say it again.

“Mir shigog!”

“What does?”

“Kunol maush!” she bawled out. She closed her eyes quick, thinking she was about to be hit again, but nothing happened. When she opened them again he was nodding thoughtfully.

“So he didn’t just teach you shit,” Grushak mused. “But that only makes it harder, doesn’t it. Because I have to teach you all of it again, and this time you’ll have to get it right. But you’ll learn, won’t you, Brat.” She looked at him warily and he gave an unpleasant laugh. “Yeah. I think you’ll find that you learn very quickly.”

Chapter End Notes

_Buk snaga-kjani._ “Bread is slave food.”

I’ve heard some of the lines you’ve been feeding her, that _shara-foshan. Lat foshan kri sha-bagal mubushug._ “I’ve heard some of the lines you’ve been feeding her, that Man-brat. You’re filling her head with shit…”

_Shrrah’rar ha far hombaur dagr’ob jashatob._ “Shrah’rar eats spunk from the assholes of goats.”

_Shum bagal-dhomaj maush-ishi._ “This meat is full of tapeworms” (literally, “shit-worms.”)

_Kunol maush._ “Rabbit meat.” Orkish doesn’t distinguish between rabbits and hares. For that distinction that lads would (and in the earlier exchange between Mushog and Rukshash, do) use Westron.
Mir Flasug

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Maevyn had a quick ear before, it was nothing to the new speed at which she learned. Grushak seemed determined to knock the words, the right words, into her. His methods were simple. He didn’t shout at her, not much anyway, but the wrong answer always earned a clout, and if she repeated a mistake he had corrected her on previously he would send her sprawling. Grushak never forgot her mistakes. Maevyn learned not to repeat them.

The first few lessons were little more than beatings. He didn’t just want the right words out of her, he wanted the right sounds. She didn’t roll her Rs to suit him and when she tried he thought she was being funny. “Are you trying to make me laugh or something?” he demanded after the third or fourth time she had picked herself up. “Say it again. Rakothas rogtar rujat kil raushatas varanat. You won’t get the meaning right if you don’t say it right.” A protest that she didn’t know what the words meant only landed her on the ground again. It didn’t matter if she knew the sense of what she saying, a towering Grushak informed her. That would come later. What mattered now was getting the sounds.

His methods were brutal, but they provided compelling incentive. Between the two of them they soon isolated all of the arbitrary word associations Mushog had taught her, which Grushak proceeded to drill out of her both painfully and thoroughly. It wasn’t just Mushog who had misinformed her. Grymawk had apparently thrown in a few “jokes” of his own, perhaps out of exasperation for her plaguing him, and other times his explanations had been lazy or unreflective. And then there were those times that Grushak just plain disagreed, as with the word for eggs.

“Not vo, voz. Say it right.”

“Voz,” she said.

“But vo is right,” argued Grymawk, who had been listening in. “At least other folk say it that way.”

“Maybe in that backwood shithole you come from, but that don’t make it right,” said Grushak.

Grymawk folded his arms across his chest. “Since when is your shithole better than my shithole?” He looked ridiculous at that moment, a small goblin challenging a much larger Orc. Grushak said nothing, only looked at him, and after a minute or two Grymawk’s gaze dropped. “It’s only a little difference of region,” he muttered.

Grushak placed his hand against the back of Maevyn’s head, pushing it a little as he spoke to give his words emphasis, as if she were a puppet nodding. “I’m teaching her so she says it right, and to make her more useful, and so she’s not offending my ears in the process.” She tried to duck out from under him but he grabbed her hair and jerked it to make her settle.

“Proper Mordor-speak, hmm?” Nazluk was skeptical. “You’ll never pull that off, Grushak.”

“He might do, if her brains don’t turn to jelly first from all the knocks he’s giving her,” said Rukshash.

Grushak laughed shortly. “Those? Those are barely love taps. She knows I could hit her harder, don’t you, Brat.”
“Hombaur kurvanug,” she spat, pushing his hand away.

“Hear that? Perfect pitch too. Said it just right that time, she did,” he cooed, ruffling her hair with a sadistic smile. There was that about their little lessons: he didn’t seem to care what she called him or what angry insults came out of her mouth, so long as she said it in Orkish. And pronounced it properly, of course.

He was a generous teacher to be sure: generous with his words and with his corrections. He was so generous with the latter that it sometimes left her punch-drunk. “Enough,” he growled during one lesson, when she began to slur her speech. “Go now, before I lose my temper.” He turned away from her, not watching as she stumbled in the general direction of the tree where Leni waited for her.

The Elf girl helped her lie down and pressed a damp rag against her forehead to soothe the ache behind her temples, ignoring how Maevyn pushed at her weakly to make her stop. “Enough,” Maevyn muttered, “enough…”

“Enough,” Leni agreed quietly. She lowered the rag but remained by Maevyn’s side for as long as she was permitted, until she was called away. Then Maevyn lay alone with her strange waking dreams, dreams in which a little boy said taunting things in Orkish and waved a red ribbon in his hand.

“So come and get it, Maggot! It’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“...what you wanted,” a familiar voice was saying.

“What,” Maevyn mumbled stupidly, turning her face up out of the furs.

“What,” Maevyn mumbled stupidly, turning her face up out of the furs.

“I said, you have what you wanted now, do you not?” The Elf girl was sitting with her legs drawn under her, her hands folded in her lap. She wasn’t looking at Maevyn. “You wanted a teacher, and now you have one.”

“Didn’t want him,” said Maevyn tiredly, laying her head down again. “Or Mushog, or any of them. Wanted you.”

“No.” Leni shook her head. “I understand some of their speech, it is true, but not so well as that.”

“Enough so you could’ve helped me. Why, Leni? Why didn’t you help me? You’re a good teacher, I know you are. It wouldn’t’ve been hard for you.”

“Not hard?” Leni said in a strangled voice. She became very still.

It was only then that Maevyn noticed and felt some weary measure of surprise at how quiet it had become. There were no Orkish voices to be heard, only the familiar rumbling of their snores. It had been fetching nigh to evening when Grushak gave her his lesson: dinner must have come and gone with no one waking her. Now it was night and Maevyn could barely make out Leni’s slender form beside her in the darkness.

“You cannot understand,” the other girl said softly into the silence. “They have forced you, it is true, but they have not forced you as they have me. What they have done—they have taken so much of me. My freedom, my body, my own Elven speech. If they wanted to make me use their language, I would not be able to fight them. But not of my own choice, Maevyn. I will not do this thing that you are doing. I will not take their tongue into my mouth.”
“That’s not what I’m doing,” Maevyn protested. “It’s only words…”

“Their words,” said Leni. “Their will. Their way.” She fell quiet and when she spoke again the forcefulness was gone from her voice. Now she only sounded sad. “I know what it is you think. You believe speech is a tool, a weapon. That you can use the power of their own words against them, to fight with them and to win. But it is more than that, Maevyn. And you cannot use their speech and think to remain unchanged.”

Chapter End Notes

_Mir Flasug_. “Talking Good,” or “Speaking Well.”

_Rakothas rogtar rujat kil raushatas varanat_. “The gruesome guard watched the newly clouded sky.”

_Hombaur kurvanug_. “Fucking asshole.”
Ditch

It was the pig that let the secret out, surprised by the noise they made as they came through. A rustling mad scramble as it shot through the undergrowth, and Mushog and Kurbag immediately took off after it. Bragdagash held up his hand, stopping the line, and soon after they heard the glad whoops of the two hunters not far away. When the whooping didn’t die down he turned to the rest of the band, who looked at him expectantly. “Right then, let’s go see.”

The pig wasn’t dead. Running from the two Orcs it had tumbled down into a little ditch and was running back and forth, squealing its head off. The others arrived soon after to see the two of them having a merry time of it. They had disarmed themselves in a mockery of fairness and were trying to catch the terrified animal barehanded. Mushog was walking toward the pig in a bowlegged fashion, hands spread and out to the sides, while Kurbag stood behind him with his knees and back bent forward and his hands on his thighs, looking, Nazluk sarcastically remarked, like he was attempting to give birth.

“You’d better catch it, lads – that’s our dinner you’re playing with down there!” called Rukshash.

“You just let us take care of it,” said Mushog. Just then the pig, which he had been backing into one earthen end of the ditch, made a break for it: it shot right between his legs before he could make half a grab, and veered dramatically to avoid Kurbag. He dived sidelong but the hind trotters flashed by mere inches from his reaching fingers.

“How’s the dirt taste, Kurby?” the watching Orcs called down amid hoots at the sudden dustbath he had taken. Kurbag didn’t get a chance to respond. Mushog, running back after the pig, stumbled over him and went sprawling. The spectators roared. Cursing and laughing at the same time, both Orcs scrabbled up and after their frantic prey.

They were several minutes at wearing it down. The others lowered the packs they carried and found comfortable vantage points from which to watch and to mock or cheer, sometimes for the two hunters, sometimes for the pig and its ingenious maneuvers at escape. They could afford to cheer for the pig: its fate was assured. There was no way for it to get out of the ditch with the rest of them ranged over it, and it was tiring fast.

Maevyn hated what Kurbag and Mushog were doing. This was not the way animals had been slaughtered in her old village, this cruel game of chase and terror. At the same time, the Orcs’ excitement was infectious. She forced herself to look away from what was going on. “Why do they have to be so mean,” she muttered to Leni.

“It will be over soon enough,” said Leni faintly.

Maevyn stared at her. “You look sick…”

“I cannot stand the sound of it.” Leni’s fingers were hooked in the straps holding the pack of eagle eggs on her shoulders. Her knuckles were white as a fish’s belly. This was one occasion on which Maevyn sympathized with her. The pig’s squeals were nauseating but the Orcs only seemed to find them funny.

For Mushog, it stopped being sport when the animal bit his hand. “Son of a bitch!” he swore, snatching it back. With the sight of blood came pain, and with pain, anger. “Throw me my dagger!”
Grushak, who was closest to the discarded weapons, snorted in response. “You wanted to catch it. Take it down first.”

“Motherfucking—you whoreson bastard, Grushak…!”

A shout from behind cut off Mushog’s spluttering. Kurbag had finally made a successful tackle: the pig flopped forward, squealing, as he attempting to claw his way up the animal, his sharp nails gouging into squirming flesh. Blood bloomed bright and shining on the pig’s sides. It writhed in terror. With an impossible wriggle it managed to pull out of Kurbag’s grip, only for Mushog to throw himself on it. Coming down hard on its back, he caught the pig’s thick neck in a stranglehold, straddled the thick body with his legs. As it tried to barrel forward he hooked his heels under its lower belly, jerking his upper torso hard to throw it off-balance. It staggered a few steps before finally collapsing beneath him. Though it continued to struggle, Mushog only tightened his headlock until the pig was wheezing beneath him, eyes rolling in its head, bristled sides heaving in terror and exhaustion. Then, in a hoarse triumphant voice, Mushog called for the knife again.

The pig’s death was neither fast nor clean. It died drowning in its own blood, amid the laughter and the stink of Orcs.

Standing free of the feebly kicking hooves, Mushog accepted the praise that was his due: a combination of the mocking and also the genuine, since no one was averse to a good pork dinner. While some of the smaller Orcs gathered to quickly carve up the carcass, he and Kurbag clambered up out of the ditch.

“Here now…Mushog…pour some of that on your hand, like.” Rukshash handed him a skin of Orc draught.

“Waste of drink,” complained Mushog, bringing it to his mouth instead.

“Not a waste if it keeps you from blood poisoning. But do as you please…”

Down in the ditch, Grymawk had noticed something. “Here, Shrah’rar, take a look at this. This is a funny little nick, isn’t it?”

Shrah’rar smiled weirdly as he fingered the dead pig’s ear. “That’s not just any nick. That’s a farmer’s notch. Men make them to sort their stock out from others.”

“Oh? So it’s feral then? Not a wild pig?”

He shook his head. “Nar, this sort of mark don’t happen on its own. See how there are two of them? Clean straight cuts with a knife. It may be out in the woods now, but before that it came from a Man-place…” Looking up from the scarred flesh, he smiled at Grymawk meaningfully. The other Orc’s eyes widened as a similar smile appeared on his own face.

Shrah’rar’s assessment passed quickly among the others, stirring up much excitement. Men, and a chance for sport! Now that they knew that there was a village or some other place of Mannish habitation nearby, the prospect of a raid was almost tangible. Bragdagash refused to confirm that this was why he’d led them out here, but the grin on his face made him decidedly unconvincing, and when they came to the place where the earth fell away he made no further attempt at circumspection.

He did hold firm in one respect: he would not be picking his scouts that night. “We’ve gone a good stretch these past few days. It won’t kill us to have an evening and good food and a night’s rest for ourselves. I’ll pick the two I want tomorrow. If this village that you’re so excited about is here tonight, it will still be here tomorrow.”
As thrilled as the Orcs were, Leni and Maevyn were considerably less so. Maevyn had not immediately known the cause for their good mood, though stray words in Orkish and some in Westron as well had filled her with forboding. It was Leni who confirmed her worst imaginings.

*They think there is a village nearby...the opportunity to raid...*

It was the first that Maevyn had been near any kind of civilization since she had been taken from her own home, bruised and bound on Grushak’s back. A village, where people lived, where men and women worked and loved, and children played—and then at Leni’s dull pronouncement of the word “raid” those idyllic scenes were crowded out by memories of her own home: ruined huts and blood and the corpses of men and beasts.

“No!” she said, horrified by the idea of this happening to other people, folk like her own folk. “They can’t…”

“They can,” said Leni wearily. “Come. We must not fall behind in our tasks. They will be in high spirits tonight.”

She was right. Bragdagash’s band had abdicated their usual minimal efforts at setting up for the night, essentially dropping their packs and bundles where they stood. It fell to the two girls to make some semblance of a camp, and then there was kindling to be found, and a fire to be built, and food to be prepared, with Orcs underfoot and in the way all the while. Rather than dispersing until dinner proper, as was their usual custom, excitement and anticipation was keeping the entire band gathered together in animated conversation, and from time to time interrupting Maevyn or Leni with this or that order, making it very difficult for the two of them to accomplish their usual tasks, and impossible for them to talk in private.

But not impossible to think. Maevyn’s mind was racing a mile a minute, and it was only fortunate that Grushak, too, was otherwise occupied and not inclined to put his pupil through her usual drills. If he had done so, there was no telling what might have come out of her mouth.

It was some hours later, when talk and eating had given way to drinking and crude song among the Orcs, and Leni was setting out the eagle eggs to be turned on the soft bed furs, that Maevyn approached her. Face flushed with more than the heat of the fire, she said, “We could warn them.”

“What?” said Leni.

“I was thinking. When they’re asleep. It’ll be soon enough: they’re tired out from walking all day and from talking and talking like they’ve been doing all night. They wouldn’t know we were gone, not till it’s too late.”

“But how would we find it? We do not even know where it is.”

“Bragdagash said it’s sort of north, north-east? If we left soon, and had the night for our start...”

Leni sighed. “Maevyn. Listen to me. Suppose that we made it past Pryszrim. He is on watch tonight. It is not impossible: he is not the best of guards. What then? We would be stumbling blind in the darkness, and morning would reveal our absence.” Maevyn opened her mouth but Leni pushed on. “I know what you will say: Bragdagash has said that it should only be a half-day’s journey from us. That is as Orcs reckon it. We are not as fast as they, nor so tireless, nor do we know where it is, not truly. We would not reach anyone and we would only be found out. Do you understand what I am saying? We would accomplish nothing, and we would be beaten for trying, if
Everything she said was true, and Maevyn knew it. She felt helpless and angry. Disappointment made her savage in response. “You’d be beaten, maybe. They’d just kill me. ’S’not like anything bad would happen to you. You don’t care, that’s all, just so long as you don’t get hurt. People are gonna die, and you’re too scared to do anything because you might get in trouble. You’re so selfish, Leni!”

Leni stared at her, her whole body rigid, her blue eyes glittering. Maevyn thought it was with the approach of tears, but then she realized that the wide hurt eyes were also filled with anger. Before she had a chance to process that—Leni was never angry—the Elf girl looked away from her. She turned one of the eggs, then another. “You are saying that because you are frustrated,” she said in a tight voice as she turned the third. “You will know otherwise when you are thinking clearly. I am a coward, it is true, and afraid of many things. But you are wrong to say I do not care.”

It was the last they were to speak with one another that night. Later, when the entire Orc band slept with the exception of Pryszrim, keeping his solitary vigil somewhere through the trees, Maevyn lay awake in the dark. She lay stiff and silent, listening to Leni’s breathing beside her and knowing that the Elf was no more asleep than she herself. But Leni only lay silently, feeling Maevyn’s wakefulness beside her.

The better part of an hour passed by slowly in this fashion. Finally, Maevyn pushed aside the part of the fur that covered her. Leni said nothing, did nothing, as the younger girl stood and padded away.

-.-.-.

Hrahragh’s eyes slid open. It was morning: gray, damp, and he had to piss. Mouth gaping in a silent, toothy yawn, he navigated the bodies of his sleeping comrades with an ease born of longstanding habit and his own casual poise. The child curled in a ball at the edge of camp, though, was a surprise, and he had to execute an uncharacteristically awkward hop-skip to avoid tripping over her.

Stopping, the Uruk stared down at the girl in baffled silence before glancing at the furs at the other end of camp where she normally slept with her little Elf friend. The Elf was their only occupant at that moment. The Man child, when Hrahragh looked again, remained an irrefutable lump at his feet.

He cocked his head and, after brief study, gave her a nudge with his foot. Shuddering, she uncurled and stared uncomprehendingly at his legs before realizing what stood over her.

“Why sleep here?” he asked her as she clambered stiffly to her feet.

Only very small, this spindly thing with the ragged hair over her eyes, and she looked at him with a mixture of resentment and defiance wholly unwarranted by the question. She also looked distinctly sheepish. She shrugged.

“So go,” he said. “Almost stepped on you.” He watched her as she picked her way unsteadily through the sleeping camp and thought, not for the first time, what a weird little tark she was.
Under An Influence

Bragdagash chose Shrah’rar and Kurbag for his scouts, sending them ahead to establish where the village was, its size, and what, if any, its defenses might be. He did so over breakfast. They returned in the afternoon, sooner than expected: what they had to report was good and he gave the word that they were to set off at once. They would reach the village late that evening, and the raid would take place at night. Murmurs of approval greeted this—eager as they were to do some violence, they all liked the sound of an immediate departure. His next decision, though, regarding who was to remain behind, drew protest from one quarter.


“I think it’s because of your hand,” Pryszrim volunteered.

He was stating the obvious. Mushog’s hand had been sore but essentially functional the previous evening when he showed off around the fire. Now it was puffy and swollen, and evidently quite painful from the way he had complained about it that morning. To hear him now, the pain was nothing: “Fuck that shit! It’s fine. See?”

The fist he made hurt just to look at. It was mottled and discolored.

Bragdagash was not convinced. “Don’t be a fool. That’s your sword hand and you can barely use it. If it drops off that’s your own affair, but I’m not bringing you along if you’re just going to be useless.” He looked around at the others. “Hoi! Sharp now, lads, let’s get it together. You’ve got five minutes.”

“Well what about Kurbag? He came back with Shrah’rar! Why should he go straight out again?” Mushog complained. Shrah’rar had been Bragdagash’s other pick to remain behind, for that very reason.

The only response was from Kurbag, who glared at his shieldmate. “See if I bring anything back for you,” he said pointedly. He didn’t stick around for Mushog’s response, walking to the center of camp and drawing his sword part-way. It emerged from its scabbard in a smooth clean motion and he pushed it back again, satisfied. Casting his eyes about him, he soon found who he was looking for. “Hey Squeaker! Fetch me two skins of water – I’m thirsty.”

The rest of the band, save for Mushog and Shrah’rar, were all preparing to leave; trading jokes, checking their weapons and cinching up whatever light gear they intended to bring along, and giving sharp orders to the two slaves traveling in their company. As Eleluleniel retrieved Kurbag’s water for him she found herself crouched almost knee to knee with Maevyn, who was getting beer for some of the snaga Orcs. Eleluleniel looked into her eyes for a moment and saw nothing; the other girl’s face might have been a mask for all that it conveyed. Maevyn jumped up again and scurried off while Eleluleniel looked after her.

Sighing, the Elf girl stood as well. Maevyn had said nothing to her, had not even looked at her since she had awakened that morning. Eleluleniel had not been surprised to find her still there. She knew that Maevyn was not foolish, for all of her impetuous words.

She was not angry at Maevyn, not anymore. She had been angry the night before, hurt by what the other girl had said, and stung by its unfairness. Now she wasn’t angry, only sad, her heart heavy with the sickness she felt when the Orcs went on a raid. It was the same thing Maevyn felt, she knew, and she knew also that it was worse for the other girl, for Maevyn’s outrage and grief were
fresh, her feelings undulled as yet by routine and the dreary passage of time.

That would change, thought Eleluleniel as Kurbag drank his water. It would have to change if Maevyn was to survive.

Lowering the skin, he breathed out a sigh. “No beer for now. Keep myself sharp for what’s coming.” She made no reply, knowing that he didn’t expect one. It sounded more as if he were talking to himself at that moment anyway. Finishing off the first skin, he pushed it toward her and fastened the other at his side. “Here now, Squeaker. D’you still have any of that cornmeal left?” he asked her. She knew it was because he planned to bring some back after they attacked the village. She opened her mouth to respond but was cut off by Bragdagash’s sudden shout:

“All right boys, if you’ve not had the sense to piss then you’ll just have to do it down your trouser leg! Let’s move out!”

Kurbag grinned, his eyes flicking toward his chieftain. He touched Eleluleniel’s forehead with absent ritual, like a good luck charm, and walked away.

And that was that. Bragdagash and his merry band of marauders departed in pursuit of their favorite pastime of murder, theft and rapine, while Shrah’rar and Mushog remained behind. Mushog, already irritable because of his hand, was sulky and resentful to be left out of the fun, though if truth were told he was long past due for guard duty anyway. “So we get to sit here diddling ourselves for the next few hours, eh?” He looked around their deserted camp with a snort. “Well this is a comfy spot.”

"It is nice, isn’t it?" said Shrah’rar, willfully misconstruing Mushog’s sarcasm. "I'm all up for a rest myself." The snaga-Orc was content to remain behind on this occasion – he’d had all the sun he wanted running reconnaissance with Kurbag and was just as glad not to be marching out again. Shame to miss out on a night raid, of course, but he figured he could live with that.

"Skai. I'm sure you’re just as happy to be hiding out here, you little turd. Myself, I was ready for some action." Mushog slid his sword a few inches in and out of its sheath compulsively as he spoke. When Shrah’rar only looked unimpressed Mushog snorted and strode some yards in the direction that the others had taken, stopping with his feet bladed, his broad hands on his hips as he glared into the outlying trees. He snorted again, muttering to himself as he turned and stalked back toward the center of camp. “Fucking typical…leave me behind with the bitches…”

For all his muttering, the words were clearly audible to Shrah’rar. His red eyes narrowed, but he refrained from pointing out that he was neither female nor a dog. Mushog was bigger than him, after all, and cranky. Probably it was best to just keep his mouth shut. “So we’re sitting on our arses for a bit,” he said instead of maintaining a sensible silence. “It’s no great thing. Like I said, I’m looking forward to resting my legs a bit. Been keeping up a hard pace these past two days as well.”

“Maybe for a weakling like you.” Mushog straightened up, thwacking himself on the chest emphatically. “Me, I can keep it up for twice that time. Three times!”

Shrah’rar looked at him dubiously. He wondered if they were talking about the same thing. Whatever it was they were talking about, he decided it would be wiser to change the subject. “Anyhow, there’s nothing says we can’t enjoy ourselves in the meantime.” He went and picked up his pack, rummaging through its contents for a moment before pulling out a beer skin. “Eh, Mushog? Join me in a skin?”

Mushog glared at him, seemingly intent on scowling forever. Then the corner of his mouth quirked reluctantly. “Oh, what the fuck,” he said. “ Haven’t found a situation yet that drinking didn’t
There was a rosy glow in the sky as Maevyn stared down into the valley. Throughout the afternoon, ever since Bragdagash and the others had left, she had kept coming to this spot. Somewhere behind her, she could hear Mushog’s loud familiar voice, though whether it was raised in anger or more cheerful discourse she could not have said. So long as it wasn’t directed at her she could ignore it, and so she did, staring at the valley, all the way to where the line of the ridge hid its further reaches from view.

That was where the village was, somewhere where the rosy sky gave way to lilac. That was where people were going to die tonight, if they weren’t dead already.

She felt like a failure. Only six miles away—that’s what Shrah’rar and Kurbag had said. Less than the half-day’s journey Bragdagash had thought it would be, for the two Orcs had been there and back again within that time. And she had walked further than that in a day before, on more days than she could count on one hand. Six miles and she could have warned them.

But…

We are not as fast as they, nor so tireless, nor do we know where it is, not truly. We would not reach anyone and we would only be found out. Do you understand what I am saying?

She lowered her head to her knees and sighed. Didn’t look up as she felt someone approaching her. She didn’t have to look to know who it was.

“There is still bread from yesterday,” said Leni. “It is here, if you want it.” They were the first words either had spoken to one another that day.

Maevyn took the piece she was given, moving it to and fro in her hands. “It’s true, what you said before,” she muttered, continuing to stare off into the valley. Looking anywhere but at Leni. “Guess there really wasn’t anything we could do.” She still didn’t entirely believe it, and it wasn’t a proper apology, but it was an attempt.

There was a silence that might have been a rebuff before Leni gathered her skirts around and sat near Maevyn. Maevyn shifted a little, not wanting to be touched, but Leni knew by now that she didn’t always respond well to such gestures. “How far did you finally go last night?” she asked. Maevyn shrugged. Hands folded in her lap, the Elf said, “It is difficult when we have to resign ourselves. It is very hard. Yet we have little power in this place, and sometimes we must resign ourselves, if it is to be at all endurable. If we are not to go mad.”

“I’m mad right now,” grumbled Maevyn. “It isn’t fair. And next time…next time I will do something, I don’t care. Next time…”

“But what will you do that you cannot do now?”

“Something,” said Maevyn firmly. “Something, that’s all.”

“Your twig moved!” Mushog shouted in the background.

“Come you,” said Leni. “Let us go sit by the fire. I have the eggs laying there. I do not like to leave them alone for long, but they are so heavy to carry.” She wanted to bring Maevyn away from the tall promontory, to bring her back where there was something to take her mind off of the raid. Nonetheless she was surprised when Maevyn actually stood and followed her, and sat with her
beside the fire. She still did not speak for a time though, and she kept looking back the way they had come. Absently she sucked on the bread Leni had given her, trying to moisten it enough for chewing.

After a while though, her attention turned to Leni and the eggs. It seemed as if the Elf girl turned them over and over, every few minutes. She watched for some moments, head cocked, before the corners of her mouth turned up in a smirk. “So what’re you gonna name ’em?”

Leni looked up, blinking at the question. “I am not so bad as that, am I?”

Maevyn gave an emphatic nod. “Uh-huh. You act like you’re their Mama-bird.”

Leni smiled ruefully. “Well, I suppose they need one, poor things.”

Maevyn squinted at the impassive exteriors. “They’re just eggs, though. ’S’not like they’re real babies.”

“They are not like the eggs one eats for breakfast, Maevyn. Rukshash says they are fertile. That means that inside of each a young eagle is alive and growing.”

Maevyn considered this. Giving up on the bread, she put her hand on one of the eggs and rocked it gently on its rounded base. Picking it up in both hands, she looked at it closely, but of course this yielded nothing. Her face screwed up a little. “Maybe,” she said at last, “but I don’t think it counts as a baby until it’s actually out.”

Leni shrugged. “It is life, in any case,” she said. Taking the egg from Maevyn gently, she set it down beside the other two.

“What’s he want ’em for so bad anyway? Bragdagash, I mean. Why’s he been carrying them all this time?” It certainly wasn’t because he felt bad about the parents or felt any responsibility for the little lives inside.

“I am not completely sure. The others say that there are those who will pay well for eagle eggs, further North.”

“Who’ll pay? Other Orcs?” Leni did not know the answer to this. Maevyn cocked her head, musing: “Wonder what they’d want ’em for. What they’d do with ’em.”

Leni did not say anything to this. From the frown on her face she had been wondering the same thing, and not very happily. Whatever it was, she clearly doubted that it was benign. Stroking one of the eggs, she murmured again, “Poor things.”

Maevyn put her arms behind her head, watching her. After a moment or so she said, “I found a little egg one day. Green with brown speckles. I thought it was so pretty. I took it home an’ all, I was gonna try and hatch it.”

“What happened?”

“My stupid brother broke it. I was so mad at him! It was already rotten, though. It smelled bad and it made inside our house smell bad too. Mama thrashed us for it so I hit Demi after, but I was kind of glad he broke it.”

Leni gave her a blank look. “Why glad?”

“I dunno. ’Cause then I didn’t waste my time, I guess. I would’ve spent all that time taking care of it
and wondering when it was gonna hatch and nothing would’ve happened. I’d never have known it was rotten inside and there was never any point.”

“But can you truly say there was no point?” asked Leni earnestly. “It is a good instinct, wanting to protect something, to care for it. It is the beginning of love. Being willing to spend the time and the effort on something or someone other than yourself: this means something.”

“Not if the thing you love is a rotten egg,” said Maevyn. “Or if it’s not a rotten egg, but nothing good’s gonna come of it. Like them.” She pointed at the eagle eggs. “You can’t say anything good’s ever gonna happen to them, so why bother?”

Leni was silent a moment. Finally she said softly, as if to herself, “Because we cannot know the future. Because where there is life, there is hope.”

“Hmm.” Maevyn was skeptical. “Sounds like rotten egg talk to me.”

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Getting on to dark and Mushog was at a disadvantage. Both he and Shrah’rar were equally drunk, but Mushog was using his less favored hand and Shrah’rar had the advantage of his night vision. The Uruk was starting to squint now while the snaga-Orc’s eyes were as keen as ever. When Mushog lost the second game Shrah’rar noticed that Mushog’s mood was becoming dangerous and that was when they moved their game to the fire so that Mushog would have a better time seeing what he was about. In some ways, though, the new location was even worse: the flickering flames cast shifting shadows and played tricks on the bigger Orc’s eyes.

“Ah! Fuck you, you little shit, that did move: I saw it!”

“No it didn’t,” said Shrah’rar.

When he and Mushog had moved to the fire Leni and Maevyn had moved away. It was dangerous to be near the Orcs when they were drunk: they were dangerous and destructive even when they were sober, and alcohol only made them the more predictable in their unpredictability. In any case, Eleluleniel had more than herself and Maevyn to protect that night: there were also the eagle eggs. Without the advantages of the fire she nestled them in the furs of her bedding, continuing to turn them from time to time.

Maevyn sat at the edge of the furs, watching Shrah’rar and Mushog at their game. It was a simple stick game, one much like she had used to play with her brother. There was a clutch of twigs on the ground and each player had to pick up one in turn without disturbing any of the others in the pile. It was weird to see two grown Orcs playing what she had always known in her old life as a children’s game and which had certainly been dismissed as such by adults. This wasn’t to say that there weren’t a few distinct differences between how Maevyn had played it with her brother and how Mushog and Shrah’rar were playing it. For one thing, where she and Demi had played it in the spirit of competition and for the fun of winning, Mushog and Shrah’rar were playing it for swallows from the drinking skin they shared between them.

“You’re such a cheating bastard, Shrah’rar.” Mushog turned his scowling face away from the game for a moment and saw Maevyn watching them. “Oi, Brat! Come over here.” When Maevyn didn’t move his heavy brow furrowed. “I said come, eh? Or do you want me to go over there?”

Maevyn looked over at Leni, who was clearly alarmed at the prospect of Mushog coming over by them, and stood reluctantly.
When she was beside the fire, Mushog didn’t touch her, he just gestured to the pile of sticks. “You watch. I don’t trust this snaga piece of shit.”

Maevyn refrained from rolling her eyes, even though Mushog wasn’t looking at her: she was within smacking distance and it wasn’t worth risking. Standing over the two Orcs, she folded her arms across her chest and watched. As things went on, though, she became interested in spite of herself, getting down on her knees so that she could see better.

Shrah’rar was annoyed to have the Brat watching them. Quite aside from his annoyance with Mushog’s continued refrain that he was cheating, the girl’s close gaze was, in fact, making it harder for him to cheat. Shrah’rar was no more dishonest than any other Orc, but he did take a certain pride in the straight face that he maintained, the “did I just see that?” speed of his fingers. “Your go,” he said calmly enough, but he shot the Brat a deadly glare that she ignored and that Mushog missed entirely.

Mushog’s calloused fingers approached the little pile with a kind of exaggerated care. They paused, and he became very still. Maevyn watched his hand, but when it didn’t move and it didn’t move she looked up at his face. There was a flat concentration in his golden eyes, a set look to his jaw.

The twig he was going for was a little apart from the larger pile, but it lay across one of the longer bottom sticks that was supporting the others and just below another twig slanting less than an inch above. He stared a long time before, finally, he made his move, taking an end lightly between thumb and forefinger and lifting gently. He was doing fine until just at the end, when the twig he was taking brushed against the one above it.

“It moved,” said Shrah’rar.

“No it didn’t,” said Mushog.

“No it didn’t,” agreed Maevyn.

“All right, it didn’t,” Shrah’rar conceded. He knew that it hadn’t but he also knew that, speaking as he had, he had sown an uncertainty in the Uruk. Mushog had not let go of the twig – too much to hope for, that would have been an instant disqualifier – but it was trembling ever so slightly in his fingers. He began to lift it again; again it brushed the twig above, and this time the second twig shifted noticeably. “Moved,” said Shrah’rar with an evil grin.

Mushog cursed and, with a sudden swipe of his broad hand, dashed the little pile apart. “Prick!”

Maevyn scooted back quickly on her bottom, getting clear of the big Orc’s display of temper but he wasn’t paying attention to her, all of his anger directed at Shrah’rar. He was standing, fingers flexing as he towered over the smaller Orc.

Who shrugged unconcernedly. “Good a place to stop as any. Now we don’t have to wait between drinks.”

Mushog’s anger abated somewhat in the face of Shrah’rar’s calm and a piece of plain good sense that even he could appreciate. “’S’pose that’s right,” he acknowledged after a long moment, sitting down again.

“Besides, I’m hungry. Why isn’t there any food, eh?”

“Oi! That’s right! Come on, Brat, what are you sitting around for? It’s fucking dinner time already here!”
“Well don’t yell at me, you’re the one who said—” Maevyn began in an aggrieved voice, but was cut off.

“Here,” Leni said, seeming to come from out of nowhere as she interposed herself between Mushog and Maevyn, kneeling down beside the fire. “I have food ready, it only needs to cook.” Her tone was mild enough, but turning her head toward Maevyn, she mouthed something at her fiercely.

Maevyn had no idea what it was that Leni was mouthing, but she could just imagine. She subsided in simmering resentment.

“Oh, so now we have to wait? Should have had it ready for us, you stupid twat.” But Mushog did not sound so ill-tempered as he said that, his eyes running over the Elf’s pale form. Probably she detected the shift in his tone—she moved closer to Maevyn and unwrapped the little leather packets as quickly as she could, laying pieces of meat on the hot stones at the edge of the fire.

Maevyn had to resist the urge to retch. The meat smelled noisome to her. It was over a day old and pig flesh did not do well in the heat. To the Orcs, of course, this made little difference. Indeed, she had heard them remark that it added savor. *Make me puke*, she thought.

Age was not a problem, but Shrah’rar had another complaint. “Pork again. Dinner, breakfast, midday snack, and now it’s dinner tonight. I hope they bring some goat when they come back.”

“I’ll just bet you do, you little pervert. Alive and kicking, no doubt.” Mushog snickered at his own joke.

Shrah’rar cast his eyes upward. This kind of jest grew tiresome after a while. “I’m just saying I wouldn’t mind a little variety, that’s all.”

“Well. It isn’t as if we don’t have our choice of meat here, is it?” Mushog grinned, looking at Squeaker and the Brat. “Been a long time since we’ve had man-flesh, eh Shrah’rar? And I’ve never had Elf.” He licked his lips, looking the latter over deliberately. She said nothing, seemed as if she hadn’t even heard, just continued to kneel beside the flames and stare down at the meat that cooked there as if that would make it heat all the more quickly. He chuckled and took another swallow of beer.

“You know what I could go for?” said Shrah’rar idly. “Those eggs of Braggy’s. Can you imagine it, Mushog? Fried up a treat, all golden and warm. Just a shame we don’t have a pan, eh?”

“I’ve never had eggs that way.” Mushog gave him an odd look.

“Mmmmmmm…” Shrah’rar’s eyes went hazy, remembering. “You don’t know what you’re missing, friend. I remember hitting a merchant’s convoy once in the wee hours. They were just fixing their wake-up meal and after we killed the ones by the fire I had a little try of what it was they were about to have. Oh but it was good. Ham and eggs, Mushog. Nothing like it.”

“Next you’ll be telling me you had the loveliest piece of toast with it, ooh! with jam and a little pat of butter and all…” Mushog mocked him.

“Are you mistaking me for Pryszrim? *Nar*, don’t scoff. I’ll always remember that morning. Best meal I ever had.” Shrah’rar sighed with remembered pleasure.

“I’ve only ever eaten them raw,” said Mushog. He liked them that way. Like to take them and crack them open on his lower teeth and let the slick insides run into his mouth and down his throat. His tongue played over his teeth, thinking of it. “I wonder what eagle eggs taste like?”
“Well, eagle liver is good, right?” said Shrah’rar logically. “‘Seat of vigor’ an’ all. And eggs are good—good energy to be had from them. And eagle eggs are big too: how big are those eggs of Braggy’s, anyway? Big as my head?”

“Hey, Squeaker.” Mushog tapped Leni’s arm. “Go fetch us those eagle’s eggs, eh?” She said something softly. “What was that?”

“I said that Bragdagash does not want them damaged.”

“Hurr.” Mushog grinned at her. “We’re not gonna hurt ‘em, we just want a look.”

“Nonetheless, it is best that I leave them as they are. It is night now, and they need to be still for a time.”

Mushog threw back his head, hooting uncontrollably. “Like little babies, haw! Are they all tucked in for the night then? That’s cute!” He lowered his eyes to her again, and drunken amusement was tempered by a predatory gleam. “That’s adorable. But seriously. Why don’t you go bring them here?”

His hand was on her upper arm, squeezing rhythmically. It was his hurt hand that he was using, but he didn’t seem to feel it. Perhaps he was too drunk to care. The Elf looked him directly in the eyes. “I cannot go just now. I am cooking your food for you.”

“Feh. Leaving it for a half a minute isn’t gonna hurt anything. Besides, I’m not interested in pig anymore.” His thumb swirled against her.

“Just what are you interested in?” asked Shrah’rar, finally sensing that something was awry.

“I want eagle egg, of course.”

The other Orc was horrified. “Are you crazy? Bragdagash will kill you!”

“Just one, right? He’ll never miss it. Come on, we’ll split it: those eggs are huge. Plenty for the both of us.”

“You think our chief doesn’t know the difference between three and two?” Shrah’rar was almost sputtering. “You’re drunker than I thought. I’ll have nothing to do with it.”

“More for me, then,” said Mushog.

“I’ll have nothing to do with it,” Shrah’rar said again, but he was still alarmed. It didn’t matter if Mushog was the one to eat the egg – he would be guilty by association. “Mushog, don’t, I don’t want to get in trouble for this.”

“Awww, you’re afraid of Braggy yelling at you? I’m not scared of him.”

“Let go of my arm,” said Squeaker. “Please. Let go of me. I cannot do anything while you are holding onto me this way.”

“‘Please’…always please and thank you. So pretty the way you talk,” Mushog crooned, drawing her closer so that she smelled the beer and old blood on his breath before he released her. “Go on then,” he said. “Go get me my egg.” She stood and he grinned, waiting as she went by him before aiming a slap at her backside to hurry her along. His judgment was off and he caught nothing but open air, which struck him as very funny at that moment: he laughed and laughed.
The Elf stopped some yards away and turned. Maevyn, who’d been sitting wide-eyed through what had gone before, saw Leni’s eyes alight on her, saw her mouth moving. Quickly she scrambled to her feet and hurried after. “What are you gonna do?” she whispered, hovering as Leni knelt down among their sleeping furs, where the eggs were nestled. “If Mushog ruins one of those eggs we’ll be the ones beaten for it.”

“He will not get one of them, not one,” the Elf girl said firmly, lifting away the fold of fur that covered them.

“But what are you gonna do?” asked Maevyn again as Leni picked up an empty pack.

“Will you do as I ask?”

“What?”

“Take them.” Leni nestled an egg into the pack, and then another. “You have carried them before. Take them into the forest, deep as you can. Just take care not to lose yourself there. You can make your way back later, when time has passed.”

“But Mushog—”

“He is drunk and, what is more, he is lazy. He will not follow,” the Elf girl said with certainty. “Not far, at any rate. I will stop him if he does.”

“But what can you do?”

“Just go.” She pushed the pack into Maevyn’s arms.

Maevyn hefted it uncertainly. The eggs felt heavier than they had before and she remembered her conversation earlier with Leni, and thought of little eagles sleeping, all unknowing, in small dark worlds. “He’s gonna be mad,” Maevyn said.

“Mushog is often angry,” said Leni. “But he has been drinking, and he will sleep, and tomorrow when he wakes up he will be just as glad not to have done something he would have regretted.”

“Oi! How long does it take an Elf bitch to fetch an egg?” came the Uruk’s cross voice.

“Maevyn, go, now!”

Maevyn slung the pack over one shoulder and, on impulse, stood up on her tiptoes and gave Leni a sudden kiss on the cheek. “Don’t let him hurt you.” And then she turned, her face flaming in the dark, and ran from the surprise in Leni’s face and from Mushog’s demanding voice.

Eleluleniel stood staring blindly into the dark where the trees had swallowed her up. Then, slowly, hesitantly, she made her way back to the fire.

Mushog turned his head to look at her as he heard her approach. “Well, where is it?” he asked, and though her arms were clearly empty he looked at her expectantly, as if he thought that it was behind her back or hidden up one of her sleeves.

“They are not there,” she said, speaking honest truth.

“Not there? What do you mean, they’re not there? You lost our chief’s eggs?” Eleluleniel was silent. Mushog, on the other hand, looked too surprised at first to be angry. Then his eyes narrowed as he looked about the fire. “Where’d the Brat go?” She said nothing. His face darkened. “She
took them, didn’t she? You had her take them.”

“They are quite safe,” she said in a calm voice, even as she wilted under his fierce gaze.

Shrah’rar breathed an open sigh of relief.

Mushog was glaring at Eleluleniel. “You sneaking bitch…”

“It’s just as well, you would have gotten us in trouble,” said Shrah’rar.

Mushog ignored him. “You had better hope to fuck nothing happens to those fucking eggs.”

“She will take care of them,” the Elf said faintly.

“You had better hope so, for her sake. I’ll shove my foot so far up her arse it comes out her fucking throat.” He seized her wrist. There was a grinding sound as the bones of her wrist grated on one another in his hand. Eleluleniel gasped and tried to pull away but Mushog pulled her toward him. As he did the fierceness of his gaze abated somewhat. The obvious terror in her response was some small appeasement for his anger; then, too, the situation began to strike him as rather funny. It was just so unexpected: he wasn’t accustomed to any kind of resistance from Kurbag’s Elf. “You sneaking, sneaking bitch…” he chuckled as she stared at him, her face pinched in pain and fear.

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Dark, and in the night sky overhead the white stars cut like diamonds. They were so sharp and bright and cold. She was not running now, but walking quickly, and staring up as she did at the stars through the dark tree boughs overhead. An owl hooted, jolting her out of her star-gazing, and she stopped stock-still and looked around her, knotting her fingers anxiously under the strap that dug into her right shoulder. She thought of the eggs she carried on her back. She had taken the eggs because she didn’t want them damaged, didn’t want either herself or Leni to be punished for it. Now she thought of other ways they could have been damaged and she wondered suddenly, guiltily, if her running earlier had hurt them, if she had shaken up the baby chicks inside.

And then, since there was nothing she could do about that now, she thought about more practical matters and where she was and if she was going to be able to find her way back again. She heard Leni’s words again in her mind:

*Take them into the forest, deep as you can. Just take care not to lose yourself there. You can make your way back later, when time has passed.*

That same owl hooted again, somewhere nearby, and she looked around to see if she could see it, but if she did it just looked like part of any old tree. It seemed as if it was just her and the owl awake and all the rest of the world asleep. But she knew that wasn’t true. Somewhere behind her she had left Leni alone with Mushog and Shrah’rar. Shrah’rar shouldn’t be a problem, she didn’t think anyway, but Mushog was another matter.

“She told me to go,” Maevyn said out loud. “I only did what she told me.” She felt a sudden burning in her eyes and rubbed at them fiercely, stubbornly, with the back of her hand. “She can handle it, whatever happens. She’s been through it all before,” Maevyn muttered. But she felt small and selfish as she said it, and she hugged herself hard, wishing that she had stayed and knowing that it would not have done either of them any good.

Well, best not to stay where she was. If she wasn’t going to go any further, she should at least get clear of the ground. Mushog might come after all, for all that Leni had said she would stop him, and even if he didn’t, there could be other beasts in the dark. Maevyn chose a likely tree and caught hold
of the first branch within reach, hauling herself up. When she judged herself at a goodly height she found a crook in the branches where she could wedge herself with some safety. After she had gotten herself situated she shrugged her shoulder free of the pack and took it in both arms, holding it against her belly. There she remembered her words of earlier, when she had argued with Leni about the lives inside the eggs, and she thought of how strange it was that she should be here holding them to her belly, quite as if they were the most precious things in the world.

“I wonder how big you are,” she murmured over the pack, “and how much longer you have to go.” She wondered if they could hear her inside their shells or if they were sleeping, and then she wondered if their whole lives were like a sleep. The owl hadn’t hooted again and all around her the world was still. She wondered if even the trees were sleeping, and what dreams they might have. The fragments of an old lullaby came into her head and quietly she began to hum it and, after a time, softly to sing.

“Sleep, sleep, sleep little baby…out of the dark and out of the wild…Sleep, sleep, sleep little baby…here in my arms, my own little child…” She rocked the eggs in her arms and imagined her mother alive and holding her in the dark. “Dear, dear, dear little baby…dearer than earth and the deep round sky…Sleep, sleep, sleep little baby…here in my arms, till morn-ing…”

-.-.-.

Mushog’s forearm was pressing against her throat. It was difficult to breathe. He’d tried to unlace his breeches but he was too drunk for his fingers to make sense of the laces and so he gave up, or perhaps in his beer-blurry mind he had succeeded. He shoved his groin forward roughly, grinding clumsily against her, and she had no idea if he was hard or soft behind the material of his breeches. It was irrelevant really; he was hurting her either way. The Uruk thrust and grunted and swore under his breath and seemed wholly oblivious to the world around him. She squeezed her fingers under his arm, trying to purchase some relief from the weight on her throat.

He worked against her until his body went rigid and a ragged moan came out of his mouth. Then the pressure slackened and the full weight of his body came down upon her and Mushog was still, and then snoring.

The Elf girl gave it a moment. Then, with a great effort, she rocked at the Orc over her, rocked and squirmed until she was able to pull herself free of his bulk. Raising herself up on one hip, she coughed and felt of her throat where he had pressed down upon her. Gingerly she touched her bruised flesh as she looked down at the, now comatose, Mushog. She knew that Kurbag would have something to say about that when he returned. He did not care if Mushog or the others made use of her, but if the marks they left were too noticeable it annoyed him. He would yell at Mushog and Mushog would be resentful and would find some way to take it out on her in turn: some way that didn’t leave marks, or not many.

“It’s a marvel, isn’t it?” commented Shrah’rar, who was still beside the fire. “A big fellow like that, full grown an’ all, an’ he still can’t hold his drink.”

She stood up and smoothed the skirts of her dress down around her legs automatically, as if nothing of significance had happened, as if she kept entirely different company. If Mushog had spent he had done so in his own breeches, for there was no trace of him upon her beyond her dishevelment and a general sense of personal filthiness.

There was a knife at his hip, such a knife as all of the Orcs carried, for knives were not Mushog’s weapon of choice: his way was of the sword. But it was a knife for all that. He moved in his sleep; he had been laying belly-down, sprawled out full-length, but now he turned onto his side, mumbling to himself as he sought out a more comfortable position, knees close to his belly, for all the world like
an overgrown child. The knife became all the more prominent, jutting as it did from his hip. Eleluleniel stared down at the Orc and imagined taking his knife and killing him with it, burying it in his belly or in his throat. It was a gray thought and emotionless, with neither yearning nor satisfaction in it. She knew that she would never be able to do it. If she had been Maevyn, she knew, she wouldn’t have hesitated, but she was only herself. It was not in her to kill, even such as them.

Shrah’rar unleashed a belch greater than his small body should have been able to produce and scratched himself comfortably. “Hey Squeaker, leave that great fool where he lies and come over by the fire. Night’s getting a bit chill.”

She did so, wondering why he made this overture and what it was he wanted. He did not leave her to wonder long.

“That pig was better than I thought it would be. D’you have any more?” Shrah’rar had eaten both his share and part of Mushog’s and his stomach was round with his gorging, but he was still hungry. He sighed with anticipation as the Elf girl retrieved and unwrapped another of the little leather packets, laying pieces of meat beside the flames. “Ahhhhhh…You know, I was talking about variety before but really, my tastes are very simple. Keep it simple: that’s my attitude. Be content with what you’ve got. Pretty good, huh?”

“Insofar as it goes,” she murmured. Prodding the pork with a stick, she wondered what it was with which she was supposed to be content.

“How’s that?” He cocked his head but when she didn’t say anything further he dismissed it. “Anyway, that was pretty bleeding clever of you earlier with those eggs. If anything were to have happened to them we’d both be for it, eh?” He frowned. “Only thing being, of course, that now we don’t know where they are, and I don’t like that so much. You sure the Brat’s not gonna let any harm come to them out there? I don’t care much if something big and scary gobbles her up, but those eggs, you know, those are what you might call an investment.”

“I am sure she will take care of them.”

“I certainly hope so,” said Shrah’rar. “Because it’s our arses if she don’t, and it’s our arses anyway if she don’t get them back before Bragdagash and the others return.” His nostrils twitched. “I can follow her scent if need be, but I’ll rip her a new one myself if I have to do that.” He felt full, not inclined to move from his current position by the fire, much less wander around the woods in search of some snot-nosed *tark*. Leaning forward, he speared a chunk of flesh crudely with a jagged black talon and held it up it up for a moment like a trophy before shoving it into his mouth and chewing noisily.

Eleluleniel looked away from his noxious meal, gazing out at the trees. “You will not have to,” she said quietly. “She will come back.”

Maevyn did come back some hours later. The night was still dark and she used starlight and her memories of the trees she had passed to guide her back to camp. It was scary because it took her longer than she thought it would, and there were several times that she thought she had lost her way. Finally, though, she saw the glow of the fire through the trees and was able to make her way back to the clearing.

She held back hesitantly for a moment, looking for the dark figures of Orcs, not knowing if the others might have come back yet, but there was only Mushog’s sleeping bulk and Shrah’rar still
sitting cross-legged beside the embers of the fire, idly tracing something in the dirt with a twig. He lifted his head and she saw the glow of his bright eyes as he saw her, recognized her, and grunted his recognition. He didn’t make a sound beyond that and she didn’t either: they were both taking care not to wake Mushog up, though with the snores coming out of him Maevyn was amazed that he hadn’t woken himself up by now. Shifting the pack on her shoulder she nodded at Shrah’rar, then bit her lip and looked about for the pool of deeper darkness that was the pile of furs she shared with Leni. She made her way toward them.

The Elf girl was asleep, the dark thick cover fur drawn up under her chin, and her blue eyes were open and sad and unseeing. As Maevyn knelt down and slipped the pack from her back Leni’s eyelids fluttered and she turned her head, looking up for a moment in blind alarm at the dark silhouette above her before relaxing back into the furs. “Ohhh, you came back,” she said, almost sighing.

Maevyn nodded before thinking that Leni might not be able to see that. “Yes, it’s me,” she whispered, slipping in under the covers. She pulled the pack close, then thought the better of it and opened it, taking an egg out and slipping it under the covers between them. She did the same with the other two so that the little clutch of eggs was nestled between her and Leni. They wouldn’t come to any harm there: they were too big and their shells too thick to be squashed in the night time, and they would keep warm and snug there until morning. “He didn’t hurt you, did he?” Maevyn asked.

Leni yawned. “I am all right,” she said.

Maevyn, annoyed, thought that that was not what she had asked, but she didn’t comment. She shifted one of the eggs further down so that it wasn’t pressing against her chest, and stroked its warm side for a moment, liking the leathery surface. It made her think of her village when the heifers were with calf in the late spring, and she would put her hands against their muddy sides. “It’s not a bit like a cow,” she said out loud.

“What? Of course not,” said the Elf girl groggily.

“No, I mean, when a cow is carrying her baby, you can feel it inside her belly. And Mama said that when Demi and I were inside of her we kicked…” She waited for Leni to say whether anything similar happened with Elf mothers, but the other girl did not volunteer such information. “Then again, maybe when they’re further along we’ll be able to feel them inside…”

Leni yawned again. “Maevyn, I am trying to sleep.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“Mmm…” A hand touched Maevyn’s arm in the dark before slipping down. Leni’s fingers found hers and curled around them. “It is all right.”

Leni’s arm was over one of the eggs like she was hugging it. Maevyn pushed her body closer. The warm contour of the egg was comforting, like a mother’s pregnant belly. “It’s like they’re our babies, isn’t it, Leni,” she said sleepily.

“It is,” murmured Leni, squeezing Maevyn’s hand. “Now sleep.”

Contented, Maevyn closed her eyes.
This is what he’s missed: the good minutes before. Bragdagash’s hand is closed on his hilt; he opens it, spreads his fingers, and the night air licks the grooves in his palm. Happens that the nearest of his lads is Pryszrim, and when he puts his hand on the smaller Orc’s back he feels a responsive quiver. Small crouched rabbit, tightly wound, body thrumming with its eager heat. He touches each in turn to feel that same fierce hum and know they are all weapons waiting in the dark.

*Now* tastes sweetest in the instant before it leaves his mouth.

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It’s Grymawk who goes first, crossbow loaded and cocked. The others follow but he pays no mind, all his focus on what lies ahead. He shoots the first dog before it can sense them, toppling the animal sidelong. The second just has time to lift its head, utter a hesitant growl that cuts off with the arrow in its throat and then it is down and Grymawk is still moving, dispensing silence with a happy purpose. He doesn’t even break stride at the still-warm corpses: jerks the arrows out on the go. Keeps moving, eyes peeled for his next target.

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Ten feet, and frantic barking tells Nazluk that Grymawk finally missed one. Five feet, and answering barks take up the alarm throughout the village. No more skulking: Nazluk runs now, knife in either hand—

*Yes, that’s right, we’ve fucking come. Come greet my knives, they’re hungry!*

At the second hut a door crashes open, a man’s strong voice comes from it, and Nazluk veers toward the silhouette. He’s light with laughter when he sees the tark carries no weapon: sings “*Die now!*” and slams into the man with all the force at his command. His blades, of course, precede him.

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“*Gut them! Bleed them! Turn them into meat!*” Is it Pryszrim who shouts it, or one of the others, or does he only think he hears the words? His mouth is open: spray of blood across his face, salt and iron on his tongue, the tark falls under his blade and he stops his headlong rush to hack at the body again and again.

“Come on, lad!” Rukshash’s blue eye, dancing laughter, calls him back. “Will you let those night-blind Uruk bastards beat you to the spoils?”

Panting, Pryszrim leaves off his butchery, runs on in the giggling snaga dark.

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There are times when Kurbag wishes he could see in the dark. Now would be good, for instance, as he squints around the hovel. He’s about to leave when he sees a shadow shifting out of the corner of one eye. He turns and, briefly, they stare at one another, the tall half-Uruk and the young tark woman against the wall.
If he could see in the dark he would have seen the knife. He’s ready for it anyhow—often they have knives—but when she realizes she won’t catch him this way she makes to use it on herself, nearly succeeding. “None of that,” he says and catches her wrist, squeezing until something breaks.

He kills her in the end, but this way he’s more than a minute about it, standing with her slender neck clamped in the crook of his right arm, waiting for her body to slacken. Holds her with an almost-gentleness until the breath fails her and the strong heart finally stops. When she is dead he lays her down and starts undoing her dress. It has little metal clasps. Frustrating as they are, Kurbag can feel their fineness beneath his calloused fingers and is pleased.

Rukshash slips behind the crude huts with his good ear pricked till he hears promise; waits in the shadow of the worn thatch, watching. Scrabble scrabble from within, dirt dislodged from the outer wall. He counts the seconds till a shard of bone breaks free into the outer air and jerks quickly from side to side, widening the hole. He expects a woman to emerge, or a child, but it’s a toddler pushed out instead: a puling brat not two years old, thumb lodged firmly in its mouth. Its eyes widen at the sight of Rukshash. Smiling, he puts a finger to his lips, waits for the one who sent the baby through to follow.

The boy has dark fuzz on his upper lip. Half-way out when he sees the Orc bending over him, he sobs and starts to squirm back, but Rukshash already has him by the hair. Jerking the boy’s head back, he saws through the lad’s windpipe with the ease of many years’ practice.

Not far away, the little one is plopped down in the dust, eyes creased, mouth parting around its thumb in one long wail. Rukshash clucks and goes to it with his red knife.

Here’s a fight! A veteran of the Ring War: one who hasn’t beaten his sword into a ploughshare. But the man is older now, the sweat standing on his brow. He knows he is going to die. The Orc is toying with him at this point, slowing its blade to match his faltering strokes. All the man can hope is that, while the beast is playing, his family can make their escape.

Grushak smiles. Beyond the man he sees three figures flee, quicksilver in the night. “Mir dafrim, sharkū, but now it ends.” He sheathes his weapon in the warrior’s gut.

The man stumbles, mouth opening and closing, fingers trembling over the long rip in his belly. Strong hands catch him, lay him back: the earth receives him like a pillow. Above him the Orc is speaking: “…track them down too, soon enough. Never fear.” It wipes its wet blade on his tunic. Looks down at him and smiles and—improbably, in the midst of battle—undoes the front of its breeches. The man feels impossibly tired. He stares past the Orc into the stars and the void beyond the stars, thinking only, It is true.

We all die alone.

How many Men inhabit this village? Hrahragh counts five in one hut, three in another. They shout and fight or weep and flee, but fight or flee, he kills them.

He throws a woman against a wall, holds her by the throat and fucks her. He makes it fast, for there is more killing in him, and Pryszzrim is hovering close by, eager for Hrahragh’s seconds.

Later Grushak will ask “How many?” and he will say a number, but it will not be true. Five and
three make nothing when daggers add them. It is all subtraction in the end.

Chapter End Notes

_Mir dafrim, sharkũ, but now it ends._ “It was good fun, old man, but now it ends.”
“Come on,” said Shrah’rar. “One more time.”

“Nuh-uh,” said Maevyn.

“You’re just afraid you’re going to lose again.”

She made a face, shaking her head.

“Do it or I’ll cut your nose off.” The girl only gave him a sidelong look. It was clear that she didn’t believe him, and with good cause. If Grushak came back to find his little snaga mutilated without any decent reason for it, who was to say he wouldn’t visit something similar on Shrah’rar? “Your ear, then,” Shrah’rar said. “You’ve GOT two of them.”

She folded her arms across her chest and stared at him, effectively calling his bluff. It did not matter how poorly or how well she played, she knew. Shrah’rar was not interested in playing fair, and Maevyn was not interested in playing a cheater.

Mushog was drinking by the campfire, trying to tamp down the headache that he had given himself the night before. With as sore a head as he had, he was no good for a rematch with Shrah’rar, not even if he’d been in the mood for one, which he most certainly was not. “Will you both keep it down,” he growled, rubbing his temples.

“I don’t know why you’re afraid to play me,” Shrah’rar said to Maevyn in a wheedling tone. “I’ve been awake for a day and night, and it’s getting into another day now. You’ve had some sleep at least. That evens the odds a bit, wouldn’t you say? Makes you a better match for me. Come on, you might even win this time. You won’t know if you don’t try…” He trailed off suddenly, ears perking visibly. Beside the fire, Mushog lifted his head, scowling at an undefined point in the trees.

Maevyn, who could hear nothing, looked from Shrah’rar to Mushog, and then to Leni, who was turning one of the eggs. Though she did not look up as they had, she too had stopped what she was doing and become quite still, staring into the ash and glowing embers of the fire. Those pointy Elf ears of hers—whatever the two Orcs had heard, it was clear that Leni could hear it as well. Maevyn scowled. She hated being the only one not to know…except that wasn’t true, because she did know, really. What else could it be?

And in a few minutes she could hear them herself as they pounded into camp: the big Orcs, Bragdagash and Grushak and Hrahragh, and Kurbag, and the smaller Orcs running behind them. She stiffened at the sight of dried blood on their arms and clothing, and even on their faces. There were flecks of white foam at the corners of their mouths from the running they had done, with one notable exception. Grymawk had not been running but was riding on Hrahragh’s back. If anything, he looked more tired than the rest of them: his head had dropped forward so that his chin rested on Hrahragh’s broad shoulder, and his eyes were closed. Beneath Hrahragh’s arm, Maevyn could see crude bandages wrapped around the goblin’s left thigh.

She had little time to wonder what had happened: Bragdagash was giving orders. “Up. Off yer arses, we’re legging it!” he said, and Maevyn realized that none of them had taken off the packs that they were wearing. Instead they were grabbing up anything that they had left behind the day before.
Mushog had risen to his feet, the headache still in his eyes but pushed away for now. “Vrapog?” he questioned, moving toward Bragdagash.

“Nar bur mabas,” Bragdagash answered shortly, “bajug gajirm shapit…”

“How up, Brat,” Grushak ordered her. “We’re breaking camp now.”

Eleluleniel was already slipping the eggs into their pack and slipping her arms through the straps of it. She quickly joined Maevyn in rolling up their bed furs. “What’s going on?” Maevyn whispered to her. Eleluleniel shook her head: whether this meant that she did not know or that she did not want to say, Maevyn could not tell.

“Shapit, shapit!” Bragdagash barked. Maevyn was pleased to note that it wasn’t her and Leni he was shouting at to go faster but Shrah’rar and Mushog.

She did not revel in this for long as a hard hand closed on her shoulder. “Fucking move, Brat,” Grushak growled. “This is not a game.” He shoved her front-first against a tree, wrenching one of her arms behind her back and forcing a strap taut over it. Maevyn coughed, tasting blood in her mouth. She had accidentally bitten her inner cheek as Grushak manhandled her. Coughing again, she turned her head and spat blood out on the ground. Grushak took no notice: as he finished cinching the last item onto her on her body he put his hands on her again and turned her around roughly. “Now come on and don’t fall,” he said, giving her arm a pull. “We are going on a little run…”

Maevyn experienced a sense of shock as Grushak hauled her forward. Only moments before there had been packs and sleeping mats and all kinds of things on the ground. Now there was nothing to be seen: everything had been loaded up onto someone’s back or was being held in their arms. The fire and the trampled grass was all there was to show of their presence, and Nazluk was kicking out the fire now, scuffing dirt over it and using the heel of his boot to knock aside the heavy stones that she and Leni had used for cooking. It was an odd thing to do, Maevyn thought, what with the flattened grass and the hard beaten soil from where ten pairs of Orkish boots had tramped. Hiding the fire certainly wouldn’t hide the fact that they had been there.

Grushak still had his hand clamped on her arm. He pulled her alongside him as he rejoined the others. Panting a little from the rough treatment, Maevyn looked around her. She caught sight of Leni through the press of bodies: Kurbag’s arm was locked around her and he was looking down at her with an expression of extreme irritation. Maevyn wondered if he had seen the bruises on Leni’s throat, the same bruises that Maevyn had seen when she woke up that morning.

“Right,” Bragdagash addressed them, “let’s move out!” He thrust his fist in the air, punctuated the words with a bellow that the rest of them took up as they all began thudding out of camp.

“-.-.-.-

“We’re adding this to your lessons, Brat,” Grushak hissed, dropping her with a noise of disgust. “You’ll learn to keep up quickly enough after I’ve laid into you a bit.” He’d managed to keep her running for the first ten minutes, but after that he had stopped and simply scooped her up, packs and all, running with her clamped in his strong arms.

It was almost as bad as that time when he had carried her on his back, when every running footfall had jolted through her body and she had come perilously close to dislocating her shoulders, and her poor wrists, rubbed raw with the rope that bound them, had taken so long to heal afterward. Even now they showed the ill-effects of that day with circling scars, pink and smooth and shiny.
Being carried in Grushak’s arms was excruciating in a whole different way: the packs bound on her and wedged between her and him make her feel like she had been bundled into a satchel of rocks, and in Grushak’s hard hot arms she was like an unwilling passenger freighted in a bouncing, shaking oven. When he dumped her at the end of the run it was just that one final jolt going through her. She lay gasping on the ground like a fish out of water.

“Maevyn! Are you all right?”

“I…think so,” said Maevyn, sitting up slowly, all in a dazed heap. “Where are we now?”

Leni, standing over with her slender fingers knotted behind the straps of her pack, looked up at the sky. “North, North-West of where we were. We were running for over an hour.”

“Did you get carried too?”

Leni shook her head.

“She’s stronger than you are, Brat,” said Grushak, still hovering nearby, with an ugly laugh. “Now get up, and get shed of those packs. You’ve rested long enough.”

Maevyn reddened in anger and embarrassment. She bent her head low as she stood up so that her dark hair fell over her eyes, trying to hide the shame in her face. Had slender pretty Leni really run all that way, while Maevyn had to be jounced along like so much baggage?

“Come, let us do as he says,” said Leni, taking Maevyn lightly by the elbow. “You have not had to run so far before,” she whispered near Maevyn’s ear as she helped the younger girl shed the myriad items strapped on her small body. “I saw you when we started out. You did very well. You do not think, before I came to be among these Yrch, that I could run so hard or for so long, do you?”

Maevyn shrugged, made a face, but felt a little better anyhow. Leni had a way of doing that, of knowing the right thing to say. The younger girl stood up straight, looking around as her embarrassment faded, only to be replaced with curiosity about their new surroundings, and with questions about what had happened earlier. “Leni…why were we running anyway?” she asked, looking around at the Orcs. “Why did we have to leave so quickly? Were we being chased?”

Had the people from the village rallied and pursued their attackers? But there was no aspect of alarm about Bragdagash’s band. Uruk and regular Orc alike, they were talking unconcernedly, even cheerfully as they removed the various articles bound on their bodies. Several of the Orcs who were party to the raid were opening the sacks with which they had returned, showing their take to Shrah’rar and Mushog. Shrah’rar was examining, with evident admiration, a bright dagger that Grymawk looked over with proprietary pride between grimaces of pain. Whatever had happened to him, it did not seem to be life-threatening – he was sitting by and answering Shrah’rar’s questions calmly enough while Rukshash re-bandaged his leg.

“This is the way it usually happens,” said Leni, shrugging. “Bragdagash does not like to remain in the same camp after a raid. He likes to move quickly in case there is some kind of pursuit, especially if we were camping at all close to the place that was raided. But he and the others would not be so calm if they truly believed that we were followed. This time, at least, it seems as if they were only being careful.”

“‘This time’?” Maevyn asked. Then did that mean they had been chased before?

“Owww. Hey Grushak, tell your brat to come over here, I can’t get this knot out!” Pryszrim whined.

“Tell her yourself, runt, I’m busy.”
“Hey Brat, come over here, I can’t –”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” said Maevyn, rolling her eyes as she went over to Pryszrim. She often found herself put to use this way, set to tugging loose the tight knots they had made with her own smaller fingers.

Eleluleniel, left to her own devices, carefully took off the pack that contained the eagle eggs. Drawing back the flap she lifted one out, examining it carefully. It did not appear to be damaged in any way by its recent journey. She examined the other two in turn, satisfying herself that they also were all right. As she put them away again, one by one, into the pack, she became aware of a shadow cast on the ground where she was kneeling. Blinking, she looked at the two dark forms towering over her. Bragdagash and Kurbag were standing there, watching what she did.

“Look all right then?” Bragdagash questioned her. She nodded wordlessly. “Fine, that’s fine. You continue keeping them like that and we should do nicely. Rukshash!” he called out, raising his eyes and walking over to the older Orc.

“Hoi.” Kurbag was still standing, looking down at her with his head cocked slightly. Nothing unusual there. This time, however, there was no air of ominous intent about him, only a kind of high eagerness. “Come up then, I’ve brought you something.”

He stepped back, motioning her away. Standing up and hugging the pack of eggs to her chest, Eleluleniel drew in a breath and let it out again as she followed him. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw that the others were starting to set up camp. Bragdagash had had them stop in a shallow coombe: a place where the earth folded gently on itself and the long grass waved. Trees lined the long furrow in the earth, providing ample shade for the snaga Orcs, and the cleft sloped up toward a band of dark trees rimming the skyline, evidently the outskirts of a vast forest. Beyond the trees was endless blue sky, and against that, a white range of mountains.

They were white: white as snow. Perhaps there was snow on these mountains, despite the warmth of summer. Eleluleniel had heard of such things, for all that her old life was spent where the earth lay flat and where the trees were tall: places where there was snow the long year round, in summer as in deepest winter. Wondering what mountains these were, and where she was, and how far she was from home, she stared at them and tried to visualize the maps of soft calfskin from which she had once been taught her geography.

“Here…” Kurbag had stopped and lowered the sack that he was carrying slung over his strong shoulder. Squatting down with his back to her, he opened it and drew out a number of smaller sacks: the usual grain and beaten flour that he would bring back after a raid. And then he took out something else.

Eleluleniel said nothing as he stood and turned, unfurling the dress of woven gray-brown fabric. Standing with the heavy pack cradled against her chest, she stared at the dress Kurbag held out to her. In her mind’s eye arms emerged from the short sleeves; she saw the ghostly outline of a woman’s throat behind the dark hemmed collar. Mercifully, she could not see the woman’s face.

“I told you I would bring you a new dress, didn’t I,” said Kurbag, sounding pleased with himself. “Go on then. Let’s see you put it on.”

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Maevyn stared at Leni when the Elf girl came back wearing, not her usual tattered clothing, but a clean garment of dark homespun. The Elf girl looked away, her eyes not meeting Maevyn’s. When they did there was such a look in them that Maevyn had to turn away from it. Wearing a dead
woman’s dress…

“It’s not like it’s so different,” she said awkwardly later, trying to comfort Leni as Leni had so often comforted her. “When you think about it, I mean. What they feed us. Everything they give us.” The slaughtered animals: meat taken from the same village from which the dress had come. The furs on which they slept. There was precious little on which they subsisted that had not been stolen or killed for. “It’s not like you’re the one who took it,” Maevyn insisted.

But Eleluleniel thought—she could not help thinking—that a woman had died so that Kurbag could bring her this garment. A woman who might have lived if the Orc hadn’t taken it into his head that Squeaker needed a new dress.

“And I cannot know how old she was,” she said quietly as they attended to the wrapped meat that the raiders had brought back, unpacking and repacking again. “If she was a woman or if she was only a girl like me, or the color of her hair, or what manner of things she cared about, or who it was she loved. In my mind she has no face. I do not even know her name…”

“We know she had bigger bosoms than you anyhow,” said Maevyn frankly. “See how it’s pooching out at the front?” Leni’s face went a little pink, and she smoothed the front of the garment down self-consciously. “I think if we refasten it that will help,” said Maevyn. She stepped behind the Elf and stared for a flustered moment at the metal clasps before walking back around to stare again at Leni’s front. Dubiously: “Or maybe you’ll just have to grow into it.”

“That might take a while,” said Leni, looking down with wry humor at the outline of her small breasts behind the dull-colored material. At least her face no longer showed that weary heartsick expression, and when she looked up again she smiled a little at Maevyn, who felt a tiny thrill of accomplishment.

“Look at the sky,” said Maevyn a short while later, pointing.

It was blue and it went on forever. High scudding clouds moved far above them. It wasn’t so often that Maevyn and Leni found themselves free to linger under open sky, and they stopped what they were doing for a moment and turned together to look at the horizon. A few birds flew blackly against the sky and the white mountains, and Maevyn made a low murmur of appreciation. “It’s pretty here,” she said.

“It is,” said Leni.

Maevyn looked at her and saw the smile at the corner of Leni’s mouth as the Elf girl stood there, the dress hanging loosely on her body. It might have looked nice enough on the woman who wore it before, but it really was all wrong for Leni: her skin was too pale for it, and it didn’t fit her right. Still, it was certainly better than the old grubby dress it had replaced. Maevyn hated Kurbag but she thought that it was just as well he had brought Leni this new dress, even if they didn’t know its provenance.

She looked forward again, toward the horizon. “Those mountains are pretty too. I’ve never seen anything like them before. See how they look sort of pointy?” This met with a quiet sound of agreement from Leni, and Maevyn went on, “I think they’re taller than the mountains we were in before. With the eagles, remember?” She looked thoughtful. “Wonder if that’s where we’re going next.”

“I expect that we will know soon enough,” said Leni.

-.-.-.
Much later, when it was getting on to evening and they had a bit of a fire going, Rukshash took the bandages off Grymawk’s leg. Exhaling gustily, he shook his head. “Ointment and bandages aren’t enough for this,” he declared of the bite on Grymawk’s thigh. “This needs stitching…”

“Bloody fuck,” the goblin muttered, though he sounded resigned. He had suspected as much.

The older Orc grinned and clapped his hand between Grymawk’s legs, causing the goblin to utter a sharp oath. “Be glad of it, lad. Much higher and that bitch would have had your dick off!” Rukshash gave him a playful squeeze, laughing raucously at the half-hearted smack Grymawk gave him in return.

“Boil water?” asked Hrahragh. He had been watching how Rukshash ministered to their damaged comrade, orange eyes alight with interest. Coming from southern lands, he was curious to see how his northern cousins went about the matter of tending Grymawk’s wound.

“Two skins for the boiling should be enough,” Rukshash agreed. “You’ll find a little kettle in my pack. Put the brat on it: I’m going to want your hands for Grymawk.” Hrahragh did not have to be told twice and he strode off at once to press the Man-brat into service.

She complained, of course, but complied easily enough. It helped that she too was curious. Filling Rukshash’s battered old soup kettle and placing it in the glowing embers of the fire, Maevyn crouched down to watch the proceedings.

They had removed Grymawk’s breeches but his tunic hung low enough to cover his privates. This was fortunate, because any concern about modesty was clearly the last thing on Grymawk’s mind. He was sitting stiffly, his arms fixed tightly at his sides beneath Hrahragh’s firm broad hands. The Uruk was kneeling behind him while Rukshash pattered around in front, poking and prodding at the open wound. As he picked bits of grit from beneath the ragged flap of skin with his filthy dark claws Maevyn was wincing almost as much as Grymawk, but she could not stop looking. Indeed, she was so transfixed that Rukshash had to tell her, quite irritably, to check the water and see whether it had come to a boil.

“That looks plenty hot,” said Rukshash, giving the steaming kettle a brief glance as she lifted it up. “Wait just a tick, I’ll tell you when.”

“When what?” Maevyn asked.

“When to pour. Come on, girl, you’re sharp enough. Keep up.” He had taken a thick strip of leather and, extending it between his hands, brought it to Grymawk’s mouth. Grymawk’s eyes were tightly shut but his mouth popped open, prompt and pathetic as a little bird’s, allowing Rukshash to fit the leather strap between his teeth.

“But it’ll burn him!” protested Maevyn.

“That’s why we’re waiting first,” agreed Rukshash. “We want it plenty hot, just not enough to blister.”

Well…if we’re going to let it cool down first, she thought…

But then, less than a minute later: “All right. Now.”

She stared at Rukshash in dismay. “But it’s still too hot—I, I don’t want—” Sighing with loud exasperation, Rukshash took the kettle from her hands and, without ceremony, poured about a third of the contents over Grymawk’s wound. Sickened, Maevyn turned her head away, but she could still hear the awful sound that Grymawk made through his crude gag. I didn’t want to hurt him, she
thought wretchedly.

“That’s one. Here’s two now.” Rukshash sloshed more of the hot water over Grymawk’s thigh, then set the kettle aside. “How you doing, lad,” he asked, though of course he had no response. Grymawk was breathing quickly, shallowly. He had fought in Hrahragh’s grip but had subsided now. His eyes were were still tightly shut, so he did not see the needle that Rukshash produced. Perhaps there was another reason for that; perhaps he had seen Rukshash threading it earlier. It was made of bone and threaded with the same kind of gut Grymawk used for his arrows, and it looked blunt. Had it been any thicker, Maevyn thought that it might have done for a knitting needle, though of course it was much shorter.

Maevyn stared at what followed, unable to look away, while Rukshash methodically stitched up the goblin’s wound. Grymawk did not struggle again but his teeth ground down horribly all the while on the strip of leather in his mouth. The noise coming from behind his teeth kept on going, and it did not stop until Rukshash finished with his suture and had tied off the end. With a meaningless murmur Rukshash knelt back, wiping the bone needle on his own trousers.

At some point Grymawk’s tunic had ridden up; either that or Rukshash had pushed it aside while he was working, exposing the goblin’s genitals. They were not those of a child but of an adult male Orc, yet at that moment they seemed as innocuous and vulnerable as a baby’s. Somehow seeing Grymawk’s privates just then did not disgust Maevyn; it only made her feel so much worse for him. The stitches on his gray thigh were livid and puckered, and when Rukshash upended the last of the hot water over them Grymawk could do no better than groan. At least, Maevyn reckoned faintly, it could not have been as hot as it was before. She hoped, at this point, he wasn’t feeling much of anything.

“There now,” said Rukshash, with almost obscene good cheer after he had dried Grymawk’s leg and wrapped another bandage around it. “Dose you with some beer and you’re good to go. Somebody get this lad a skin of Orc draught, eh?” he said, looking up at the faces looking down at them.

Several of the other Orcs had wandered over to watch Rukshash at his surgery. Nazluk was one of them. He nodded his head curtly and vanished as Rukshash turned to Maevyn.

If she had been thinking properly she would have wondered why he had spoken to the others instead of telling her to get the beer for Grymawk. As it was, she was wholly unprepared when Rukshash struck her. He did it with his mutilated hand, contemptuously, hitting her across the face with a cracking sound. She yelped and recoiled. Rukshash’s hand was not so heavy as Grushak’s, but it was hard and bony and she had not expected the attack.

“Don’t ever do that again. When I say pour, you do it. Tender-hearted little fool, was that supposed to be tarkish mercy? Think Grymawk would have thanked you when his leg swelled up with the puss and the bad blood welling under it?”

Warm wetness on her upper lip. Was he going to hit her again? He was glaring at her like he wanted to. Blood was coming out of Maevyn’s nose but all she felt was shame, and fear of another clout like the first. She shook her head quickly.

“Too fucking right. Think Bragdagash would have thanked you for costing us our only archer? No, he wouldn’ve neither. Use your head or don’t use it as you may, but when a time comes for you to act, you do it! Understand?” She nodded at once and he continued to glare at her. “It’s a short enough life you’ll lead if you don’t. I haven’t lived this long by sitting back and letting the world happen to me. What! Do you want to be like that fool Mushog, without the sense of two fleas?”

“Here now, I can do without your insults, sharkǔ,” snapped Mushog. He was another one of the watchers.
“Nonetheless it’s true. Or how is your hand doing today?”

“That joke is on your head, old bastard, not mine. Look at this. Fine as ever it was!” He closed and reclosed his fist without a sign of pain. The swelling did seem to have gone down.

“And it’d be healing even faster if you’d only listened to me,” continued Rukshash, unperturbed by the demonstration. “Well, you’ll listen to me next time, won’t you.”

His attention no longer on her, Maevyn wiped her hand across her upper lip, snuffling through her bloody nose. Hrahragh was still close by. He shook his head at her. “Here, foolish girl,” he said, handing her a rag, and she covered her nose with it. It was not wise to bleed so openly in the company of Orcs.

Meanwhile Hrahragh settled some of Grymawk’s packs behind the goblin’s back, allowing him to sit semi-upright. Grymawk was ignoring them both, sucking on the skin of Orc draught that Nazluk had given him. His brow, still deeply furrowed with pain, began to smooth a little as he drank. When he lowered the skin he opened his eyes, blinked tiredly at Maevyn. “Hey Bait,” he said at last. “Fun stuff, eh?”

Maevyn stared at him, wondering why she hadn’t just done what Rukshash told her to do. Why she should have cared whether it hurt Grymawk or not. Certainly she had had her share of bruises on his account. Often enough she had smarted beneath Grushak’s hand in the past few days because of the ill lessons she’d received, and those had been from Grymawk as well as from Mushog. Certainly she had no cause to like Grymawk.

Perhaps it was because they had killed an eagle together. Perhaps it was because he still called her “Bait” sometimes, as he did now. But he was an Orc, and his wound had come from a village raid. Killing people…people, like her folk…

She wanted to ask him just how he had come to be bitten, and by what, or by whom. Not even as an accusation. Just – just to know. Instead she watched unhappily as Grymawk closed his eyes again and tilted back his head once more to drink.

Chapter End Notes

Vrapog? “Run?”

Nar bur mabas, bajug gajirm shapit… Very loosely: “No men follow but we're making tracks quickly.”
They marched all of the next day, skirting the outer perimeter of the forest, and part of the day after that. Bragdagash was eager to close the distance between themselves and the mountains. They were larger on the horizon now, close enough that they no longer looked white, their flanks gray and pitted with scars like the irregular skin of a sickly goblin. There was tree growth about the base of the mountains, and some scruffy greenery ran up the side of the left-most slope. Otherwise they appeared stony and barren. Hardly a welcoming sight to Maevyn’s way of thinking, but the Orc chief’s eyes glinted with a hard dark gleam when he looked at them.

What did mountains mean to Bragdagash? Did they mean another village, or something else entirely? Maevyn thought of eagles and her stomach responded queasily. “But we would have seen eagles by now, if there were eagles,” she said to Leni, like it was Leni she was reassuring and not herself.

“Maybe,” said the Elf. “These mountains are far larger than that mountain was, though, do you see? And I think that is snow at the top…” She looked to the higher peaks as she spoke.

“The sky is clear though,” Maevyn insisted. “We’d’ve seen ’em flying.”

Leni shrugged. “You are probably right,” she agreed.

The easy way she said it annoyed Maevyn. She thought that Leni should be more invested in the answer.

“So what if there are eagles?” asked Mushog in passing. “Scared we’ll send you for another climb, eh?” He grinned at Maevyn.

“I’m not scared,” she said, squaring her shoulders and giving him a contemptuous look that made him laugh. But when he had gone her shoulders slumped and she looked toward the mountains again, plucking unconsciously at the material of her skirt.

They had made an early stop because of Grymawk. Not that Bragdagash said this was why, but it was obvious. For all of Rukshash’s efforts, things weren’t going so well for Grymawk. Two days Hrahragh had carried him per Bragdagash’s orders, but it did him little good. By their second day of travel he hung on Hrahragh’s back with no attempt to support his own weight, his face gone slack and heavy, his forehead oily with sweat. It was after the chief had looked him over, during their midday breather, that Bragdagash said they would go on and make camp…preparatory, he warned, for a big push on the morrow.

Stopping did not mean rest for Maevyn. She had the job of tending Grymawk. That was Rukshash’s doing: he had not forgotten her poor showing with the water two nights before and had been her constant taskmaster ever since, making her change the dressings on Grymawk’s thigh, boil old rags and fetch clean dry ones, wash the wound herself and dry it too once he had checked it over for any foulness or swelling. It was not pleasant work, but Maevyn did as she was told. She knew that she would receive swift punishment for being insolent or squeamish: Rukshash had made himself clear enough. More than that, though, she felt pity for Grymawk. It was obvious that he didn’t feel well. His words were slurred when he spoke, and his red eyes were fever-bright and stupid.
“He’s taken wound fever,” was what Rukshash said. He held his hand over Grymawk’s stitches. “Feel that?”

Maevyn put her hand out with some hesitation and the old Orc caught it impatiently, pressing it against Grymawk’s thigh. The girl’s eyes widened. Crude stitches bristled beneath her palm like an angry caterpillar, but it was the heat of Grymawk’s skin that shocked her.

“Hot, eh?” Rukshash let her go, smirking as she wiped her hand reflexively on her skirt. “I’ve seen plenty worse. Just a pity we had to stitch him up, that’s all. Better to bind a bite wound than to stitch it.”

“Well then why did you then?” she asked.

Rukshash snorted. “Use your head! He couldn’t very well go about with a chunk of his inner thigh flapping open, now could he? It wanted the stitching I gave it.” He turned his head sidelong and spat. “If only the little fool had accommodated us by being bitten somewhere else. The arm, maybe, or the back. Any place but between the legs…”

Maevyn stared at him, nonplussed. "But he'll get better," she said finally. "'Cause you've seen worse."

"So I have," he agreed. He eyed Grymawk. "Course, I've also seen a lot better."

That noncommittal attitude wasn't much to Maevyn’s liking, and it wasn't to Bragdagash's either. Getting on to evening he came by to see how Grymawk fared, and he did not look happy with what he found. "Sha. He looks worse than he did before. There's no way he'll be fit to travel tomorrow…"

"Not likely, no," said Rukshash.

Bragdagash frowned. "I'm willing to give it a day, but after that he'll just have to make do with being carried again." His frown deepened as he looked at Rukshash. "Nothing more you can do for him, then," he said, like he thought the other Orc might be holding out on him.

Rukshash just looked back at him coolly. "I'm keeping him clean and fed and watered. Beyond that, what he needs is rest."

The Uruk scowled. It was obviously he didn't care for this response one bit. "He's getting a day," he said as he walked away from them.

Rukshash chuckled darkly. "Here's a lesson for you," he muttered to Maevyn, who had kept quiet during this exchange. "Never get old. They just expect more of you. Figure if you've been around this long, you must know something they don't."

Maevyn's brow furrowed. She had been brought up to respect her elders. Maybe she hadn't always been good about it, but it was what she had been taught. As for the Orkish viewpoint on such matters, the others weren't exactly respectful of Rukshash, but they still paid attention to what he said. "So don't you?" she asked. "Know something they don't know, I mean?"

He cocked his head. "What do you think?"

Maevyn looked at the old Orc with his ugly face and crooked smile. A number of responses came to mind. She kept all of them to herself.

Rukshash laughed. "You may live to be old yet."
Grymawk wasn't Maevyn's only responsibility. The entire band was at loose ends: ordering Squeaker and the Brat around was a good way to while away the hours, and both were kept very busy indeed. It wasn't much fun being told to repack Shrah’rar's pack for the fourth time running, or fetch Mushog another skin of Orc-drought, or scratch Pryszrim's dirty back for him, or dig a jakes big enough for the purposes of ten Orcs and their two slaves.

That last was definitely the most labor-intensive. It was on Bragdagash's say-so, and he was not in a good humor. Maevyn, who had never been ordered to make a *bagronk* before and didn't understand what Bragdagash wanted, received a clout before he realized she wasn't just backtalking. At that point he sighed gustily and called for Kurbag’s Elf to come and show her how.

Left to her own devices, Maevyn would have dug a hole any old place and been done with it. Unlike Maevyn, however, Leni had done this before. “It should be further away from camp,” she said. “And it is better to go where the ground is at an incline.” It was the work of minutes to find a suitable patch of earth. Once they had settled on the spot Leni said that they needed to clear away the grass first before they began the real digging. “It does not have to be very deep, but it does need to be wide.” She began using a flat piece of bone to cut into the turf.

"Where did you get that?" Maevyn demanded. It looked like the shoulderblade of an animal.

"I asked Kurbag for something to dig with. Do you want to ask Grushak?" Maevyn glared at the suggestion and Leni shrugged. "Then you must ask one of the others, or be willing to make do with your hands."

She had not offered Maevyn the use of her own tool. Of course Maevyn would just have refused it, but the snub made her sullen. She scowled in the direction of the massive forest they had been circling. Probably, if she went there, she could find a stick or something else that she could use for digging, but the forest gave her a funny feeling. The Orcs did not want to go in it, and neither did she. Then she brightened as she thought of something else. "Wait a minute!" she said, scrambling to her feet.

Leni waited for some time before Maevyn came back. There was something pressed close beneath her arm. Pulling away the rag that covered it, she revealed a plate of burnished silver: a bright and gleaming disk of polished light. This time it was Leni’s turn to be surprised. “Where did you get that?”

“It was in Grymawk’s pack. I thought I would look in there for something to dig with. He’s sick anyways so I don’t have to ask him.” Maevyn was feeling very pleased with herself.

Leni had taken the plate into her hands and was examining it. “This is very fine work,” she marveled. “It is of Elven make. I wonder where he found it.”

Maevyn didn’t want to think about that. The image came to her, unasked, of an open oaken trunk, a monstrous figure holding up a wedding cup. “Took it from someone, I’m sure. Like they all do.”

Leni ran her fingers slowly over the elegant embossed design that ran around the edge of the plate. There was a queer look in her eyes, as though it reminded her of something she had lost. Then, surprisingly, she laughed. Handing it back to Maevyn, she said, “I am trying to imagine the face of its maker, if he could see how you intend to use it. Here now, do as I do.”

With two to dig, the task was grubby but manageable. In some ways it was like preparing the ground before making a fire. They cut away the groundcover to form a long rectangle of exposed
soil, then dug into the earth itself, scooping out a narrow trench some four feet in length and piling up the displaced soil at one end. Leni explained this was for anyone using the pit to drop some of the earth in afterward, to help cover up the smell. She was very methodical and matter-of-fact about the whole thing, leading Maevyn to ask how often she had done it before. “Not very often. Bragdagash only orders that a pit be dug when he plans to keep the same camp for some time. We do not usually stay in one place for more than two days in a row, so there is not the need.”

“But he told Rukshash we weren’t staying more than one more day,” Maevyn argued.

Leni shrugged. “If that is what he said, that is what he said.”

Maevyn thought about this. Her cheek still stung from the blow that Bragdagash had given her, and she didn’t like him much at the moment, but it took some of the edge off her resentment. Whether it was because he really cared about Grymawk or, as Rukshash said, he just didn’t want to lose his only archer, he was obviously resigned to keeping camp for more than just another day.

“Grymawk is very ill, then,” Leni commented.

“You’ve seen him, haven’t you?” Propped up beside the fire, he wasn’t easy to miss.

The Elf nodded, looking at her thoughtfully. “If he died, there would be nine of them.”

It was a line of thinking close to Maevyn’s own, or at least to how she had thought before. Now she was not as sure how she felt about the idea. Grymawk was an Orc, but it wasn’t like he was Grushak. She did not like seeing him sick. She searched for the words that would explain what she felt, but, “I don’t hate Grymawk,” was the best that she could manage.

“He has not hurt you.”

Maevyn made a face. Grymawk might be small, but he still hit hard enough when he was annoyed.

“I mean he has not been cruel to you. Real cruelty, finding pleasure in your pain… Has he been cruel to you?” Leni asked suddenly. Maevyn shook her head and she nodded again. “When you are long among cruel folk,” she said, “an absence of cruelty can start to look like kindness. Indifference becomes a kind of virtue. It is an easy mistake to make.”

The words were simply spoken, but there was a sadness behind them. Maevyn felt a responsive ache in the pit of her stomach. She covered it over with a grumble. “You sound like an old grandmama. We dug the hole—now what?”

Leni smiled wryly. “We tell Bragdagash that we have done as he asked, and we let the others know where it is before someone steps in it.”

The possibility hadn’t crossed Maevyn’s mind to this point, but a wide grin spread on her face at the thought. Better than that: she imagined an earth pockmarked with holes like an enormous cheese, every one of them perfect for tripping stupid Orcs who did not look where they were going. As they headed back she expounded her grand vision to Leni, conjuring it up with such extravagance that Leni forgot her sadness before the younger girl’s enthusiasm.

“My hands are tired enough from digging one hole!” she protested, laughing. “Are yours not tired as well?”

“I’d work extra for this,” said Maevyn fervently.

Both girls were giggling when they nearly stumbled upon Nazluk. He was kneeling in the long
grass, placing a snare. When he rose up in front of them his face was full of anger, though he kept his voice to a low snarl. “There’s not a rabbit in miles that cannot hear you snaga and your stupidity. Where have you been for so long, eh?”

He was looking at Leni, but Maevyn answered him back in Orkish. “Bagronk garmogug.”

Nazluk rolled his eyes at her. “Lat ha gujab-lat. Give it over, Brat. You sound like you’re speaking underwater… What’s that under your arm?”

“Nothing,” said Maevyn, backing away from him, but Nazluk stepped forward, catching her by the elbow. She had pulled the rag back down over the silver plate again, but a stray gleam beneath one treacherous fold had betrayed it. When Nazluk grabbed her arm it slid out and fell into the grass.

Still holding Maevyn, Nazluk stepped on it, staring down at the plate from his full height. “Funny,” he said at last. “It doesn’t look like nothing. Where did you find it, hmm?”

Maevyn glared at him, and Leni spoke up. “Leave her be, Nazluk. Let her put it back. You know she was not stealing it. What good would it do her?”

“I know nothing of the kind, nor do I care. I want to know where it came from.” His nails dug into Maevyn’s arm. She clenched her teeth responsively, determined not to say anything, and after a moment she felt Nazluk’s grip relax. “All right, then. Go on and pick it up.”

She made no move to do so until she felt his hand leave her arm. Then she dropped into a squat, grabbing the plate and quickly wrapping it up again. As she did so she looked up at Nazluk’s face. He was staring at her. When she stood up she half expected him to grab her again, but he did not.

Instead, he seized Leni.

Maevyn hissed, not perturbing Nazluk in the slightest. He only jerked his head at her. “Go on then. You go put it back. We’ll just follow at our own pace, yes?”

She looked at Leni, who flinched in Nazluk’s grip. Snarling under her breath, she turned away from them both, walking toward camp. As she did so she tried to make her body relax. The last thing she needed was for her stiff gait to draw attention. She hoped, as she began passing amongst the Orcs, that she was doing a good enough job at looking calm, but she felt no calmer on the inside. She imagined the plate beneath her arm grown massive and unwieldy, impossibly conspicuous, even under the rag that covered it. Her ears strained for any sound from behind her…it would be easy for Nazluk to call out and set the others upon her…but she knew that he was following, Leni in tow, to see where the plate had come from.

None of the others spoke to her or seemed to give any notice as she approached the band’s assorted baggage. After all, she was sent to fetch things all the time. She knelt down beside one of the packs, quickly unfastening and drawing back the flap. Resisting the urge to look around, she shifted the object she carried out from under her arm and slid it inside. Once she had closed it again she remained crouching for a moment, knowing that Nazluk’s eyes were on her. Then she stood up, looking back at him defiantly.

The others might not have noticed her, but they had certainly noticed Nazluk, coming back with his arm locked around Leni. “Here Naz, that’s more friendly than you usually are with Squeaker. Had a bit of fun then, eh?”

Nazluk’s mouth curled in a sneer as he pulled away from her. “She has her uses from time to time, I suppose.” For all that such a dalliance was out of character for him, the satisfaction on his face was
convincing enough. And why shouldn’t he be pleased? He had seen which pack the girl had opened. He knew exactly who it belonged to, and his mind was already playing with the possibilities.

Leni, for her part, looked distressed. If she could have gone to Maevyn immediately she would have done so. But with both girls back the others quickly found their own uses for them. Grymawk’s leg needed re-bandaging. Pysrurk could not find his whetstone. Had they dug a jakes yet? Why hadn’t they said so, then, and where in Gorthaur’s name was it? It was close to evening now: there was meat to be cooked, hungry Orcs demanding food, and it was some time before Leni could snatch a moment with Maevyn.

“Why did you do that?” she whispered during a lull in their work. “That was not Grymawk’s pack!”

Maevyn rolled her eyes at her. “You think I don’t know that, huh?”

“It was foolish of you. Grushak will be furious. Have you moved it yet? You should do so while you have the chance.”

“What for? He won’t know that I’m the one who put it there.”

“He will if Nazluk tells him you did.”

“Sha. You think Nazluk’s gonna do that? He’s up to something funny himself, isn’t he, or he would’ve told the others that I had it. Why should he care where I got it from, anyway?”

“They are not supposed to keep treasures for themselves! They are supposed to pass the most valuable things to Bragdagash. Now Nazluk thinks that Grushak is holding it back…”

Someone called for another skin of Orc draught and Leni darted away, leaving Maevyn to ponder this. She felt doubly glad now that she hadn’t put the plate in Grymawk’s pack, at least not while Nazluk was watching. At the same time, she knew it was a dangerous game that she played, one that was only going to get her in trouble. As cavalier as she had pretended to be with Leni, a cold sick feeling filled her gut.

So I will move it, she told herself. As soon as I get the chance…

But when she looked in Grushak’s pack later, the plate was gone.

Chapter End Notes

_Bagronk garmogug._ “Digging a cesspit.”

_Lat ha gujab-lat._ “You eat your own tongue.” Nazluk doesn’t much care for Maevyn’s glottal approach to Orkish.
The forest was old, and thickly wooded. There are not many woodland spaces wholly untouched by Men, that have not known their footsteps, their voices, the thud of a falling axe, but if this forest held such memories, they seemed to belong to another Age. The trees grew in close proximity to one another, their branches intertwining to form a canopy through which no light could penetrate. Even those along the timber line grew in this way, and the dense matting of their heavy boughs cast a pall on the earth below.

"You see something I don't, boss?"

Thumb brushing over the pommel of his sword, Bragdagash did not look at Grushak but jerked his head at the dark wall of trees bounding the forest's edge. "What do you think of that, then?"

"Don't like 'em. But they seem to be minding their own business."

Bragdagash did not crack a smile. “Anyone complaining for want of shade?”

“Ah, you'll never lack for complaints if you go looking for them. But if you’re asking whether the snaga Orcs want in there, it’ll be some time before you hear words to that effect. You’re not the only one with tree sense.”

It did not take great wisdom to see there was something off about the place. The growth at the edge of most forests was generally more diffuse. The way these trees hedged together, they resembled the wooden stakes of a village palisade.

“Spaces enough to go through,” muttered Bragdagash. “But I wouldn’t count on getting out again so easy.”

Grushak turned toward him with an air of exaggerated surprise. “And you’re planning to go in there, are you?”

That, at any rate, got a laugh out of the big Uruk. “No, can’t say that I am.”

“Then unless you’re expecting company now – ”

Snorting, Bragdagash wheeled and cut in front of his subordinate as he started back for camp. Grushak chuckled as he followed suit, though his amusement was tempered by the warm sun as it struck the left side of his face and neck. Flinching a little, he swatted at his shoulder as if at the attentions of a noxious insect.

As they walked back a number of black birds flew up out of the grass. “Big crows,” said Grushak.

“They’re not crows.”

“Ravens, then?” He had seen one earlier, while he was taking his morning shit. Trousers down around his boots, light of an un-risen sun staining the sky, and the sudden, unnerving sensation of something watching him. That something turned out to be a very large black bird in the grass nearby, just a few yards off. It kept watching until he shied a loose clump of dirt at it and it turned its back on him, flapping off across the long green grass.
He remembered again the span of its wide black wings. Certainly big enough to be a raven. But Bragdagash was shaking his head.

“They’re crebain. ‘Dunland squabs,’ we used to call them under the Hand. The wizard commanded great numbers of them during the War.”

“Huh. We’re not in Dunland, though.”

“Who’d want to be in Dunland?”

Grushak couldn’t argue with this. “Are they intelligent? I heard that they were used for spying.”

“I suppose they are, as birds go anyway. Some of them even talked. But I don’t recall that they were ever very sociable.”

Camp was on the northeast periphery of the forest, tucked back beneath the shade of a few outlying trees: enough to provide some protection to the snaga, but not as much as Bragdagash had expected. When the sun first rose it had shown in upon them, and the smaller Orcs had awoken with noises of annoyance and scattered to find other dozing arrangements, with the obvious exception of Grymawk, who was in no shape to shift himself. Someone had applied a crude solution by dragging him behind one of the trees and then piling up some packs as a makeshift sunbreaker. Bragdagash made a detour to give the sick goblin another once-over.

Grushak, who already knew that Grymawk looked like crap and felt no need to reconfirm it, ambled in the direction of last night’s fire and the lone Uruk seated beside it. “Hoi.”

Hrahragh was chewing something unknowable and looking out across the grass. His ear flicked and he turned toward Grushak, offering a muffled greeting around his mouthful. “Find a copse?” he asked as he swallowed.

“Nar. We didn’t go far, though. It’s not very friendly in these parts.” Grushak squinted against the light. “Where is everyone?” It made sense for the other snaga to relocate, but Mushog and Kurbag had still been here not that long ago. He could smell them.

Hrahragh shrugged.

“Not too far, I should think,” said Bragdagash as he joined them. “Still, I don’t like faces unaccounted for just now. Feel like doing some tracking, Hrahragh?” The Uruk looked absurdly pleased as he got up, to Grushak’s amusement. Hrahragh always did enjoy a bit of scout work. He was welcome to it: Grushak was just as glad to relax for a time.

Bragdagash looked at him, and though he did not exactly smile, his broad mouth quirked in a way that suggested he knew what Grushak was thinking. “If you’re up for breakfast, fetch something for me too.”

“There’s a jug of ale from that village,” said Grushak. He headed for Grymawk’s tree and the packs mounded on either side, intending to find some of that ham from the raid a few days before as well. He’d had some of it last night and it was still good – all the better for waiting a day or so. A few swallows of that ale would be just the thing to wash it down. That would be a breakfast to satisfy any palate.

As he hunkered over the packs, pulling out the ones that looked or smelled like they contained foodstuffs, Grushak absently noticed the hitch to Grymawk’s breathing. It didn’t sound good, but Grushak figured this was due to the awkward angle that Grymawk was propped at rather than anything more sinister. He supposed that he might spare half a moment to position the goblin more
comfortably, but he was hungry and thirsty just now, and Grymawk could wait. After all, it wasn’t like he was going anywhere.

“Looking for something, hmm?”

Grushak twitched but otherwise contained his reaction. It wasn’t often that Nazluk actually managed to startle him, and he didn’t want the other Orc to feel smug. When he looked up he found Nazluk standing a good few meters away. Nothing like as close as he had sounded just then. “Ai, Nazluk. Like a snake you are. Where did you come from, anyway?” Nazluk didn’t respond immediately, and Grushak, who wasn’t really interested in an answer, went back to looking through the communal packs. “I’m scrounging here. If you want something, say so.”

“Oh, no need to put yourself out on my account, I already ate.”

Grushak rolled his eyes at Nazluk’s annoying voice, then cheered up as he noticed a promising sack sticking out from under the others.

Nazluk drifted over, looking down at Grymawk. “My, but he does look wretched, doesn’t he.” He stooped and took perfunctory hold of Grymawk’s ankles, tugging the goblin backward. Grymawk whimpered, his already closed eyes squeezing tighter shut. “No whining,” crooned Nazluk. He gave Grymawk’s leg a pinch.

“His wound don’t smell bad, anyway,” said Grushak absently. “Be stinking pretty bad by now if he got something really nasty.”

“Mm.” Nazluk propped a spare pack behind Grymawk’s shoulders and crouched back, studying his handiwork. “So it kills him in ten days rather than three, yes? I suppose, if we have the time to spare.” He patted the goblin’s knee.

“I doubt Braggy’d keep us waiting around if he figured that.”

“But of course not. Our Bragdagash is an Uruk with sense, isn’t he? Certainly not somebody that any one of us would want to put out.”

Grushak made a noncommittal noise. He was only half listening to the other Orc at this point. He had found the side of ham that he was looking for, but he wondered if it didn’t smell iffy. Hard to tell for certain. There was honey baked into the rind and it was messing with his nose.

“…but then again, you’re both generally well attuned to one another, or that’s the impression I’ve always had. So that sort of thing isn’t really a problem for you, is it.”

“Hmm?”

“You and Bragdagash. Just that you get along so well, yes?”

Grushak turned his head and looked, really looked this time, at Nazluk. Nazluk’s expression was bland, but his eyes were unblinking and completely fixed on Grushak’s. Grushak’s eyes narrowed in return. “Are you trying to say something to me, or are you asking me something?” As he put the question, Grushak was less annoyed than he was bemused. Who but Nazluk had the energy to shit-stir this early in the morning?

“Only an observation,” said Nazluk, shrugging.

“Right.” Grushak stared at him. “Well, if you have other observations about me and Bragdagash, maybe you would like to take them up with him. I’m sure he would be fascinated to hear them.”
Nazluk smiled and took a step back, putting up his hands slowly before he turned away. Grushak stood and watched him go.

-.-.-.

“What do you mean, ‘It was gone’?”

“I mean that it’s not there! What did you think I meant?” Maevyn looked over her shoulder quickly, but they were by themselves. The only sounds to be heard were the droning of insects and the occasional call of a bird. She had pursued the Elf girl to a place beneath the forest eaves, well beyond the camp that Bragdagash had appointed, and there was no one else around to hear them.

Leni was staring at her in a kind of horrified silence, but Maevyn could see that her mind was working quickly, looking for some explanation behind this awful discovery. She was not long in coming up with one. “It must have been Grushak. It is his pack, after all. He probably opened it to get something and found it there.”

“I don’t think so. He hasn’t said nothing, and he isn’t acting any different.”

“Nazluk, then? He saw where you put it.”

Maevyn shook her head. “He keeps saying things at Grushak. Funny things. Like he’s talking at him about it, only sideways.”

“He probably still took it, though,” Leni persisted. “That could just be his way of taunting Grushak.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure! He acts like it’s still in Grushak’s pack.”

“Well, if it was not them, and it was not you, then who else could have taken it?”

Maevyn averted her eyes slightly. “I thought you might’ve done, at first. To keep me from getting in trouble.”

“Me? I did not have the chance! And anyhow, do you think that I would not have told you?” asked Leni with some surprise.

 “…I thought you wanted to scare me. To teach me a lesson,” Maevyn muttered.

Surprise gave way to indignation. “Well, if you still think that, you can stop right now. I would never do something like that to you! What do you take me for, anyway?”

“I said I only thought it at first. I know you’re not like that, Leni! It’s just that, well, you’re the only one besides Nazluk who saw what I did, and I didn’t…”

Leni waited briefly before prompting her. “What?”

Maevyn swallowed hard. “I didn’t know what else to think.”

She was not looking at Eleluleniel. She is afraid, thought the Elf. And she should be. “When did you realize?”

“Last night.”

“And you have said nothing all this while?” Maevyn made no reply, leaving it to Eleluleniel to speak for her: “No, you would not, would you. You thought that you would be able to find it again on your own. I suppose you looked through Nazluk’s things in search of it.”
“Would’ve…but I haven’t been able to get near to his packs. He keeps staying around them all the time! ’Cept when he doesn’t, and even then there’s always one of the others around. I can’t even get near enough to look. I was – I was thinking maybe, if you could distract him…or if I could…then maybe one of us…”

All the while she had been looking in any direction but at Leni. Now she dared a glance at the older girl, only to find her frowning. “And what would we do if we found it?”

“Take it back.”

“And do what? Put it in Grymawk’s pack again? Do you think that Nazluk would not notice it missing in turn? Do you really think he would not realize that you or I had taken it?”

She was right, and Maevyn knew it. Still, what other choice was there? She couldn’t just do nothing. Lifting up her chin, she answered back, “Doesn’t matter what I think. I have to find it. If I know where it is, I can figure out what comes after that on my own. You don’t have to help me if you’re scared. I’ll do it by myself.” There was a false bravado in her voice that did not fool either of them.

Leni sighed. “Maevyn. Of course I will try to help you, but I will not help you to do something foolish – at least, no more foolish than can be helped.” Her gaze shifted, and then she looked back at Maevyn. “Someone is coming,” she said. “We will speak more about this later, you and me. Let us go back to what we were doing.”

It was Hrahragh who found them that way shortly thereafter, foraging in the shade of the outermost trees. He made no comment on how little they had gathered for all the time that they had spent. Possibly he did not notice in the first place. Hrahragh was observant, but he had about as much interest in mushrooms and berries as the next Orc, which was to say none whatsoever. “Come back to the fire,” he told them shortly. “Bragdagash says so.”

Looking at each other, the two girls did as they were told.

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It took Hrahragh about ten minutes altogether to sniff out the rest of them. The snaga Orcs wandered back with squinting eyes and long-suffering resignation on their faces. Mushog and Kurbag, by contrast, returned jubilant. They had found deer spoor and were full of schemes for tracking and slaying.

Bragdagash looked at them skeptically. “And you’ll kill it how?” he asked. “By making ugly faces at it?”

Grushak coughed on his ale.

“We’re down an archer, you may recall,” their chief went on.

“Don’t need an archer when you have me,” Mushog said airily. “I’ve managed to get the drop on a deer before. It had horns out to here…” He held his hands an exaggerated distance apart.

“Was this a deer or an elk?” asked Nazluk. He was rolling his eyes.

“I’ve heard this story,” remarked Rukshash, “and as I recall, it did not end well for you.”

“The branch swayed,” said Mushog, “and it threw my angle off. Only by a little, though. And I did kill the deer.”
“Didn’t you also pop a nut?” asked Shrah’rar.

Mushog grinned. “I kept the good one,” he said.

“Normally I would say that it’s your business if you want to risk the other one,” said Bragdagash, “but I don’t want any of you fucking around in the woods. The last thing we need is to stir something up against us. Certainly the snaga won’t thank you if we have to camp any further from the edge of the forest than this.”

The smaller Orcs made noises of assent. Although they did not like the feel of the local trees any more than Bragdagash did, the forest was the only real source of shade to be had.

“So, no tree climbing,” said Bragdagash. “And dry fires only – no green wood. And if you have to go any deeper into the forest than these outermost trees… Well! No green wood, so you won’t have any reason to, will you?”

“So basically it amounts to another day of sitting on our hands,” muttered Kurbag, exchanging a look with Mushog.

Rukshash glanced at Kurbag. “Here now, as I see it, my lad, you have precious little cause for complaint. You’ve always got that pretty golug of yours if you’re really strapped for something to do. Myself, I’m going to carve some new dice to replace the ones that this sorry shit – “ indicating Pryszrim, “ – managed to throw away yesterday.”

“I heard a noise,” protested Pryszrim, who had already explained this several times before.

“They were my dice,” said Rukshash pointedly. “The next time something spooks you, you can bloody well chuck something of your own.”

“So! Has everyone got something to do?” asked Bragdagash sharply, before there could be any further tangents. Several responses, both affirming and in the negative, ensued. “Then find something,” he told them.

As the little group began to disband, Squeaker and the Brat, who had been sitting on the outskirts, got up as well. “Hi! Girl! Where do you think you’re going?” Bragdagash snapped. The Elf girl stopped and looked at him. “Not you. I’m talking to the Brat. Get over here.”

Reluctantly the Man-child approached him. There was a furtiveness about her that might have struck Bragdagash as out of character, if he’d been paying attention, but Bragdagash had something else on his mind. “Didn’t Rukshash tell you to stick close by Grymawk?”

She looked at Rukshash, who was standing near to her, then back at the Uruk. “…yes?” she said. Hesitating: “But… He didn’t say all of the…”

Bragdagash growled, and Rukshash leaned forward, poking the girl’s arm. “I’d suggest you go stick with ’im,” the old Orc said.

Maevyn sat with her arms around her knees, watching Grymawk with half-lidded eyes. Although she felt sorry for him, pity was somewhat tempered by several days of tending to the goblin, and a growing resentment about how she was having to spend her time. Outside of changing Grymawk’s bandages or coaxing him up long enough to steer him over to a tree whenever prudent, there wasn’t really much for her to do.
If Leni had been there she could have talked to her, at least. She needed to talk to Leni. She had counted on being able to continue the conversation they were having before, but Bragdagash had wrecked that plan, and Leni had not stuck around afterward. Small wonder after what Rukshash had said to Kurbag, but it was still very inconvenient for Maevyn. Reluctant as she had been to tell Leni about the plate, she had still hoped that telling the older girl what happened would ease some of her anxiety. That relief had been a little one, and short-lived. Now, trapped with Grymawk, she only felt more keyed up than ever, separated from the only ear she could actually confide in.

It was while she was brooding in this fashion that Shrah’rar turned up. “Ai, you stupid tark,” he greeted her. “Why did you and the golug dig so far off, eh? I just had to crap beneath a fucking noonday sun!”

“’S’not noon yet,” said Maevyn flatly. “And you could’ve gone in the woods.”

He shuddered. “More than my skin’s worth, thanks. I’d rather face a little sun than go in there.”

“Why? What’s in there?” Maevyn had listened to Bragdagash’s instructions earlier with some puzzlement. She had noticed the Orcs’ general reluctance to penetrate beyond the outermost trees of the great forest, and it was a reluctance that she shared, but she couldn’t think of any reason for it. The trees, to her eyes, were like any other trees, the dark places beneath them no darker than those in the woods where her brother and she had used to play. And yet the thought of entering there made her apprehensive even now, in daylight.

Shrah’rar looked at her oddly. “Don’t tell me you can’t feel it. I know Men can’t see or smell for shit, but you’ll never tell me you can’t feel it.”

Maevyn wasn’t denying anything. “But what is it, though?”

“Who knows? I just don’t go into a place that makes me feel like that, is all. I pay attention to my instincts.”

Maevyn turned her face in the direction of the trees and frowned. If she was going to be afraid of something, she would much rather know what it was that she was afraid of.

She said as much, and Shrah’rar gave her a bemused stare. “Of course, if you want to go see what it is then you can just go right ahead…”

“But I’m s’posed to be watching Grymawk.”

“Oh I’ll watch him if that’s what’s stopping you.”

She shook her head.

Shrah’rar was smirking at this point. “Well then! Since you like playing ‘Nursey’ so much, I guess you should keep on doing it.”

Annoyed, Maevyn did not respond. She felt at that moment that she could have very cheerfully bitten Shrah’rar if it weren’t for the yucky thought of any part of him in her mouth. She wished that he would go away, but Shrah’rar, who neither knew nor cared what Maevyn was thinking about him at that moment, only began pawing through the communal packs. Unfortunately for her, it didn’t look like he would be leaving any time soon.

As Maevyn watched him, she thought again about the missing plate. Forced to keep her vigil over Grymawk, she knew, she had the opportunity and the perfect excuse to go through those same packs. If anyone challenged her, she could just explain that she was trying to find something for
Grymawk: bandages or ointment or the like. That wasn’t guaranteed to help her if she was caught rifling through someone’s own personal things, but she could always say it was by accident.

Unless it was Nazluk who caught her. If he had taken the plate, he would certainly know that she was looking for it, and even if he wasn’t the one who had taken it, he would probably still be suspicious anyway. That was how Nazluk was.

“Why’re you looking at me?”

Maevyn blinked and looked at Shrah’rar. “I’m not,” she said.

“Yeah you are.” He had opened up a drinking skin and was sniffing the contents.

“Well I wasn’t looking at you,” she said. “I was just thinking.” Her nose wrinkled as she spoke. She could smell the strong draught all the way from where she was sitting.

“Hmm.” Taking a swig, Shrah’rar shuddered pleasantly, then gave a short laugh. “Don’t think too hard, or your brains will fall out.”

“You’re one to talk,” said Rukshash as he ambled over. “You have barely any brains to speak of.”

“Ha ha,” said Shrah’rar.

“Is that draught? Here, give us a suck of that.” Shrah’rar passed the drinking skin to him and Rukshash took a few swallows, then wandered over by Maevyn, looking down at Grymawk.

“Well,” said the old goblin thoughtfully, and Maevyn gritted her teeth as he planted a hand unceremoniously on her shoulder, supporting himself as he got down into a squat. “Well, well, well…”

“Well what?” demanded Maevyn, bearing Rukshash’s weight with some discomfort.

Rukshash chuckled. “By ‘well,’ I mean he’s looking well, ain’t he?”

“You’re joking, right?” said Shrah’rar.

“Nar I ain’t. Look at his skin – the skin on his face and neck. See how it’s darkened? He’s got a bit of color back in his face now. I didn’t like how pale he was last night. And feel how his brow is?” Rukshash ran the back of his hand over Grymawk’s forehead. “Warm and dry. Here, Brat, you changed his bandages this morning. How’d it look?”

“Crusty,” said Maevyn, making a face.

Rukshash pursed his lips. “Well, I guess I can’t expect better from you. You’re ignorant.” He grunted and pushed off of Maevyn’s shoulder as he stood up again. “But trust me, it’s an improvement.”

“But he just keeps sleeping. And he peed himself this morning,” said Maevyn. She really had not been thrilled about that last part.

“Well peeing himself ain’t good, but it’s more of an inconvenience to you than a harm to him,” Rukshash shrugged, easily dismissing the girl’s discomfort. “But the sleeping, that is all to the good. That’s just what he needs right now. He wasn’t getting real proper restful sleep to start with, because he was feeling so poorly.”

“So you really think he’s improving?” Shrah’rar had come over now and was looking down at
Grymawk. “Huh. Have you told Braggy that, then?”

“Eh…” Rukshash pursed his lips again. “I’ve thought it before, but this is the first I’ve really been sure enough to say as much. I still want to watch him a while, make sure he don’t start scratching his stitches or other foolishness now that he’s feeling better. And he’s still going to need the time to get more kip and build up his strength. But he does look better, though.” He glanced at Maevyn. “Not that that means you can just go skipping off to play with your little Elf friend. You saw how Bragdagash was. No, you stay here for now: keep his mind easier on the matter.”

“I wasn’t going to skip,” said Maevyn, glaring.

“Oh yeah you were, into the woods and all of that,” scoffed Shrah’rar. Jabbing his thumb at her as he addressed Rukshash: “Hear this one talk, she thinks she can take on an entire forest.”

“I do not!” she said, indignant.

“Is that so, eh?” Rukshash looked Maevyn up and down. “Child, I have stories that would make your hair curl about little fools going off to play in strange forests and the nasty things that happen to them.” He cast an eye toward to the silent trees. “Well, but those can keep. Come on then, girl. You too, Shrah’rar. I need warm bodies to help me test these dice, and you two are the closest I can find.”

When Bragdagash called Maevyn back, Eleluleniel thought at first of remaining with her while she kept her watch over Grymawk, but several considerations made her decide otherwise. Rukshash’s cruel comment, for one. If Kurbag’s boredom led his thoughts down that road, there was not much she could do about it. That did not mean she intended to make herself easy for him to find.

For another, she needed some space to think about this business of the missing plate. Although she was trying not to focus on that part of it too much, she couldn’t help being annoyed with Maevyn for getting herself into such a situation. And for taking so long to tell her!

Though it probably made no great difference in the scheme of things, she admitted to herself. It was not likely that there was anything either of them could have done if Maevyn had told her the night before. More likely they would only have spent the night fretting over it together. Poor Maevyn. Eleluleniel could only imagine how anxious she must have been, keeping it secret all the while. She suspected that Maevyn’s furtiveness, annoying as it was, had ultimately saved herself a peaceful night’s sleep. That was something Eleluleniel no longer took for granted.

She was wearing the pack with the eagle eggs on her back. Straightening as she pulled up a fresh green shoot, she felt the rounded bulge of one against her spine, and wondered to herself how big the eaglets inside them were. When the time was going to come for them to hatch, and how big they were going to be when that happened. Eleluleniel wondered, not for the first time, how she was going to know when that time had come, and just what she was supposed to do. Some birds, she knew, had a sort of tiny tooth that they were born with, which they used to break through the shells that cradled them. But the memory came to her of what Nevhithien, her scholarly older sister, had told her once about eagles and their offspring.

“The parents of great eagles are very wise,” Nevhithien announced, lifting her head to address Eleluleniel from where she curled, bent near double, in her beloved window seat.

Eleluleniel looked up with interest from the long line of lambe flowing from her pen. She was still
learning her Tengwar at the time and had mastered her primary letters, but the irregular letters gave her trouble. Lambe, at least, was easy, because there were so many in her name. (Too many, her other sister Alageth would sniff, but Nevhithien had said to ignore her.) “Great eagles are intelligent anyway, from what I have heard,” she ventured, though she knew there must be more to it than that.

“Yes, but this is very clever,” Nevhithien assured her. “When the time comes for an eaglet to leave its egg, the shell is too thick for it to break out by itself, so the mother or father eagle will hatch it by breaking the shell from outside instead.”

“How do they know to do that, the parents? I mean, how do they know when it is time?”

Nevhithien scanned the tome that she was reading. “It does not say here. I expect that they can hear the baby eagle moving inside, or perhaps they can intuit it some other way, through smell, or by the grace of Ilúvatar… You see how much more intelligent great eagles are than a regular eagle, though, or other kinds of birds. Among other birds, the little chicks must force their way out on their own, and this is called “pipping.” The parents brood their eggs and keep them warm, but when the time comes for the babies to make their way out, their parents are no help at all.”

Eleluleniel nodded, thinking about this. “Great eagles are very clever,” she agreed. “What if the mother or father is not there to help, though?”

Nevhithien looked at her book, then looked up at her sister again. “It does not say. Since the shell is too thick for the baby eagle to pip by itself... I suppose, if the mother and father are not there, that it does not.” She was frowning as she said it.

Eleluleniel did not like it either. The image of the baby eagle cradled in its death-egg was disturbing. “That is a cruel sort of death.”

“It is not unlike the newborn babes of Elves, though, or of Men. We are so weak in the beginning compared to other living things. Colts and calves and newborn fawns may walk within an hour of their birth, but when we are first born we are wholly reliant on our parents. Maybe it is some sort of concession that must be made. Maybe, to reach a greater wisdom or awareness, it is needful that we start from greater vulnerability.”

Eleluleniel recognized the self-conscious and slightly elevated tone her sister employed when she was philosophizing. Eleluleniel admired Nevhithien very much, but she did not like this kind of abstraction applied to living things. “It is good that the great eagles are wise, but it is still sad that their babies should be so helpless.”

Nevhithien nodded reluctantly. “I think you are right. It is a fine thing to be a great eagle and wise, but there are times when it is kinder to be a beast.”

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It was not the first time that Eleluleniel had thought on this exchange. As motherly as she might try to be in her care for the unborns that Bragdagash had charged her with, they were not her kind. She was neither an Eagle nor a mother, and she was subject to the limits of a knowledge that she knew was small. What had she ever known or thought of great eagles in her old life, beyond their presence in history and lore and song, and one abstruse conversation with her sister years before?

Rukshash claimed to know that the eaglets lived behind the placid exterior of their shells. Rukshash was vulgar and cruel, but this was a wisdom that she could not claim herself. She hoped that the old Orc was right, and that he also had the wisdom to know what they must do later, when the time came for the eaglets to be born.
“Look, she came through this way!”

The Elf girl blinked and pulled closer to the trees. It was easy to recognize Mushog’s gloating voice. That was bad enough, but then she heard Kurbag after his and blanched. Had the two of them come looking for her together? Kurbag was careless enough of her wellbeing, but he still generally sought her out on a solitary basis. More than that: she knew he was still cross with Mushog for his manhandling the other night. It was out of character for Kurbag to seek her in purposeful company with the Uruk.

“…how do you gather that, friend? I can’t make out a whiff of her.”

“You oaf! Can’t you use your nose?” Mushog jeered at him. “In fact, fuck that, you don’t even have to smell: it’s obvious enough she pissed on the grass there, right? Can’t you see the stain she left on the blades? Made a regular stream.”

Eleluleniel’s fingers, squeezing painfully tight around the straps of the pack where they pressed against her shoulders, relaxed a little. She almost wanted to laugh at this crude evidence that they weren’t talking about her. She restrained herself, but she still couldn’t help some degree of amusement as she listened to what they were saying.

“Why are you so certain it’s a she, anyway?”

“Pff. That’s easy enough. You saw those prints before same as I did, right?”

“Yeah, and?”

“And! the stagger is too small for a buck. Most bucks are going to be wider-chested than a doe, right? Puts a wider space between the hoof tracks on either side. The wider the stagger, the bigger the buck.”

Skeptically: “Yeah? So what if it’s a buck that isn’t fully grown, then?”

“Well that’s – fuck you. I’d be able to tell if it wasn’t summer, right? If it was snow, we could make out the color of her piss. Bucks piss darker than does do.”

“Right. Well, you would know, I suppose.”

“Yes I would! This is knowledge I came by very dearly.”

Kurbag snorted.

Eleluleniel allowed herself a glance from behind the tree she had edged behind. The two Orcs were standing over a patch of grass that looked like any other grass from where she stood, although she had no cause to doubt what Mushog was saying. At least they did not seem aware of her, for all that they were engaged in the business of tracking. Either they were so focused on their deer that they hadn’t noticed any sign of her own movements, or they had and simply did not care. Either way, she was grateful to be overlooked.

“You heard what Bragdagash said, though. Tracking is all well and good, but we’ve no feasible way of killing one just now – not without Grymawk and his bow. I know you don’t really mean to do that tree thing again. Even you can’t be that stupid.”

“Ah, but that’s just it, right? Who’s to say that we don’t – Hey. What do you mean, even me?” This signalled the start of a squabble, during which Eleluleniel quietly turned her steps in the other direction, doubling back before her luck ran out and she caught their attention.
Had she lingered another moment, she would have heard Mushog’s clever scheme. She would certainly have passed the word to Maevyn, and Maevyn would have taken measures accordingly, appropriate or otherwise. If she had, it is possible that events might have played out differently.

Chapter End Notes

Mushog and I both owe Wayne A. Laroche (http://www.nyatler-outdoors.com/deer-tracks.html) credit for Mushog’s tracking know-how in this chapter. ‘Shog is wrong about the piss being darker, though, outside of the rutting season. Or so I assume. I am not a hunter, I’m just someone who ran a search for tracking deer piss.
They were playing Yasara, and they were playing it right. So Rukshash said, anyway. He had Maevyn go first on the grounds that if Shrah’rar went he’d just be looking for some way to cheat. The Brat, as Rukshash put it, was a proper blank and wouldn’t know enough to try.

Rukshash’s dice were of carved yellow bone, with little grooves notched in each side, and soot rubbed into them to make the marks easier to see. She took them from him gingerly; when her fingers closed over them she could still feel the heat from the old Orc’s hand.

“Now roll those round a bit, and when you’re ready, throw. Lightly does it, now – no need to take after Prysrim. Just give it a little toss…” She cast the dice on the ground and Rukshash laughed. “Well, look at that. Now count that up. What’s one and six?”

“Seven.”

“Right you are, and the best number you can start with when you’re at this game. Seven’s got the advantage when you’re playing at Yasara.”

“No shit,” said Shrah’rar, rolling his eyes. “Most Orcs I know play this, they don’t roll for it first, they start at seven and then roll from there.”

“That’s the crap version,” said Rukshash sharply. “We’re not playing the crap version, we’re playing Yasara as it was taught me by someone who learned it out of the cradle in Khand.”

The next throw, Maevyn learned, established her Main. “Now with a Main of seven you can’t get a two, a three, or a twelve, or you’ve thrown out. Another seven, or an eleven, and you’d have nicked, which is what you want. But you just rolled a ten, so that’s your Chance.”

Maevyn, confused: “My chance to…?”

“It’s your second number,” said Shrah’rar.

“Shut it, lad. Just one teacher for this, or you’re going to confuse her… It’s your second number. Your Main is seven and your Chance is ten. Now this time if you roll your Main again you’ll lose, but if you roll your Chance, you’ll win.”

“But what if I don’t roll either?” asked Maevyn.

“Then you keep rolling until you get one or the other,” said Rukshash.

“Um…”

“Just roll,” said Shrah’rar.

Maevyn was hard pressed to see the point of all this, but as Rukshash and Shrah’rar watched all she did with great expectation, she continued to roll the dice again and again. When she finally rolled a seven Rukshash pronounced her as having Thrown Out, at which Shrah’rar relieved her of the two dice.

“Now you watch someone who knows what he’s doing,” he said, and he blew into his cupped fist.
and made a great show of rolling the two dice in his hands, first behind his right ear, then behind his left, before casting. “…Aw fuck,” he said.

“He rolled a two,” said Maevyn, looking at Rukshash. “Is that the Main?”

“Not in Yasara it’s not,” said Rukshash with some pleasure as the goblin yielded up the dice to him, along with a few muttered obscenities. “The Main can only be between five and nine inclusive.”

“Meaning five through nine,” translated Shrah’rar crossly.

“And if it’s a two or a three it’s straight out.”

Maevyn wondered where all of these rules came from and what was the point of them. If Shrah’rar, for all his ill grace, weren’t corroborating all that Rukshash said, she’d have thought he was just making it up.

“All right,” said Rukshash. “Now you’ll notice I don’t make a great show of it.” He gave a few jerks of his fist and tossed the dice without ceremony. “Hah, seven!” he cooed, gathering them up again.

“What?  Fuck that, those dice are crooked!” exclaimed Shrah’rar.

“I’m sure you think so,” said Rukshash pleasantly, rocking them in his hand, “and haps I do have crooked dice – Pryszrim didn’t throw those, at any rate. But any gamer worth his salt likes to have a few unloaded, even if it’s for his own solitary pleasure.” Droning a little: “Which you would know if you weren’t just in it for the wagers and you had any love of the game for its own sake, but as it is…”

“Are you going to roll any time soon?!” asked Shrah’rar.

Rukshash grinned and cast. “Oooo…”

“He got a seven again,” announced Maevyn.

“I’m not playing anymore,” grumbled Shrah’rar.

As it happened, though, the three of them were still playing when Kurbag and Mushog turned up. The two larger Orcs were murmuring to each other, but they fell silent when they saw the game in progress.

“Join us, lads?” asked Rukshash amiably.

Kurbag glanced at Mushog in a “now what?” sort of way.

“Not playing for stakes: we’re still teaching this one,” said Shrah’rar, nodding his head at Maevyn.

“So it’s Trounce the Tark, is it? I can definitely get behind that,” said Mushog. Maevyn scowled at him.

“We’re playing Yasara,” said Rukshash.

Mushog made a face. There was enough chance involved in that game to put them all on fairly equal footing, and he didn’t much care for that. Still, if he and Kurbag couldn’t put their scheme into immediate effect just now, he didn’t hate the idea of playing a few games in the meantime. “But let’s
play for stakes,” he said. “It’s boring otherwise.”

“Actually, I’ve not played Yasara myself,” said Kurbag. “You start with seven, right?”

Shrah’rar laughed out loud, and Rukshash looked piqued. “Right,” he said, rolling his eyes a little. “We’ll play a few friendly rounds, no wagers, to bring Kurbag here up to snuff, and then we’ll play for stakes. Sound good?”

“If we’re placing bets, though, I’m getting my gaming board,” said Shrah’rar, getting up. “I’m not placing wagers without an even playing surface.”

“And I’m getting a drink,” said Kurbag, walking away.

“So everyone get up then, why don’t you,” complained Rukshash. Maevyn started to do so and he uttered a strangled obscenity and pulled her down again. She glared at him resentfully, shifting on her backside.

“No fear, old one, I’ll keep you company,” said Mushog, sitting down across from them. He nodded his head toward Grymawk, sleeping some yards away. “So then! How’s the little arse over there, eh? Not dead yet, is he?”

“Rukshash says he’s getting better,” said Maevyn.

“Well that’s good!” said Mushog. “Can’t wait to see his ugly face around the fire again! But he’s not all better just yet, right? Still pretty out of it, ain’t he?”

Rukshash gave Mushog an odd look. “He’ll likely be mostly sleeping for the next day or so, aye.”

“That’s fine!” said Mushog heartily. “Good old Grymawk. Little snaga deserves a bit of rest.”

Kurbag, passing behind him, gave Mushog a sharp poke. The Uruk shut his mouth, but he looked pleased.

As Kurbag sat down, Maevyn inched away from him. It put her closer to Rukshash, but she didn’t care. She did not have much interaction with Kurbag, but she didn’t like him. Whenever he was near her she would think about what he did to Leni, and the knowledge made her flesh crawl.

Kurbag didn’t notice. Taking a suck from his drinking skin, he looked around at the three of them. “Wasn’t there a dice board coming?”

Shrah’rar returned, presenting the board with a flourish, but they still weren’t ready, because then both Kurbag and Shrah’rar knelt forward and set themselves to mashing down the ground in front of them until the board was resting as evenly and flat as possible. “I swear the grass is growing under me,” Rukshash muttered at one point, and then he did not say anything else, but only waited with an expression of long suffering on his dark features. When they had both sat back again, looking pleased with themselves, he coughed. “All finished then, are you?”

They nodded.

“And no one needs to get up, or take a piss, or pour themselves a little drinky-poo?” He looked at each of them around the board.

Various noises were made in the negative.

Rukshash brightened. “All right then, lads. Let’s play.”
Over the next hour, Rukshash’s game of Yasara grew. There was still himself and Shrah’rar, Maevyn, Mushog and Kurbag; now there was also Hrahragh, pleased to find them playing a game that was already familiar to him, and Grushak, whose amusement that they were teaching the Brat dice games knew no bounds. “Well now. You’re getting to be more useful all the time, aren’t you?” he said to her.

Once again Maevyn started to get up and once again Rukshash caught her arm and pulled her right back down again. “Oh no you don’t. Not before I have a chance to win those pebbles you’ve got there.”

Smirking a little, Grushak sat down on the other side of her. On the one hand, he was sitting between her and Kurbag now; on the other hand, Maevyn didn’t think having Grushak next to her was much better. Little as she liked Kurbag, her dislike for Grushak was more personal.

They had fulfilled Mushog’s desire to play for stakes, but rather than tokens or drink, they were using pebbles and twigs. This way they didn’t have to worry about wasting all their coin on a few casual games, nor were they getting drunk off their arses too early in the day. Maevyn was a weak player, but because the game was mainly driven by chance and because Rukshash was actually looking out for her, making sure she took the best actions based on her points, she was not falling behind.

“Only because you’re new at it, though,” he told her. “If you were one of the lads you’d be cut by now.”

“Where’s Braggy?” asked Shrah’rar.

“Boss is chafing with the wait,” said Grushak. “He sent Nazluk into the woods to do a sighting.”

There was a little murmur of surprise at this, so soon after Bragdagash had told them all he didn’t want anyone going into the forest, but they were too focused on the game at hand to start up a conversation about it.

“He picked the right lad for the job,” was all Rukshash said. “A bitter mouthful is Nazluk. Any tree tried to eat that lad would only end up spitting him out again… Fiery breath of Mount Doom, Shrah’rar! You aren’t going to win any prizes for fancy rolling! There, and you see? All that fuss for a ten. Now roll again…”

Shrah’rar laughed with wicked pleasure as he rolled a six and a one. “Fuckin’ finally. I’ve been waiting for this.” The next number he rolled was a nine.

“Chance is nine,” commented Maevyn, who had taken to saying the Main and the Chance out loud regardless of who rolled them, mightily irritating Shrah’rar in the process.

“Quit saying the obvious, I can bloody well see that, can’t I?” His bad temper changed to good humor two rolls later, when he got another nine. “Stakes!” The others grumbled and pushed some of their winnings toward him.

Mushog and Kurbag were sitting on the far side of the board from Rukshash. From time to time, Kurbag glanced at Mushog, who seemed as much into the game as the rest of them, if not more. Kurbag wondered if Mushog had forgotten the plan. If he had, Kurbag would not have especially minded. It was a risky idea and one that likely would have landed them in trouble.

A bright slant of light came through the branches above, as if in answer to Kurbag’s thought. The
sun was higher now and shining through the thinner branches of the edge-lying forest trees. No great hardship for himself or Hrahragh or Mushog, but a considerable inconvenience for the snaga Orcs in their midst. Initial attempts to ignore it faltered when Grushak was put off his throw.

“Bollocks,” he growled, and shielded his eyes. “Why’d you boys pick this spot, anyway? There’s thicker cover elsewhere.”

Maevyn looked over at Grymawk to check that he was still well shaded, and Shrah’rar followed her gaze. “Hi! Let’s set up on Grymawk. He’s not moving, he’d make a great table,” Shrah’rar joked.

Rukshash snorted. “Grymawk is supposed to be resting. And you lot are making too much noise as it is.” (Although he’d been as loud as any of the others, Maevyn thought to herself.) “Best we move the game altogether. Too bad for you, eh?” – ruffling Maevyn’s hair cheerfully with his three-fingered hand. “We’ll have to pick this up again later.”

Grushak chuckled and patted her on the head as well, and Maevyn ducked her head under her arms to avoid him.

“I’m out,” said Mushog loudly. “’S’warmer here, I’d just as soon keep in the sun, win back some of what Kurbag took from me earlier. Hey Kurby! You have your own dice, don’t you?” He threw Kurbag a significant look.

Kurbag wanted to kick him. He couldn’t imagine anyone more transparent than Mushog when he was trying to be inconspicuous. Fortunately no one was paying attention, their focus having shifted to searching out another more comfortable playing space for their game.

In a few minutes they had all cleared out, leaving Mushog and Kurbag to a false start at dice over the bare beaten earth where the gaming board had been before. Shrah’rar, of course, had taken it with him. Kurbag rolled, and as he did he leaned in, speaking low to Mushog. “Don’t look so smug. You’ll never tell me you planned that.”

“Sun had to move some time,” Mushog murmured, smirking.

Kurbag wasn’t buying it. “And even if you did, there’s still someone you haven’t accounted for.”

“Don’t you worry,” said Mushog. “There’s two of us. There’s only one of her.”

Maevyn, meanwhile, was bored again, and a little resentful to have been left behind. Of course she kept telling herself that the game was annoying while it was going on, so it was silly to be disappointed at being alone again. Whatever game Kurbag and Mushog were playing was between the two of them, so for all intents and purposes, it was just her and Grymawk.

She didn’t know, then, whether it got quiet all of a sudden or she just became aware of a quiet that was already there. A prickle ran down her neck, and she turned her head quickly. Kurbag and Mushog were talking, but quietly, much quieter than before, and when she looked at them Mushog looked back at Kurbag, and she realized they’d been watching her.

Kurbag was rolling the dice around in his hand, and she could hear their muffled clicking, but he wasn’t making any move to throw. “Do you…” she heard him say in a low voice.

“Yeah, all right,” said Mushog. He was getting to his feet.

Maevyn tensed, but he walked right past her in the direction of the packs. She relaxed a little, thinking that he was just looking for something to eat or drink. Then he straightened, and she saw that he had picked up Grymawk’s crossbow.
“Well fuck,” said Mushog.

“What is it?”

“It isn’t strung.”

“Why would it be strung when he’s not using it?” asked Kurbag sensibly. Mushog’s response was as brief as it was obscene. “Well, check the packs, then.”

She got hurriedly to her feet as the half-Uruk passed by her to join Mushog in his search. The tree that Grymawk was propped against had a number of packs piled on either side that someone had assembled in a kind of makeshift sunbreaker; it was these that Mushog and Kurbag began to sort through.

Then Kurbag glanced down at Grymawk, and his eyes narrowed. “Hi,” he said, gesturing to Mushog. “Look.”

“Ahhh…good eye.”

Alarmed, Maevyn saw Mushog stoop over Grymawk and slide his hand down the front of the sleeping goblin’s shirt. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

They ignored her. Mushog was slipping a pouch out from under Grymawk’s shirt, lifting the leather thong that went around the goblin’s neck up over his head. Grymawk’s eyes slid back and forth under his gray lids, mouth shaping an inarticulate protest.

“You leave him alone!” said Maevyn.

“Quit your whining, brat, I’m being gentle enough.” Mushog let Grymawk’s head thump back as he pulled the pouch free. “There now. I should have remembered. Right next to the skin. ’Smeant to keep ’em supple.” He looped it around his own neck, shooting Kurbag a rakish look as he did so.

“Very nice,” said Kurbag shortly. “Just be sure you put it back afterward, right?”

Maevyn felt intensely aware of her responsibility. She was supposed to be looking after Grymawk, and here were Mushog and Kurbag, jostling him about while he slept and taking his things and who knew what they were going to do next? “You put that back,” she said. “I’ll tell. You’re gonna get in trouble.”

“Tell who?” said Kurbag. “Who are you going to tell?” They had waited until everyone else was gone and it was only her and Grymawk.

“You’re not telling anyone,” agreed Mushog. “You’re going to stay here and watch Grymawk, like the Chief said. You’ll get in trouble if you leave. Besides, what have you got to tell anyway? We’re not doing anything.”

Maevyn looked at Grymawk’s bow in Mushog’s hands, and Grymawk’s mixed quiver of arrows and crossbolts that Kurbag had picked up in the meantime. She didn’t say anything but she folded her arms across her chest, trying to look authoritative.

“We’re going to bring them back,” said Kurbag.

“Never mind, Kurbag. She’s not going to tell anyone. And if she does, she’ll soon wish she hadn’t. Right?” Mushog took a sudden step toward her and Maevyn took a quick step back. “Haw! That’s right. You just stay here and keep an eye on our little friend; it’s what you’re here for. Come on,
He started toward her again and she stepped reluctantly to one side to avoid being barreled out of the way. This was evidently not enough for Mushog: as he passed her by he gave her a sidelong shove that almost knocked her over.

“Just mind your feet there,” he said, leering. “Ground’s a bit uneven.” The two of them snickered as they left her and Grymawk behind.

Recovering quickly, Maevyn went to Grymawk, checking to make sure that his head hadn’t been hurt when Mushog let it thunk back against the ground. Then she looked up, in the direction that Mushog and Kurbag had gone.

Mushog was right. Bragdagash had wanted her to stay with Grymawk. At the same time, she couldn’t help but think of Rukshash’s voice in her head:

*Think Bragdagash will thank you for costing us our only archer?*

How happy would Bragdagash be if their only archer got better, just in time for his bow to go missing?

“But it’s not my fault they came and took it. That’s not what I was here for. And I did try to stop them,” she said, facing Grymawk. His face screwed up in what looked more like annoyance than discomfort, and Maevyn wondered, unhappily, how much he might know of what was going on, even while he was supposedly sleeping. She remembered how she used to whisper things into her little brother’s ear when he was sleeping, and how he would tell her his dreams later, and she would find out how the things she said had shown up in his dreams.

They hadn’t got far when Kurbag looked back over his shoulder. “Oi. Mushog.”

Mushog looked back and rolled his eyes. “Oh, what the *fuck*…” Thrusting the crossbow at Kurbag, he turned back in the direction of the tark. He didn’t yell but waved his hands at her, motioning furiously for her to go back. He had no intention of raising a great shout and drawing everyone’s attention to what they were doing.

The girl, following along at a safe distance behind them, had stopped when they did, but she showed no signs of retreat. She folded her arms across her chest and turned her face back toward the forest, then toward Mushog again, in a way that made it obvious. She knew that they didn’t want to be caught any more than she did.

Mushog made an obscene gesture at her and turned back toward Kurbag. “How would you feel about a little target practice?”

Kurbag shrugged. “I don’t want to be the one who explains to Grushak why his pet snaga has holes in her.”

Mushog looked sorely tempted but shook his head. “Fuck it,” he said and took the crossbow back. “If she wants to follow us she can follow us.”

“Makes no difference to me.”

They set off again with the Brat following behind.
Yasara. I nicked the medieval game Hazard and here present it with a different name. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word "hazard" may have originally been derived from the Arabic *yasara*: "he played at dice." Hazard is also the progenitor of craps, which is a simplified variant of the game. Hence Rukshash's snide reference to the "crap version."
They were retracing their trek of days immediately before, south-bound along the eastern perimeter of the forest. This was where Kurbag and Mushog had managed to track the deer smell from earlier, which was very convenient in view of the present venture. Bragdagash had made no bones about the fact that he was restless, eager to break camp and head for the mountains as soon as Grymawk was well enough – but those of course were northbound, in the other direction. Little chance that the chief or any of the others would have cause for coming back this way, which reduced the odds of being found out.

It also upped the likelihood of a successful outing. They were far enough now from camp that their smell and speech should not have already alerted the animals in this area.

There was a little rise, and when they came to the top of it Mushog put a hand on Kurbag’s arm. A doe was grazing at the forest’s edge, and the direction of the breeze was such that it carried her scent toward them and not the other way around. She fed unaware of the two Orcs watching her: the tall Uruk sizing her up down the stock of the crossbow he carried, or the half-Uruk standing beside him.

Mushog grunted, shoulders shifting as he adjusted his aim. Kurbag waited. At length he lowered the weapon and silently put his fingers into the pouch hanging around his neck. Kurbag watched, a bit skeptical, as Mushog strung the crossbow: a complicated business that involved fitting an end of the bowstring to one end of the lathe, then fitting a loop of the second, longer, length of cord over that, before attending to the other side, and finally unstringing the longer cord again.

Kurbag had seen Grymawk do this often enough and the goblin had made it look easy, but with Mushog doing it the whole process seemed much more laborious. “Well that only took about ten minutes,” he commented as Mushog braced the bow against the ground and spanned it, winching the string back until he had it cocked.

Mushog grinned. Raising the weapon, he fitted a bolt in the groove of the crossbow and trained it on the doe, still grazing obliviously beneath the trees. “Gonna send it right up her arse,” he said, taking aim.

There was a click as the bolt was released. The thud as it struck harmlessly in the ground below was not audible from their vantage point, but the deer must have heard something; it shied and bounded for the trees. Kurbag laughed silently while Mushog mouthed a few curses. “Never mind,” said Mushog at last. “I think I can still see her there. Hand me another bolt.” With the bow already strung it didn’t take him as long to prepare this time.

The tark had come closer in the meantime, evidently satisfied that they knew the futility of trying to send her back. The two Orcs ignored her. Crouching down in the long grass, they waited for Mushog’s deer to get up the pluck to reemerge and provide him with a better target. Kurbag only turned toward Maevyn long enough to indicate that she should crouch down as well, bobbing his hand emphatically until she did.

As Maevyn knelt down, she heard a coughing sound in the grass nearby, and saw a big black crow looking at her out of one bright eye. It opened its dark beak, and she was startled by the serrated edges. Not like any crow she’d seen before.
“Gonna get in trouble,” said the bird. It said it in her own voice.

She stared at it for a moment, uncomprehending. Then she heard a thump, and a squeal, followed by Mushog’s jubilant exclamation. When she looked there was no deer, but Kurbag and Mushog had both stood up and were wading through the grass down the hill, talking cheerfully as they went.

Maevyn looked at where she had seen the crow but it wasn’t there anymore.

“Did you see that?” Mushog was saying to Kurbag. “I’m sure that was a heart shot. Second try!”

“Not bad,” said Kurbag. “Is this where you hit her?”

The ground was churned up, and there was blood on the long grass. Mushog knelt to examine it more closely, while Kurbag walked further up to see if he could find the first bolt, the one that had missed, but it had entirely disappeared in the grass. He straightened and looked back. “Hi,” he called to Grushak’s Brat, who had followed them down the slope. “See if you can find that bolt from before.”

Mushog made a dismissive noise. “It’s just the one,” he said.

“Grymawk counts them. He’ll notice if there’s any missing, even if it is just the one.”

“There was a bird,” said the Brat, stopping and pointed up the slope. “It – ” She faltered and looked back in the direction she was pointing.

Mushog straightened and looked at her in annoyance. “Look, you followed us. Go make yourself useful and find that bolt.”

“I didn’t come to help you, I came to get Grymawk’s bow back,” she flared at him.

Mushog hefted the crossbow, looking down at her from his full height. “You can try.”

Kurbag sighed. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he told the tark. “We’re going to bring it back. Don’t make him decide to use it on you in the meantime.”

“Gonna get in trouble.”

It was the girl’s voice, but it had not come from her. Her eyes widened, fixed on something beyond Mushog. The two Orcs turned quickly to find a large black bird on a limb, preening its dull feathers.

“Craban,” said Mushog at length, dismissive.

“That’s uncanny,” said Kurbag, staring.

“You were never at Isengard.” Mushog was unimpressed. “Thicker than flies on shit.” The bird stopped its grooming long enough to give him a cold stare. “We’ve wasted enough time. I’m going in.”

“What, now? You’ll never find it if you go now. You need to give it time to bed down first.”

“Not for a heart shot,” said Mushog. “And if it hasn’t gone to earth yet, what’s that to me? I have a nose, haven’t I?” He started for the trees.

“You’ll get in trouble,” said the craban, but this time it did not speak in the Brat’s voice. It spoke in Mushog’s.
He stopped short.

Bragdagash’s voice this time: "Don't want any of you fucking around in the woods."

Unnerved, Mushog tried to mask his disquiet with an ugly laugh. “Nice trick,” he said sarcastically.

Another bird appeared, flapping silently out of the forest to land on the branch and sidle up next to the first. Something dangled wetly from its beak. “She is ours now,” said the first bird, in a charred black voice. “We have already taken her eyes.

Mushog swore and braced the crossbow against the ground, winching back the string. The two crebain gave him just time enough to load it before they rose up on wings silent as an owl’s, beating leisurely back into the forest. Mushog loosed his bolt without any effect except to see it disappear in the trees. A muffled thwack came from somewhere in the dark beyond.

“Well,” said Kurbag, speaking into the stillness. “That was a waste of time.” Sudden alarm as he saw Mushog raise the crossbow up: “Wait – ”

Mushog flung the weapon down in anger. It didn’t even make a very satisfying sound, hitting the grass with a shuddering rattle.

“For fuck’s sack, Mushog!” Kurbag hurried forward to pick it up, looking it over quickly. It looked intact, which was luck undeserved as far as he was concerned, but he knew that didn’t mean it was undamaged.

“You lost those three arrows too,” said the tark disapprovingly, and Kurbag wondered how she had ever managed to live this long. It was like she had no sense of self-preservation whatsoever.

Mushog turned toward her, murder in his eyes. “You want them?” He started toward her.

Smart enough at least to realize she would not outrun an Uruk over open ground, she cut for the woods, the grass whipping at the ragged skirt of her dress, with Mushog in snarling pursuit. He stopped just short of the trees, screaming after her:

“They’re not arrows, you little shit, THEY’RE BOLTS!”

“All right,” said Kurbag wearily. “All right. Enough is enough.” They had lost three crossbolts, Mushog’s deer and Grushak’s tark, all in the same outing, and it was obvious that there would be no further hunting here. It was time to accept defeat.

The forest was old, and angry, with a bitterness that he did not understand and did not care to. There were no signs of nearby habitation or interference, and the trees themselves looked healthy, but something, sometime, had earned their continuing animosity, and it was this resentment that followed him as he stalked through the plant life.

Nazluk moved with purpose, but the path that he pursued was neither straight nor unbroken. He stopped continuously, searching the canopy overhead with an assessing eye. When he finally found what he was looking for, he approached the massive fir tree with his hands open, palms up like a supplicant. “No biting steel or tinder glow, so in your branches let me go.”

The tree gave an unmistakable twitch.

Nazluk’s hands dropped to rest on his hips. He sneered at little. “Think I want to crawl around your
sorry self? Not by my will, but that of my chief. You want us to leave? Well, so we shall, but I must do this first. Let me up and let me look, and I swear we’ll be gone the sooner for it.”

No response. Around them all was still, and Nazluk, satisfied, stooped to take off his boots. He had not lied. He was not carrying his knives, and as he straightened he felt naked without them. Generally when Nazluk went without a blade he wasn’t wearing anything else either.

Grasping the first branch with his lean hands, the Orc began to work his way upward. He was neither as fast nor as nimble as Grymawk, but he was capable enough, and the tree he was climbing had made no motion to throw him off, or not so far, anyway. With steady effort he cleared the main body of the canopy.

Exposed beneath a sun that was either at its apex or near enough as made no difference, Nazluk pulled the back of his shirt up over his head for a makeshift hood. He did not care if he looked ridiculous. There was no one up here that he cared about impressing, and the sunlight aggravated his exposed skin. Nazluk hoped with all his heart that little runt Grymawk improved soon. He did not want this task devolving to him in future.

Slitting his eyes against the light, he scanned out over the tops of the trees until he had his proper bearings and was facing toward the mountains. He squinted, then nearly lost his hold when he heard a sudden hoarse cough, almost in his ear. “Shaaaa—! Fuckery!” he swore, holding fast and squeezing his eyes shut as tight as they would go.

When he could finally bring himself to open them again, he looked around him, still breathing a little quickly, and saw a great black bird on a branch not far away. It was turning its head to look at him, first from one bright black eye, then the other. Its beak was closed, but Nazluk still had a clear view of the jagged seam on either side.

“So Bragdagash was right about you,” Nazluk growled. “Broshan, zi zog-hai. And who is your master, eh?”

Chapter End Notes

“They’re not arrows, you little shit, they’re BOLTS!” Grymawk carries and uses both crossbolts and arrows, but Mushog is correct. The projectiles he lost were bolts and Maevyn should totally know better.

Broshan, zi zog-hai. “Hail, great black bird.”

Google bird teeth for your choice of bird teeth for the crebain. I waffle between something like what geese and swans have and something more prehistoric, but keep coming back to the former. Unnerving, but not unprecedented.
When she had gone a safe distance, and definitely out of sight of Kurbag and Mushog, Maevyn crouched down, listening. She could hear Mushog’s angry voice yelling after her, then Kurbag’s, and then she didn’t hear anything. She counted ten, and ten again, and when she had done that ten times over, she stood and looked around.

Trees, trees on all sides, in dense forbidding columns. The air felt close. It was not like where she had left Grymawk, where they had played at dice earlier, with sparse tree cover and open bits of ground, the wind and the grass stretching away to a distant skyline. There was no sunlight here, or wind, and precious little undergrowth. The sky was just a memory.

Don’t tell me you can’t feel it. I know Men can’t see or smell for shit, but you’ll never tell me you can’t feel it.

But what is it, though?

Who knows? I just don’t go into a place that makes me feel like that, is all. I pay attention to my instincts.

So much for instincts. She had taken a risk, leaving Grymawk to follow Mushog and Kurbag and get back the stolen crossbow, or at least find some way to make them bring it back, with no kind of plan. Now they would return without her, and it would look twice as bad when she came trailing in after them.

Maevyn plucked at her skirt unhappily. She knew that she was the one who had created the situation she found herself in, and consequences would be no better for her putting them off. Reluctantly she started back in the direction where she had heard their voices coming from. Time enough that they should have moved on by now, but she would keep a wary eye out as she approached the tree line in case Mushog had some plan to jump her.

More likely he and Kurbag were half way back to the camp by now.

She stopped shortly thereafter, squinting ahead, still surrounded by trees. This was the way she had come, she was sure of it, and she should have reached the edge of the forest by now. She was not really alarmed yet, but she was feeling the first twinges of worry. She had not gone in so very deep, not enough to become turned around. There was no reason she should be lost.

A few minutes later she stopped again, swallowing as she looked around her. She might not have started out lost, but she was now.

It was not the first time Maevyn had wandered, frightened and unsure of herself, in a dark wood, but those other times had been at night. She would never have expected to misplace herself like this in the daytime, but perhaps it was not so surprising. It was twilight-dark and gloomy in this forest, wholly defiant of the bright day outside.

She looked up. Somewhere, up over the trees, the sun was shining in a blue sky. If she climbed, she would find daylight again, and maybe get her bearings. The trees in her immediate vicinity grew tall and straight, their bark comparatively smooth, their branches higher up; she needed a tree with lower branches. She set out to look for one, no longer caring whether the direction she went in was straight or not. She had already got turned around at some point, so it didn’t matter which way she went – at least, it wouldn’t until she got high enough to see around her and pick the best way to go.
Then she saw something that changed her plan entirely. Hurrying to one wide black tree trunk, she stood looking up.

It was Grymawk’s crossbolt, the one Mushog had fired third at the two birds.

Two completely contradictory impulses came into her head at the same time. The first was to start climbing the tree. The second was to stand right where she was and use the bolt as a way to orient herself. Planting herself squarely underneath, she turned and faced back the way that the protruding end pointed. That was the direction Mushog had fired it from. That was the way out. She looked for a rock, something she might use to cut a mark directly into the tree itself, but she didn’t see one. Then she found a nice sturdy stick instead. Carefully she scored an arrow mark in the ground beneath the crossbolt, pointing back the way that it had come.

There were no lower branches on this tree. She had actually been about to discount it for that reason when she noticed the crossbolt sticking out of it, rendering the point moot – she was going to get that bolt. She took off her shoes as she had learned to do from Grymawk’s example, and gripped at the trunk with her knees, as well as clinging with her fingers and toes. Hugging tightly with her arms, she walked her feet up the trunk of the tree until her knees were bent under her, pushed up from her toes, and then repeated the process.

It would have been hard to attain the full height of the tree this way, but she didn’t have to do that. She climbed until the bolt, which had been a good ten feet above her head to start with, was almost within arm’s reach. Then a shadow passed over her.

A bird – one of those black craban-birds – landed on the crossbolt where it stuck out from the tree. It mantled, either to steady itself or in a display of protecting its perch. Then it settled, and stared at her.

Maevyn stopped climbing and just clung there. “Go away,” she said at last.

“Go away,” it said right back.

She was not shocked, or not as shocked as she might have been. She had heard them talking before, outside of the forest. “I need that,” she said. “I climbed up this far to get it.”

“Finders keepers,” said the craban in its own harsh rasp.

Maevyn considered it uneasily. She was caught in an awkward position, part way up the tree like this; her arms weren’t free, and the bird was big. Bigger than any crow she had ever seen, and she had never seen a bird with teeth before. That beak was scary. “Why should you want it?” she asked at last.

She gasped as the craban seemed to lose its balance, tipping over backwards. Then she saw that it was no accident as the craban hung there, swinging back and forth, head twisted back sinuously as it eyed her. “If someone wanted it, someone wouldn’t have lost it.”

“It wasn’t his fault!” she protested. “They took it from him. The other ones. He couldn’t – I
couldn’t stop them.”

“If you couldn’t stop them, you aren’t strong enough to keep it.” Maevyn wanted to respond to this but didn’t know how. The craban continued to swing idly upside-down. “I think I’ll stay here. It makes a nice perch.”

“You –” Maevyn broke off in annoyance. *You have a whole forest,* is what she was thinking, but she didn’t say it out loud. Instead she studied the bird closely. It was bigger than a crow, but it was still a good bit smaller than her. She wondered what would happen if she kept climbing.

What happened was the craban gave a loud scream that froze her in mid-movement. Then it let go of the crossbolt and fell a short distance before checking itself, catching at the rough bark with its gnarled feet and clinging like a squirrel, just level with her.

“If you get it out you can have it,” said the craban magnanimously.

Maevyn bit back a retort. Ignoring the bird, she directed her gaze toward the bolt and climbed. She climbed until she was close enough to grasp the protruding end of the bolt and pull. It was well stuck in and wouldn’t budge at all. She yanked on it in dismay.

“Like I said. It makes a nice perch.”

“It has to come out,” she snapped. She wiggled it back and forth. It was difficult, trying to do this without falling out of the tree or breaking the slender shaft. Nonetheless, she kept at it, wiggling and twisting, until she finally felt it move. “There,” she said. Twisting and pulling, she gradually unscrewed it from the tree.

The craban, evidently conceding the loss of its new perch, dropped to land on the ground below.

When she climbed down she found it studying the arrow she had drawn in the dirt. “Clever. You’ll be leaving now, I expect.”

Putting on her shoes, she nodded warily.

“You don’t want the other one, then.”

“...what other one?” she said, but she was already remembering. There had been three: the one that landed in the grass, the one that she had retrieved and the one that actually hit the deer. “Where is it?”

It lowered its head, standing on one foot while it scratched its head with the other. “I can take you to it.”

Maevyn stared. All kinds of warnings were going off in her head. “Why would you do that?”

The craban didn’t answer. It started walking: a seemingly uncharted path across the dark earth, as if it had stopped paying attention to her. As it walked it studied the ground, pausing to peck at a stray stone. Then it hopped and fluttered up onto the exposed bulge of a root, feathers fanning like a cape before they settled again. It turned and cocked its head expectantly.

It looked like a crow and it acted like a crow. But it was too big to be a crow, and it talked, and it had teeth. She didn’t trust it. But she didn’t trust the Orcs, and she was around them all the time. If she found Grymawk’s other bolt, at least it might make some kind of a conciliatory offering when she got back to camp. If she came back with all three, better still.
“Wait,” she told the craban. The stick that she had used before was on the ground. She picked it up, and then she saw, sticking out between two trees, part of a limb that must have fallen from one of them, and she went to it and set to breaking off a bigger stick with her foot. It took some effort, but when she picked it up it felt substantive. The stick for far away, then, and the pointy end of the bolt for close-to.

“All right,” she said. “I’m ready.”

The craban gave a hop and flew a short distance away, then landed and looked back, waiting for her to follow.

She used the stick, at intervals, to make marks. The forest seemed impenetrable, but she had entered it, as had Grymawk’s crossbolt. Now she was going deeper, and as she followed the craban she made the path that would take her out again. The craban did not seem bothered about her stopping. It only waited and watched until she followed, then sailed ahead to land on the ground or in a tree and wait again.

It didn’t take as long as she expected. Mushog had been right when he said it was a heart shot.

She smelled it when they came to it, the scent of blood, and the stench of open bowels, but she did not see it. What she saw in the gloom under the trees was a black, rippling mass. It was making sounds, wet and messy beneath the louder ripping and tearing. Maevyn stared, then realized what she was looking at and gripped her stick tight, willing herself not to be sick.

Something struck her shoulder, making her stagger. The craban’s claws pricked through the material of her clothing and into her skin as it clung to her, beating its wings to retain its balance. It gave a series of loud staccato cries.

Rustle of plumage, and every head rose as the feeding crebain turned in Maevyn’s direction.

-.-.-.

He lay in a sleep broken from time to time by dreams – mostly ugly – or by the vague and unwelcome sensations of the waking world. For a long time he lay in a pool of heat that spread outward from his body, and the air pulsed against his face. Even the ground beneath had felt unseasonably warm, and the weight of his own body pinned him against the earth.

Now his body did not feel hot or heavy. It floated, everything floated…his mind floated too, and he couldn’t be bothered with anything at all.

He came back when something lighted on his chest. He felt a light step, heard a rasping cough. Almost more than he could do at that moment to open his eyelids, to raise his head a bare fraction and see the bird, a big black one, appraise him. He stared at it, unthinking, and it cocked its head, made a hop toward his face.

A stone sailed overhead, narrowly missing the – crow? raven? – which tumbled off anyway with a squawk. He could no longer see it from his limited perspective, but he heard its indignant cry as it flapped away.

“Oi! You go on! He’s not dead yet!” Someone was standing over him, blocking out the light. “…Eh, Grymawk. You all right?”

He blinked upward, trying to find the speaker’s face, but his eyes wouldn’t focus. What was wrong with his eyes? The bird… It had been black and stark, each feather perfectly articulated, coal-black beak and eyes like onyx. The figure that knelt beside him now was little better than a shadow, a
hopeless blur.

Too much work, this seeing business. He closed his eyes.

“Still out of it? That’s fine. I brought it back, so we’re quits now, right? Nothing for you to mind about…nothing at all…”

It wasn’t the first time he’d had this dream: the rough hand fumbling under him, lifting his head up, pulling something over his ears. Mushog’s voice was annoying, but it was going away now, and Grymawk was going too. The floating world called him back, and Grymawk drifted…-

“He saw you. I’m sure his eyes were open just then.”

Mushog laid the smaller Orc’s head back with rather more care than he had done the first time, slipping the pouch down under the material of Grymawk’s shirt. “Nar, he’s still too far gone to know anything. And see? They’re closed now. Reckon he’s asleep again.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Well I can’t be, can I? But it’s no use worrying about it now. We have to make it look like it did before. Come on. Give us his bow.”

“It was leaning here. Like this.”

“…ah. Yes…”

“And the quiver was there…”

Mushog stood up and they both took a step back, Mushog assessing the scene with great satisfaction. “There now. Like nothing happened. Just as it was before.”

“Except for Grushak’s tark,” Kurbag muttered.

“Oh yeah.” He scratched his jaw reflectively. “Shame about her, but she would go wandering into the woods to be eaten and leave poor Grymawk here for carrion… Did you see the size of that craban? Would’ve had his eyes out if I’d not been there! Good job we showed up when we did, eh?” Mushog liked this version of the story as he told it. It put them in a good light, especially him.

But Kurbag was frowning. “Only that’s not how we’re going to tell it, right? Because we never left, supposedly. And if we’d seen her going off and leaving him, we’d have stopped her.”

“Right.” He scowled, forced to revise. “…So she was here and we were here, and then we went to rejoin the others. If someone wonders where the Brat is later, she was here when we left – and if she does get out again and come back in the meantime, well and good. She’ll know to keep quiet if she don’t want my foot up her arse.”

“And if the bird comes back?”

“Oh, there’s no pleasing you…! Anyway, ’s not our problem, is it? It wasn’t us Bragdagash wanted to look after him. Come on, let’s clear out before someone finds us here and the Brat gone.”

There was a bit of luck on the way to finding the others: Kurbag’s Squeaker, going about her usual foraging. She drew up short at the sight of them, and Mushog elbowed Kurbag. “Go on,” he muttered. “Tell her to go join the Brat. That takes care of Grymawk.”
Kurbag stared at Mushog blankly before it clicked, and then he went to the Elf and stood over her. What he said Mushog didn’t hear exactly, but he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder and she nodded and went back the way they had come, giving Mushog a careful berth as she did.

“There,” said Mushog. “As much as we can do. Now we only have to join the others and we’ll be well out of it.”

Better go back, Squeaker. Tark’s asking after you.

It was odd, Kurbag relaying a message to her from Maevyn, but she did not question it – not then. It made sense that Maevyn was anxious. There was still the matter of Grymawk’s vanished plate hanging over her – hanging over both of them, for Eleluleniel knew she could not simply leave Maevyn to face the consequences alone.

Maevyn had wanted to go through Nazluk’s packs. Eleluleniel had pointed out the shortfalls of this plan, but she’d had time to think about it since, and Maevyn was not wrong. If they could check Nazluk’s things safely, without fear of discovery by him or any of the others, at least it might offer confirmation of the plate’s whereabouts, regardless of what they decided to do from there.

When she came to the site of last night’s fire she looked first for Grymawk, expecting to find Maevyn with him. Not seeing her, she paused, then went to where the sick Orc lay by the mounded equipment of the Orc band. Her assumption was that Maevyn had gone to relieve herself, and Maevyn would hardly thank her for coming after her if that was the case.

Grymawk’s brow was furrowed, and Eleluleniel sat down on a bedroll and regarded him thoughtfully while she waited. He must have been restless before – his clothing looked disheveled – but he lay breathing quiet and easy now in what appeared to be a true sleep. It was just herself, then, and somnolent Grymawk, and now was the perfect opportunity to look in the packs. But that would be a foolish thing to do without an accomplice to keep lookout, when any of the band might return at any moment. Better to wait for Maevyn’s return.

But Maevyn did not come back.
Bragdagash stood in the place where he had seen Nazluk off earlier. It was an office he had also done for Grymawk, and Iggrut and Shapat before him: for all of the climbers. He had not gone into the trees himself but had watched the other Orc disappear, and then stood waiting and listening. He felt the approach before he saw or heard it. The brooding heart of the forest seemed to change and shift, and he relaxed his stance and waited until he saw Nazluk emerging once again.

"So you didn't get et," he said by way of a greeting.

"Not this time, no."

"Any joy?"

A smirk hovered on Nazluk's gray features. "I think you're going to like it."

He was, as Grushak would have put it, being Nazluk, which is to say he wasn't hurrying to dish. Under other circumstances Bragdagash might have told him to spit it out already, but good news is fun to hear as well as tell, and there was obviously no urgency or Nazluk wouldn't be faffing about like this. He figured the other Orc had earned the pleasure of telling the thing at his own pace, so he waited while Nazluk put himself to rights.

He had left his blades behind when he entered the forest, care of his chief. Bragdagash watched as he buckled and slipped and stowed them all away. "You really didn't keep any, did you? I'd have kept one at least, if it was me. Just in case."

Nazluk glanced at the trees. "Better to not, in a weird wood like this," he said, jerking his head. "They talk amongst themselves. They know if you're lying."

When he had straightened again, Bragdagash said, "So?"

Thin lips pursed. "Well. You were right about our feathered friends. I had a little meeting, when I was on top of that tree…"

When he had finished, Bragdagash nodded. "And when will that be?"

"There and back again, as the craban flies, with time in the middle to gage interest, so there's no real knowing. Likely as late as tomorrow, since they'll want to keep us in suspense. These creatures do like their games."

Now there was a look-who's-talking statement if ever Bragdagash had heard one. He shrugged. "Well, at least it gives me time to make up a list." Also to reassess their inventory. As chief he had the happy duty of carrying the best of the spoils: precious metals especially, since these were the friendliest items for commerce regardless of who they traded with. Gold and silver were not commodities they ran across in bulk, but as much distance as had been covered at this point they still accumulated, and Bragdagash's back was feeling it. Another reason why he had been so relieved to pass those eggs on to Kurbag’s Squeaker.

Those eggs… Bragdagash had a good feeling about them, now that he had a likely buyer lined up. Trouble enough to care for and worry about, but they wouldn't be his problem for much longer.
Soon he would be able to stop thinking about them altogether.

Back at camp, the others were not by the fire. The only faces they saw were those of Grymawk, and the Elf girl who was sitting near him. Bragdagash frowned, looking around. "Where's the Brat? I told her to watch Grymawk."

"She has only stepped away," said the Elf. "She will be back soon."

He might have opted for pissed. Being in a good mood, he was generous instead. "Well, at least she had the sense to leave you with him. Where are the others?"

As they left, Nazluk turned his head sidelong to stare at her. She was rubbing at the back of her right hand. It was a gesture he had seen her make before.

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Shrah'rar was in the hole. He'd been riding high before, but his luck had taken a different turn since the game's relocation earlier. Now even Kurbag and Mushog were coming out ahead, and they had joined in late – that and Kurbag was a bloody amateur, so where was the logic or the fairness in that?

"You're out, Shrah'rar," rumbled Grushak. "Pay up."

"Oh look," he said, brightening at the sight of a distraction. "Braggy's back with Nazluk."

"Braggy's not going to save you, lad," said Rukshash. "Pay up." He lifted his head, squinting at Nazluk. "So! You weren't eaten, then."

"That's funny," remarked Nazluk. "Of course, it was even funnier when Bragdagash said it."

Rukshash gave a philosophical shrug at not being first.

"I have an announcement," said Bragdagash sharply, his tone cutting through any other chatter. "If you're not too busy, you might do well to listen." All ears perked up as they gave him their undivided attention. "I'm going to be taking stock tonight, see what we need in the way of gear and supplies. If there's something you're missing, something you need, or something you want repaired or replaced, let me know. I don't want no one bitching about it later."

"More beer," said Mushog – a split second after Kurbag, so that they overlapped. There was some laughter at this.

"That was a productive jaunt," said Grushak, looking at Nazluk. "Met someone in the woods, did you?"

Nazluk gave a closemouthed smile but said nothing.

"You remember our conversation about crebain earlier?" Bragdagash asked. "Turns out the ones around here are the talking variety." In a louder voice: "WHICH, being the case, a word to the rest of you! Don't say nothing you don't want to embarrass you later. There seem to be quite a few of them around here, and they are notorious mimics."

Kurbag and Mushog exchanged a look at this, and Hrahragh murmured something to Rukshash, who explained that crebain were those big black birds they had been seeing all around the place, and also explained a little something of their nature and the part they had played in the War. Hrahragh nodded. He thought that crebain must not be frequent visitors in the lands he came from, but perhaps he had seen them in the past and taken them for common crows. At any rate, his southern speech
made no distinction between crows and very large crows that talked and spied on people.

"That reminds me," began Shrah'rar, "of a story…"

He was drowned out by the catcalls of his fellow gamers.

"Putting it off," said Hrahragh disgustedly.

"You're delaying, Sheep-shagger," Mushog accused him. "Cough up the pebbles!"

Rukshash was shaking his head. "Sticks and stones, Shrah'rar. You should just be glad we aren't playing for real stakes, you'd be wiped out completely.

"But it ain't just pebbles!" explained Shrah'rar. "There's my self-respect to think about as well. How am I s'posed to keep that when I've lost everything else? You lot can see I'm down. Do you really need to rub it in?"

"Yes," came the answer from all round.

"Well!" Shrah'rar's ears flattened, but he was undeterred. "Well, then I'm wangling for a deferral, that's all. Just a little bet, to see if I can make a bit back. Not too much, but enough to keep playing."

"He wants a fucking reprieve," said Mushog, rolling his eyes.

"Nar, that ain't it. Just so's I don't have to throw in the towel this turn, right? I want to place a bet. No dice, just a friendly wager, and if it pays off I can keep in the game."

Those among them who were playing looked equal parts skeptical and annoyed. Bragdagash, who wasn't playing and had been listening with some amusement, decided to take the bait. "What did you have in mind, then?"

"I'll wager my story," said Shrah'rar, and was met with groans. "Come on, you haven't heard it yet! And it's a good one too. Let's agree to a little hiatus: you lot hear me out, and the Boss can judge."

"Who, me?"

"You've got no skin in the game, right? That makes you impartial. And! If you think it's a good story, everyone donates one pebble to my fund."

The sheer audacity of it struck them briefly dumb. Kurbag was first to speak. "Since when did this turn into us losing our winnings?" he asked in amazement.

"… I have to tell you, boys. He's made me curious," said Bragdagash.

"Also me," admitted Hrahragh. (Then again, he had stones enough to spare.)

"Now wait a minute…"

"Aw fer – "

"Give over, friends," said Grushak irritably. "We'll put the game on hold. The sooner the little runt tells his story, the sooner we can play again." He visited a dirty look on the runt in question, who looked pleased with himself.

"Of course, after all this buildup, it's not likely to be much of a story, is it?" remarked Nazluk. "You haven't said what you'll forfeit if it doesn't pass muster."
"Oh, er." Shrah'rar shrugged. "You know. Being flat out of pebbles already, the sheer humiliation of another defeat…"

Obviously, this wasn't going to fly. Suggestions of an actual monetary penalty in which Shrah'rar coughed up real tokens inspired hasty protest from that quarter, but in the end they settled on a penalty that everyone could live with: snaga labor, with Shrah'rar on grog duty for the evening, keeping everyone happy with food and drink and the odd favor – all excepting Braggy, of course, lest the hope thereof influence his decision-making. Bragdagash heard this last condition with a sardonic look on his face. He assured Shrah'rar that he wouldn't hold it against him for introducing it, but he said it in such a bland voice that Shrah'rar wondered if the impartiality he'd been counting on was already compromised. But there was no going back now.

When they had argued all points to a nicety, and Rukshash had scratched a few notches in the dirt to remind folks of where they were in the game, Bragdagash gave the word for everyone to shut it. Shrah'rar began.

"…There's this Orc from up around Gundabad, right, name of Aurug. Aurug does not play well with others: he has a terrible temper, and it's got him in trouble all his life. He has a falling out with his chief, and he takes it into his head: 'Right! I don't have to put up with this – none of it!' So he waits for his opportunity after the next raid.

"Everyone's making merry, and Aurug is too, but he's not drinking nothing, right? And he's watching as everyone gets more and more soused, including the chief, and when his boss wanders off to piss Aurug follows him.

"Chief goes pottering off through the trees, with Aurug following real quiet behind. Chief finds a tree, the best tree ever, and he's pulling out his dick; he's so drunk, he's actually talking out loud to the tree and waving his dick; he says, 'Have I got a big one for you!'

"'Mine's bigger,' says Aurug, coming up behind, and he slits his throat."

Bragdagash coughed. Shrah'rar faltered, then flashed him a grin. "Oh! Well, that's just how the story goes, innit? Anyway:

"In that same tree is a craban that's heard the whole thing, but Aurug doesn't know it.

"Now Aurug did what he done sober, so he shouldn't regret nothing, but he does. Not because he feels bad for the chief, but he knows he's not got what it takes to be boss himself. He knows too that whichever Orc does end up getting the job will make a point of spitting Aurug up on a pike. So he picks up his skirts and hikes into the mountains.

"In the mountains Aurug meets a Man, a Dunlending who's done jobs with Orcs before, and they fall in together, robbing travelers and slitting throats and splitting their take down the middle, or that's the idea anyway. Gets to be the Man starts thinking Aurug is holding some of his take back (prob'ly because he is.) Aurug's tired of the Man whinging on, so he decides to do something about it.

"'All right,' he says. 'Here's how it is. I have been saving some loot on the side, but you've made me feel real bad about it, so I'll tell you where it is. See, there's this log…'

"He takes the Man to this hollow log, says that's where he's been stashing the extra swag, and he tells the Man to take a look inside. The Man goes down on his knees and looks, but he can't see anything. Puts his hand in and feels around, but all he's finding are splinters. 'Deeper…' says Aurug, 'you have to go deeper…' and when the Man is finally down full-length on his side with his head in the log and his arm up to the shoulder, Aurug takes the opportunity and skewers him. So much for the
"Now Aurug doesn't notice, but that same craban from before is perched at the other end of that hollow log, and it's seen and heard the entire thing.

"So! Aurug's lost his partner, and he's tired of the mountains, right? He reckons he'll try the woods next. After all, there's Elves live in the woods, and he knows they have gold, and silver and jewels and all. So Aurug goes to the woods hoping to find some pansy-assed Elves to waylay.

"Well, maybe there are Elves in the woods, but Aurug never meets none of 'em. Why's that? Because he meets the spiders first! I don't mean little spiders either, I mean Great Big Spiders, with hairy legs and twenty eyes and stingers under all the hair. Picture, if you will, our Aurug on his ownsome, fending off these fuckers with a sword in one hand and a flaming torch in the other. He's an evil-tempered son of a bitch, Aurug, but he don't lack for courage: he's collecting a regular pile of corpses in front of him, and as he swings his sword and stabs and singes, he yells, 'Come on, is that all you've got? Well, I always did like a challenge! Come try it! There's always room for one more!'

"And what do you think? The craban is there too! It's been following him, see, on account of Aurug's soooo interesting, and it hears him.

"After he's got away from the spiders, Aurug's none too keen on the woods. He never did kill himself an Elf, but he still has his loot from that time with the Dunlending, so he decides that what he ought to do is find a nice cave to hole up in and count his treasure. Well, haps there is a cave nearby – not a nasty wet dirty cave, nor a dry bare sandy cave, but a well lived in cave, home to all manner of creatures over the years, and the most recent of these is a Troll: a big Olog by the name of Pud.

"Pud's a big ugly bruiser, but he's being friendly to Aurug, reeeal friendly, and he's showing Aurug some proper Olog hospitality, with a big bear's haunch and a barrel of grog, and Aurug's in about as good a mood as he's ever been in his life. All about the cave are heaps of bones and old dry hides, and it's just as cozy and well appointed a little spot as you can imagine. Aurug and Pud get a nice game going after a bit, with Aurug pointing to this bone or the other and guessing what it came from: sometimes he's right and sometimes he's wrong, and they go along for some time that way.

"Then Pud starts getting just a little friendlier with Aurug than he likes – "

Some of Shrah'rar's audience began to snicker, and he gave them a sly look. "Well, I guess you think you know where this is going. But you don't know all of it yet, so you can keep quiet while I tell it.

"Aurug tells him to, and I quote, 'Feck off.' He's an Olog, you remember, with an Olog's big hands, and Aurug's none to keen on having old Pud fumbling about his bits.

"'Well I like that,' says Pud, all hurt-like, 'I thought I was showing you a good time and all.'

"Aurug, for a change, thinks that he might try being a bit more polite to his host. You know, Pud being a great bloody Cave Troll, it might not do to make him angry. 'Meaning no offense,' says Aurug, 'it's just that you're a big feller and I don't like to chance things going too far.'

"Now everyone likes to hear about how big they are, and Pud's as susceptible to flattery as the next lad. 'True,' says he, 'I am an Olog of prodigious endowment.' And there they might have left it, but:

"'Mine's bigger,' says the voice of Aurug."

This time the snickers were replaced with outright guffaws from the others – including, most importantly, Bragdagash. Shrah'rar smirked and went on.
"There's this moment of stunned silence, and Pud swivels his head. 'You what.'

"Weren't me,' says Aurug.

"Y'daft bugger, you'll never tell me it wasn't. It was your voice.'

"It was my voice, but it wasn't me!'

'Pud takes this about as you might imagine. 'Well I say we make a bet. You show me your bits and we'll see if they're all you say, and if they're bigger than mine, fair enough, but if they're not, you get to show me a good time.'

'He fills up the entrance to the cave, right? So Aurug's not getting out that way. There's nothing for it, so he shimmies his trousers down over his hips, and it's no contest. Aurug's a big boy, but he's nowhere near as big as an Olog, and they both know it. So now Aurug has to show him a good time. We'll skip over what happens here – "

A loud round of jeers and complaint. Shrah'rar threw up his hands to quell them. "Come off it, you all have an imagination! I think you can figure it out! …All right, it's the usual, with maybe some mouth thrown in, and if you must know it ain't wholly unreciprocal, but Pud is just as hamfisted as Aurug figured 'e'd be, also Aurug soon finds himself with a powerful crick in the neck. Still an' all, he reckons he's going to live through this.

"Pud himself ain't expecting much more, but a feller can always hope, and he puts a hand on Aurug's flank and asks him if he'd fancy a little summat on top. Aurug shakes his head and he opens his mouth and:

"'I always did like a challenge,' says his own voice."

This time Shrah'rar said nothing. He waited for the laughter and the groans to die down, then continued:

"'That wasn't me!' says Aurug. He's getting scared now.

"Pud's amazed – great big Olog, you know, and Aurug's big enough for an Orc but he's not that big – but he's not one to miss a trick neither. He says, 'Nothing wrong with my hearing, and it ain't fair to tease a fellow,' and before Aurug can do anything to stop it there he is propped with his bum in the air and this big Cave Troll – "

Chaos ensued. Shrah'rar went on with his story in and around the uproar: "And of course you know, here's Aurug yelling, "Stop! Stop!" and there's Aurug's voice all, 'Deeper…you have to go deeper…''

There was no hearing him now. Crowd control should have fallen to Bragdagash at this point, but he was howling too. It was Rukshash finally who stood up, gesticulating as he grinned. "Now lads. Lads! Settle down, lads! It won't be told any faster if you keep making a great noise like that! Let's all stop and think about it and spare a minute for old Aurug, eh?"

He continued to stand until they had subsided and then slowly sat again, yielding to Shrah'rar.

"Well." Shrah'rar shook his head. "Getting on to morning now and Aurug hasn't had such a good night, as you can imagine, but Pud's a happy camper, right? …Anyway, it turns out Pud has a friend – " (he paused for them to calm down after this) " – an even bigger Cave Troll by the name of Blod, and Blod comes by Pud's cave because he was out walking and lost all track of time and the sun's almost up now and can he stay in Pud's cave until it gets dark and oh it looks like you're entertaining
company should I come back later or can I have a piece of that?

"And Aurug's voice says,

"There's always room for one more."

Cheers attended the end of story, and Bragdagash called the bet in Shrah'rar's favor. The smaller Orc grinned widely under the general praise. "Damned if I won't give you an extra pebble after that, lad," declared Rukshash, and he made good on his word. "Well told!"

"Raise your hands if you thought Aurug and the bird were going to fuck," said Mushog loudly.

Kurbag snorted. "I thought he was going to meet a Warg in the mountains and have a nice litter of puppies."

Shrah'rar forbore to take offence. "Laugh all you like, then pay up." They grinned and handed over their pebbles.

As Grushak pitched his own stone in the pile, he noticed the hooded look on Nazluk's face. "Guess the buildup didn't hurt the final telling after all, eh Nazluk?"

"Mmm." He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Words like 'labored' and 'predictable' come to mind, but it obviously amused the rest of you."

"There really is no pleasing you, is there."

"Anyway. I don't really have time to linger here. You'll have heard what Bragdagash said about assessing the state of our affairs…"

Grushak snorted. "I don't know about you or the rest of this lot, but I reckon I know the state of my shit inside and out."

"Oh, I don't know." Nazluk gave a partial smile. "It doesn't hurt sometimes to take a moment. See that things really are as we think they are. But you'll know your own business, I suppose."

...the fuck? Grushak stared at him as he walked away. Rukshash was making noises at this point about resuming the game, so Grushak shifted his attention to that, assessing the relative strengths of his little pile of sticks and stones, but his mind remained with Nazluk and that enigmatic crack he'd just made. He resolved that at the next chance to pull out, he would do so.

When Nazluk returned to camp he found her standing, staring into the trees. Remembering the self-soothing gesture he had seen her making before, and glancing at Grymawk, he put it together.

"Where's the Brat?"

"I do not know. I do not know where she is," she said in a low voice. She wasn't even trying to pretend. She turned and stared at him. "Did you see her? When you went into the woods?"

He laughed. "Why would I have seen her? I had my own concerns when I went in there."

She took a step toward him. She actually did. "You did not see her, then? Truly?"

"I said as much, didn't I? But you can see as well as me – that means nothing. It's a large forest, she needn't have gone in the way I did." She was touching the back of her hand again. His eyes narrowed. "What cause would she have to go in there, anyway? Maybe you know something about
this, yes?"

Her mouth trembled. "I do not know anything. I only wish I did."

"Pretty words," he murmured. He took a step toward her, then paused and looked at Grymawk—
more specifically, at the packs mounded near him. Nazluk glanced at the Elf girl again, then went to
the packs and began to draw his own apart from the general pile. To look through them one by one. It
was what he had told Grushak that he came for, but news of the Brat's disappearance gave him
another reason.

When he had satisfied himself, he looked back at her. She was staring at him in a way that made him
want to bark at her. "What."

"What are you looking for?"

"I am taking stock," he said coldly. "As instructed by my chief. So shall we all, I should think, very
shortly." It was the only reason he didn't go to her and wring answers from her then and there. Most
likely he'd only be interrupted by one or more of the others.

Then again:

That doesn't matter, does it? He had every right to question her, with Grushak's brat missing.

She didn't falter or back away. He used his extra inches, well aware as he did that she was
accustomed to bigger Orcs than him using their size to dominate her. She only stared at him, and then
he saw her eyes flicker toward his packs, so fast he might not have seen it if he wasn't so close.
"Why are you so interested in my things?" he growled.

She was afraid of him. But she wasn't as afraid as she should have been. "If you had done something
to her, you would not hide it from me," she said very quietly. "Even if you did not want Grushak or
the others to know. You would want me to know." She seemed to draw conviction from the words
as she spoke them.

He glared down at her. It might indeed have been pleasant to toy with her in that way, had he
thought of it, but he knew she wouldn't believe him now. "Why would you think I did something to
her anyway? I have nothing to do with Grushak's snaga. How long has she been missing?"

The answers, most of them, came very easily. She had not seen the other girl since Bragdagash's
orders earlier, when he told them not to go into the forest and set the little snaga to watching
Grymawk. Squeaker had cleared off at the same time as the others, and had been gathering food.
Then Kurbag had told her that the tark was looking for her, but when she came back…

He saw the thought occurring to her at the same time as it came to him. "You really are a stupid
bitch, aren't you. Here's Kurbag telling you, but no, you decide that it must be me. Why would I
want to anger Grushak?"

"But…" The rest went unspoken, but it clear enough what she was thinking. What would Kurbag
have to do with the tark girl any more than he did?

Nazluk scowled. "Well, there's one thing I know, at any rate. If the Brat is missing, Grushak will
want to know about it." His lip curled, and he looked down at her speculatively. "And I expect that
he will want to hear about it from you."

Chapter End Notes
I don't mean little spiders either, I mean Great Big Spiders, with hairy legs and twenty eyes and stingers under all the hair. Damn it, Shrah'rar. Spiders don't have stingers.

Well, haps there is a cave nearby – not a nasty dirty wet cave nor a dry bare sandy cave, but … "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort." (The Hobbit, "An Unexpected Party")
One of the feeding crebain hopped down onto the ground and let out a croak. The craban on Maevyn's shoulder responded with another croak and then a rattling noise, loud and close to her left ear – and how easily, she realized, it might have that ear off altogether if it wanted. If they flew up and descended on her in a body, she would be completely overpowered.

"Go on," said the craban, and Maevyn realized that it was talking to her.

Stiffly, stick in hand and the bird still clinging to her shoulder, she started forward. The other crebain were hopping off as well in twos and threes, and now she could actually see the deer itself, the ribs exposed like thin spars around the dark cavity of its insides. They had decimated the animal's soft underbelly; she saw the torn intestines and almost faltered. Horrible memories flickered through her mind as she made herself keep going. Some of the crebain remained, ignoring her and continuing to feed as she approached. She looked but did not see the bolt. She came close and stood over the carcass through sheer force of will, then walked around it slowly. The eyes – she could not help but look – were gone. The mouth was torn and bloody.

They had taken its tongue as well.

When she was certain, at last, that the bolt was not on or in the deer – at least, not any part facing up – Maevyn made herself looked on the ground around it. She was lucky. There was a dark patch nearby where the blood must have gouted in a final rush, before the deer succumbed. And there it was: the bolt, almost indistinguishable where it had fallen, in the black on the forest floor.

She bent quickly, the craban flapping free as she did, and picked it up. It was sticky all down the length of the shaft. Maevyn gathered up a fold of her skirt to wipe it clean.

"Foolish," remarked the craban, looking up at her from the ground. "You want to smell like blood?"

_It wouldn't be the first time._ Maevyn didn't say this out loud. She hesitated, then took a handful of dirt and used it to scour the bolt. That didn't get rid of everything, but at least it got rid of the stickiness. She held the two crossbolts together in her left hand, then picked up her makeshift cudgel again in the right.

Then she looked at the craban again. Uncertain of the etiquette in a case like this, she bobbed her head at it. "Thank you."

"At your service," said the craban, its head in profile. And:

"At yours and your family's," said the other crebain (except for the ones still eating.) A weird sniggering rose among them.

Maevyn flushed. She felt that there was a joke here, but she did not see what it was, or why she should be the butt of their humor. The reference to family hit an uncomfortable nerve. "Well," she said. "I have to go now, so…"

"Don't you want to know our secret?" asked the craban.

"…what secret?"

"Oh, we know many secrets. But this is a really good one."
"I'd – " Maevyn glanced at the feeding crebain. "I'd better not. I have to go back. They'll miss me if I'm gone too long."

"No one else knows about it, you see. They're too afraid of the Forest. But you're not afraid, are you." Its voice was tricksy and clever.

"I'd better go. Thank you for helping me." It was unnerving to turn her back on it, to have it behind her, but she did so, and began to walk away. Not too fast, but not too slow either. When no rustle of wings or loud cawing followed, she picked up the pace, following the marks she had made before, the little trail that would get her out of here!

She slowed to a halt. The marks had stopped, and there was a tree in front of her that she was sure had not been there when she came this way before, only a short while ago. She stared at it, baffled, then leaned sideways to peer around it. More trees, but no more marks.

"Could have told you that wouldn't work. Things don't really stay put in this place. They tend to move around."

Maevyn took a deep breath and turned, to find – of course – that the craban had followed her. It was standing right on one of her marks, its head at an angle as it watched her. "Trees don't move," she said. Marks, she thought grimly, eyes flicking toward the mark under the bird's feet…yes. Marks could be changed or covered over. But trees don't move.

"They do around here," said the craban.

A shiver ran up her spine. She shouldn't believe it. But she did. "Well why didn't you tell me then?" she demanded.

"Wanted to show you our secret."

"Wanted to…?"

"Only it's obvious you're not interested." It began to groom.

Maevyn looked at the surrounding trees. She couldn't help but feel how they seemed to be looming. "I might be," she said. Very carefully. "If something doesn't eat me, or kill me, I might be interested."

"Everyone has a secret," said the craban, turning out its feathers. "That deer, you know. The last thing she thought was, My baby, my baby. She had a little fawn hidden in a thicket, not too far from where she was shot. When she ran, she ran away from her fawn. She probably wouldn't have got so far if it wasn't for that. She thought, At least he won't find it there."

The craban paused. "But we did."

Maevyn swallowed. "Was that the secret?"

"Oh no. That was to explain. We don't need more food just now. There is plenty of meat."

She closed her eyes, but that didn't help. She opened them again. "And you can't just tell me your secret? It's something I have to see?"

The bird didn't answer.

It hadn't answered last time, and she had followed it. This time she made herself walk away, around
the tree that should not be there, scanning the ground for any marks that had not been erased. But there were none. Also, there were other unfamiliar trees she did not recognize, and while she could not be certain that they hadn't been there when she passed through before, there still seemed to be more of them than reasonable, obscuring the way that she had come. She might have followed her original idea of climbing one to look out over the canopy, but knowing what she did now, that seemed like a very dangerous thing to do.

When she was certain, she went back to where the craban still was grooming itself. It lifted up its head and looked at her.

She felt that she wouldn't get out of this forest by herself. Her plan had been a good one, but it hadn't worked, and if she tried to go it alone she would only get more lost. The crebain hadn't killed her, but something would. In the stories children dropped stones or crumbs or carried balls of string, and she had used her stick to make marks. But the usual rules didn't work here.

She shifted her grip on the stick. "Is it far?"

She had made up her mind. The craban knew it too. Black wings spanned as it lifted into the air. It lighted on a branch above her head, leaned down as if to impart a mystery.

"Deeper," said the craban. "You have to go deeper." It launched itself on silent wings toward the rotten heart of the forest.
"What do you mean, she's gone?" Grushak stared at the Elf. Nazluk had come pulling her behind him to announce that the Brat was missing and imply that Squeaker had something to say about it. Now she stood chafing the part of her arm where the other Orc had gripped her, eyes fixed on the ground. Around the interrupted dice game, all heads and ears were up and listening. "What do you know about this?"

"I know very little. I only know that she…that she has not been there for some time."

"What, you mean since Nazluk and I came through before?" asked Bragdagash sharply.

She flinched and seemed to look harder at the ground. "Longer."

"That's a useless answer," said Nazluk, standing close behind her, obviously enjoying himself. "When is the last time you saw her, exactly?"

"I have not seen her since Bragdagash called us together this morning, and we all separated afterward. I was by myself then, gathering food. I did not go back until I was told to join her."

"And who told you to do that?" There was that in Nazluk's voice which said plainly enough that he already knew the answer.

"…Kurbag…"

Kurbag looked awkward as all eyes shifted to him. Nonetheless, he answered promptly enough. "True enough. I told her the Brat was asking after her. That was when Mushog and I left to come join you lot."

"She was there with Grymawk when we left them," said Mushog. He laughed. "She's probably just off taking a crap."

"No." This time the Elf spoke without hesitation, and she lifted her head. "It has been too long. She would have been back by now."

Absent one of them speaking to her first, Squeaker didn't generally speak up like that, and not in that voice of quiet contradiction. She was looking at Mushog and Kurbag as she said it.

Grushak glanced at Nazluk. He was hanging close behind her, and Grushak could smell his excitement. It was obvious that he hoped Grushak's anger would fall on her in an easy case of blaming the messenger. This wasn't much information to go on, though, and it was clear from what she said that the other girl had been gone before she'd ever arrived on the scene. If anything, Grushak had seen the Brat more recently than she had, and Kurbag and Mushog sooner still.

"Right," said Grushak, and got to his feet. He was more inclined to find out where the Brat was than to bite Squeaker's head off just yet. "Well, I'll go look myself. Kurbag, I'm borrowing your snaga."

Kurbag made some startled noise of assent that Grushak didn't bother waiting for as he caught hold of her arm.

"Watch her be back when you get there," said Mushog.

"Slap the shit out of her for wasting my time if she is," muttered Grushak, and he pulled the Elf girl along after him. She moved quick-smart to keep up and he let her go after a moment, knowing that
she followed.

When they had got back to camp proper he gave the place a thorough lookaround, studied after the tark girl's scent. Wasn't as if she'd stayed in any one place since they'd set up here. He could smell her here, there, and everywhere, but he wasn't detecting anything freshly informative. One thing interesting, anyway: it didn't smell like she'd gone into the woods. She might have done, of course, but if she had, it had been through some other part of them.

When he ruled out the bagronk he stood there for a moment, squinting over the grassy expanse off and away from the forest. There was, of course, all of Out There as well, and he considered the possibility that she'd run off. It would be strange for her to do that now, in what was basically the middle of nowhere.

The Elf had stopped still and quiet by the ashes of that morning's fire while he canvassed the immediate area, her eyes following him all the while. Now as he approached her again they remained fixed on him, searching his face. Whatever she found there, it obviously wasn't what she was hoping for.

"You know, I don't like to credit Nazluk," said Grushak conversationally. "I figured she was smarter than to go fucking off like this."

Squeaker shook her head meaninglessly.

"She isn't the most sensible of creatures, but she isn't stupid." His lip curled. "And I know that you're not stupid either, so if there's something more you know, I think that you will tell me."

"I do not – "

He raised his hand sharply, cutting her off. "We all know something about something. Even when we think we don't know anything, given a little time, we should start to form an opinion. So that's what I'm going to ask you, Squeaker. Do you think she's run off?"

"No."

He smiled unpleasantly. "You two are close. I'm sure you've talked about it. Did she run off."

She shook her head hard as he stepped in. "She would not have done that."

"No? Why not?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again. "...She would not have left without me."

He studied her closely. "Huh. I'm sure you think that." He shrugged. "May even be right. But I will tell you something, Squeaker. If there is something you aren't saying, I will hurt you." He caught the side of her head in his heavy hand, leaned down and rumbled in the shell of her ear. "I will hurt you in a way that doesn't leave marks, not where anyone can see. Not even Kurbag. You'll be bleeding for a week. You understand my meaning, I think." He curled his fingers in her hair and tugged.

There were tears in her eyes, but when he released her she only shook her head again. "You said it yourself. She is not stupid. She would not just run away in a place like this. And if she did, something must have happened first. Something would have happened to make her run."

-.-.-.-

The others were coming back now. The round they had been playing was effectively shuttered (as
Shrah'rar pointed out, aggrieved, it was supposed to have been Grushak's turn next) and there wasn't sufficient momentum to start another. Kurbag and Mushog were too distracted, Hrahragh wanted to see if the missing snaga had been found or not, and Bragdagash was more than a little curious about that himself.

As a matter of fact, Bragdagash was pissed.

"I told you I didn't want none of you fucking around in the woods. Wasn't for love I said that, even if you are just the cutest lot ever; I said I didn't want nothing stirred up against us. Now here's one of us vanished, and we don't know what happened. I am not best pleased about that, whether the little snot deserved it or no."

About this time someone pointed out that Pryszrim also was unaccounted for, which ramped things up a bit. No one had seen him since Bragdagash's exhortation that morning. He hadn't been around when Rukshash started his game of Yasara, and he wasn't in the immediate vicinity. Maybe, wherever he was, the Brat was with him, unless whatever had got the Brat had got him too.

But finding Pryszrim brought more questions than answers. Hrahragh and Nazluk discovered him tucked under a bush, looking like he'd been through the wars. His knees and the heels of his palms were badly torn, and there was a terrific goose egg over his left eye. Shrah'rar looked at him in amazement when they brought him back by the fire. "The fuck happened to you?"

It wasn't a long story. Pryszrim had been feeling ambitious earlier that day and had climbed one of the outlying trees in the hope of liming a few songbirds. Whether it was his own clumsiness or something more uncanny at work, he picked himself up after, bruised and raw, with a ringing in his ears. After that he'd given it up for a bad job and spent the rest of the day rolled up in a thicket.

"You stupid fool," said Nazluk. "That's not what you do when you take an injury like that! What if you had died in your sleep?"

"No one was around," whined Pryszrim, who had been pulled from a sound nap by Hrahragh, still had an awful headache, and didn't know why everyone was talking to him all of a sudden. "And if I died in my sleep I wouldn't know about it anyway."

"You might still have found someone easily enough. At least put some ointment on it." Disgusted, he went to search one of the communal packs.

"Come off it, Nazluk, you don't really expect sense from Pryszrim, do you?" Shrah'rar crouched in front of the other Orc, studying on the lump on his forehead with fascination. "Oi, can I touch it?"

This was clearly a rhetorical question. Not waiting for permission, he poked it. Pryszrim yelped.

"Stop that," growled Nazluk. Crowding Shrah'rar out of the way, he started applying the dark stuff from the box in his hand to Pryszrim's injuries.

They pumped him for information about the Brat, of course, but it was useless. He had been out of commission for easily several hours and hadn't seen the girl since Bragdagash called them all together before. Certainly he hadn't known she was missing until he was told as much, nor would he have had cause to make use of her in the first place, unless it was fetching him food or drink or something along those lines. Absent anything solid from Pryszrim, questions gave way to speculation and conspiracy theories.

"I don't think she wandered off, you know. More likely something took her."

"What, you mean like some sort of forest bogey?"
"We don't really know how Pryszrim got that bump on his noggin. Maybe he didn't land on his head after all. Maybe something else did that."

Pryszrim was confused. "I fell out of a tree," he reminded them.

"Really?" said Nazluk. "Because the way you told it, suddenly you were just there on the ground. Do you actually remember falling out of the tree?"

"Well, I was in the tree," said Pryszrim. "Then I was on the ground. I don't remember in between."

Nazluk looked around at the others. "There you go, yes? Normal enough for someone who's had an injury like that, to lose a little time right before."

"Since why do you know so much about head injuries?" asked Shrah'rar.

"We all know something about something," said Nazluk coolly.

Absent from these discussions were Kurbag and Mushog, who in fit of surprising diligence had taken themselves off to assess the state of supplies and gear, per Braggy's orders. They had pulled their packs off to the side and were muttering over them, huddled together like a pair of especially ugly twins.

"I don't like this," growled Kurbag. "It turned into a thing. I told you there'd be a stink when they found the tark missing, and now look."

"Well how was I to know they'd kick up such a fuss over the Brat?"

"Because she's Grushak's little pet, that's why! Also Bragdagash figures if something took her it might take one of us next."

"Sha. Nothing took her. She just ran into the woods like a ninny…"

"Because of you. She was running from you, remember?"

"Keep your voice down. Do you want someone to hear you? Remember, you were there too, it's not like it was only me, and I don't recall you running into the woods after her." Mushog paused, then added darkly, "Didn't really need Squeaker making it weird, pointing the finger at us like that."

"Wasn't you she was pointing the finger at." Kurbag scowled. "Anyway, that wasn't really her, either. Nazluk was riding her, is all."

"Fuckin' Nazluk," muttered Mushog.

"Fucking Nazluk." This, at least, they could agree on.

"But she was looking at us afterward," said Mushog. "You did see the way she was looking at us?" Kurbag didn't say anything. "…Might want to talk to her. Feel her out a little; find out what's in her head. We don't need it to be weird."

"And talking to her won't make it weird?"

Mushog examined his claws. "I know how to talk to Squeaker."

Kurbag stood up from his crouch, glaring down at the Uruk. "Horseshit. Because you have such a gentle way with her. If anyone talks to her it will be me." He turned abruptly and found the Elf girl standing and gazing at him from a distance of some yards off.
"Fine. Then you might want to do it sooner than later, and you might want to find out what she said to Grushak. He ain't –"

Kurbag, not taking his eyes off her, gave Mushog the kick that he'd been wanting to give him all day. Mushog made a startled, angry noise, noticed the same thing Kurbag had, and shut it.

They had been talking in low voices, and she ought not to have heard what they said. Even if she had, she shouldn't have made out enough to understand it – but she was looking at him in such a way, Kurbag didn't feel fully confident of that just now. He felt Mushog at his elbow; the Uruk had got to his feet and was leaning in by his ear:

"Now. Go on and do it now."

"You go on by the others," he muttered back. "I'll deal with it."

There was, for a change, no backchat. Mushog took himself off with a sidelong look at Squeaker as he passed her by, and then it was just her and Kurbag staring at each other.

He didn't need an excuse to be alone with her. No one had any cause to think oddly of the two of them together, not now or any time he wanted. He might take her and bed her down in the place of his choosing and get all the answers he needed, without having to worry about how it looked.

Even as he thought it, though, she took a step toward him. "Did she really ask for me? Earlier?"

With a bitten-off expletive he burst forward, caught her arm, and hustled her off. They were at a proper distance from any of the others, no chance of someone overhearing, when he stopped and faced her.

"Did she?" she asked at once, before he could speak. She had followed without resistance, but she was staring at him with an intensity that had all of her being behind it.

"Did she what?"

"You said that she was asking for me. Did she?"

"I said as much, didn't I?"

Seeing the way her shoulders slumped then, he knew he should have just said yes. "I should have known," she whispered. "I should have known then that something had happened."

He looked down at her. Mushog would have been menacing her by now. Kurbag didn't want to do that, but she couldn't just keep running her mouth off like this either. "Look, I don't know what you think you know –"

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing. I didn't do nothing to her." That, at least, he could say honestly, and this lent his words more force.

Her eyes flickered over his face. In the slow dark of evening they were not blue but gray, gray as the dress he had got for her. "But something did happen… And you know what it is. And you knew it then… That is why you lied."

"Don't – " He leaned in abruptly. "Don't use that word, 'lied.' You don't know anything about it. You weren't there." He paused. "What did Grushak say to you, anyway?"
"He wanted to know if she had run away. He wanted to know if I knew anything about it."

"And what did you say?"

She looked at him, then looked away.

"What did you say, Squeaker?"

"I told him that I knew nothing. It was true when I said it." She didn't say the other part of it, that it wasn't true now, but they both could hear it just as clearly as if she had.

"What you know..." he began, and stopped, because she wasn't looking at him. Catching hold of her chin, he turned her face deliberately toward him. "You know nothing. You saw nothing, you heard nothing. You weren't there. You don't know anything."

She gave a queer little gasp, like a stifled sob. "My friend is missing. She is gone, and you know something about it. I know that much. And if you did not - " A pause. "Was it Mushog? Did he do something to her?" A shudder ran through her. "He has joked about such things before."

It was like the distress was coming off of her in waves, making him twitch. He could almost feel it creeping into his own skin. "Ai, Squeaker. Squeaker. What do you want from me, huh? Didn't I tell you not to get attached?" Her eyes squeezed shut as another shudder tore through her, and he sighed. "...Look. He didn't touch her, right? He scared her a bit, that's all, and she ran into the woods. It was her own fault for following us." He waited while she seemed to still slowly, processing what he said. Gentled his hand against the side of her face and rubbed his thumb against her cheek. "She may not be dead. Nothing to say she may not find her way out again... There now. I've told you what there is to tell, and if Grushak hears any of that he'll tear me a new one, so keep it to yourself, eh? I don't need to tell you: if he makes life hard for me, I won't hesitate to do the same for you." The threat was tagged on like an afterthought, ineffectual and gutless while he stroked her face, and if Mushog had been around to hear this feeble performance Kurbag couldn't begin to imagine the other Orc's reaction. Grushak wasn't the only one who was going to tear him a new one.

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Grushak and Hrahragh had always got on very well together. The Uruk was on the younger side, nearer in years to Kurbag and Mushog, but less inclined to the kind of silliness that could come with that. He was swift to answer a challenge but not someone who picked fights or involved himself in wanton stupidity. He enjoyed other people, but was content also to be on his own, and to be left to his own devices. That was how they’d first found him, wandering in the wilderness hundreds of miles from the lands he called home with barely a stitch on him (the chainmail didn’t count) and only his knives for companionship, and doing just fine, ta muchly. Like someone out of a story or a song, on some vague journey to test his mettle.

Grushak was not a romantic, but even he had to concede that was fairly impressive.

Hrahragh had a tireless bent for self-improvement: killing, tracking, running, knife work – certainly Grushak was his own measure of patient and persistent, but Hrahragh took it to another level, and he liked a project. Which was good, because pissing the night away trying to find a missing snaga was not how Grushak had planned to spend his evening, and his own patience was just about tapped out.

So it was a mix of bloody-well-irritated-but-nevertheless-obliged that he responded to Hrahragh's shout, going to where the Uruk crouched in the grass.

"Here is interesting," said Hrahragh. He was in a low squat, elbows resting on his knees as he
studied the ground. If Grushak had adopted a pose like that he'd've been bobbing to keep it, but Hrahragh held it with perfect equanimity.

"How's that, then?" He could see broken blades of grass where someone had passed through before, and that broad trample would have told the tale even if scent did not. Mushog and Kurbag had been this way earlier.

"More down," said Hrahragh, fanning a hand over the grass.

Grushak resisted the urge to roll his eyes and got down on one knee. Taking a few shallow whiffs, he frowned. "...That's old, ain't it? It's not very strong."

"Not strong, but not old either. Covered over. They walked on it also, more than the one."

"...More than once, you mean."

"Yes. Going to, coming back."

The only reason he could smell it was because he was down in the grass like this. Standing up, he scanned along the broken blades. Followed that faint trail and the other Orcs' scent for a few yards, then got down close again. Hrahragh said nothing, letting him confirm it for himself. "...You're right. Brat's scent keeps track with 'em here too." He looked back at Hrahragh, mouth peeling back in a malevolent grin. "Wonder what that's about."

They hadn't gone far before they heard a shout, and Mushog came up behind them at a good clip. "Hoi! There you are! Getting hot there by the fire. Braggy is pinning Pryszrim's ears back. He's furious about that whole tree climbing business."

Indeed, Bragdagash's anger was readily audible even from where they were standing. "No surprise there," drawled Grushak. "Boss told us not to fuck with the trees, didn't he?"

Mushog made a cheerful noise of agreement. "True enough! Only, since he did make the attempt, it's sort of a shame he didn't catch anything. Pryszrim, I mean. That is, I don't know when you last looked at rations, but food's starting to go a little ripe and it's getting on to suppertime. Nazluk says he's going to check his traps in a bit, but if he hasn't caught anything we may be pulling out Rukshash's kettle to make the meat go farther."

He was talking too much, and there was a broad smile on his face. It was the face of someone trying not to crap himself. They were standing right on the scent path he had made earlier, and it obvious that he was buying time, trying to think of some way to deflect them.

Grushak's mouth twitched. "Actually, we're tracking something interesting ourselves just now. Maybe you'd like to tag along."

"Oh yeah? Wait, come with you now, you mean?"

"That's right. In fact, you'd be doing us a big favor if you did. After all, you did go this way earlier, didn't you? You and Kurbag?"

It would have been stupid to deny it. To Mushog's credit, he didn't try. "Sure, this morning. We were tracking that deer, remember? Er. Didn't come to anything, though. That's why we came back."

"Better luck now, maybe," remarked Hrahragh, orange eyes flicking toward Grushak, who was smirking openly.
"He has a point," said Grushak. "And you know what they say. If at first you don't succeed…"

"I don't know," Mushog hedged. "It was a long way – and it's getting dark now too. Too bad we're not on the other side of this stupid forest." The sun had already dropped below the treetops.

"Oh, there's light enough," said Grushak easily. "And I don't expect we'll be very long about this. What do you think, Hrahragh?"

Hrahragh gave an acknowledging grunt.

He was looking back and forth between the two of them. "Well…I guess I don't object. Only – hadn't we better let Bragdagash know what we're about? He is a bit cross at the moment. Might get mad if we just take off without saying anything."

"Such concern! No, I don't think we need to bother Braggy about such a short little trip. I'll bet he'd be happy to know you're thinking of him, though." Mushog's smile was beginning to waver. "It's all right," murmured Grushak, watching him. "I'll hold your hand. You needn't worry about the dark."

Mushog laughed. "Oh, well! If you're really promising to hold my hand!" But the joke sounded forced.

They moved off together, the three of them, along the darkening path.
She did not know how long they had been walking. When she asked if they were there yet the answer was never yes, and when she asked how far they had to go the response was “Deeper,” or “Further in,” or “Not as far as when we started.”

This seemed to be par for the course as conversations with the craban went. “What’s your name?” she’d asked early on, but it only echoed the question back at her:

“What’s your name?”

“Maevyn.” She hesitated only a little as she said it. She couldn’t very well ask if she wasn’t willing to share hers in return.


“But what’s your name?” she asked again when it said nothing further.

“Nothing you can say.”

“How do you know?”

“Errutikitarrutikit-kutkutkutkaTOK.” That was what it said, but that wasn’t all of it. A burbling sound ran through it, and there was a whistle at the end.

“…That’s your name?”

“It means, Your ears are inside-out. And if your ears are inside-out, you can’t very well speak Crebbish, can you?” It flew a little distance ahead, unmindful of the dirty look that followed it.

What she really wanted to ask was why it had teeth. Birds didn’t have teeth, not any birds she had seen before anyway. But she had learned something of the craban’s personality by now, and she could already imagine how that conversation would go.

“Why do you have teeth?”

“Why shouldn’t I have teeth?”

“Birds don’t have teeth.”

“I must not be a bird, then.”

“But you are a bird.”

“Then some birds have teeth.”

Better not to ask in the first place.

She started to think there were no other animals besides the crebain. There had been the deer, but that was at the forest’s edge, and for a long time after she entered the trees she saw no sign of any other living creature. But as time went by she became more attuned to the noises in the underbrush
and up in the canopy, or perhaps they just entered a part of the forest where the wildlife was more active. She began to hear and catch quick glimpses of other kinds of birds through the greenery, squirrels that flitted branch to branch without apparent interference from the trees.

Maevyn would have begun to doubt what the craban said about the trees in this place, but she had been tripped or scratched too many times to think it was all her own clumsiness. She learned to keep a wary eye out for exposed roots – to walk around, not over – and to skirt any low-set branches. She was somewhat mollified to see the craban also had to be careful. It tended, for the most part, to walk or fly short distances along the ground, rather than up near the canopy where the branches were thickest.

Once, after it had flown on ahead, it hopped a few steps forward, then turned and immediately sailed back again, landing in front of her. “Don’t speak,” it said.

“Wh – ”

It hunched forward, saw-edged beak falling open as if in a scream of warning. No sound emerged, but the meaning was plain. Up ahead, a chorus of startled songbirds trilled out over the canopy. Underfoot, the ground began to shudder.

Something infinitely large and powerful was moving in the trees up ahead.

Stunned, she let the craban chivvy her sidelong, among several of the smaller, closer trees. They stirred faintly as she stood among them, and she fought down panic at being so enclosed, fearful of their whip-thin limbs. Then a terrific crashing came, branches on branches, as an enormous elm, swaying on its heavy roots, bent the trees either side of it edgewise: trees as big and tall and thick as it was, or perhaps they leaned sideways themselves to give it room enough to shoulder through.

It did not see her – and what did that mean when a tree has no eyes? At any rate, it took no apparent notice of either Maevyn or the craban. They kept still and silent, staring up in the shadow of its passage.

Somehow, she had believed when the craban spoke of trees moving: believed even without seeing. But seeing was something else again. It made a kind of ache in her to see the elm tree walking, as if she had to grow bigger herself to hold the memory.

“But why do they walk?” she demanded afterward. “Where was it going?”

“Who knows why a tree does what it does?” said the craban. “Only best not to be in its way when it gets started.”

Before, Maevyn had been impatient with the meandering route that it was taking her. She thought that it should not take so long to reach the center of the forest, if they only went in a straight line. She knew now why they couldn’t do that.

The trees wouldn’t let them.

-.-.-.-

The craban became more voluble after that, sharing what it knew about the trees and the larger forest as well. It seemed very free with these “secrets,” and she could tell that it liked showing off. Berries from that bush were poisonous, but they took hours to show their effects, and by then it was too late. Water from this stream was good, but it joined with another stream further along where the water was not good and had a soporific effect on anything that drank from it. There was an upside. The trees that grew along that stream were more placid than those in other parts of the forest. Less prone
to stomping on unwary travelers, or swatting innocent crebain just minding their own business.

It taught her how to distinguish wakeful trees from sleeping, and walking trees from trees that were just wakeful. The earth was generally softer and unsettled around the walking trees, or she might see drag marks where heavy roots had trailed…and Maevyn shuddered, remembering the writhing mass of roots that followed in the elm tree’s wake. Trees did not move where she came from.

She said as much and the craban clicked. “As to that, the trees of Fangorn walk as well, but they are better kept in line. There is no one here to keep these trees in check.” She did not know the name Fangorn, but the craban said it was a very large very old forest, away to the west.

“What’s this forest called?” asked Maevyn

“That depends on who you’re talking to.”

“Well, what do you call it, then?”

“The Forest,” it said, much to her annoyance. It was being mysterious again.

She began to realize from things it said that the crebain were not from the Forest but from someplace else. When she tried to find out where, though, it just led to more circumlocution. “Where are you from?” she asked, and was answered promptly:

“A little egg.”

“No, I mean where do you come from?”

“Somewhere else.”

“But where is that?”

“Where do you come from?”

“I’m…” Maevyn was quiet for a moment. “I’m from a place that isn’t there anymore.”

“Aren’t we all,” said the craban.

It was dark in the forest, which made it hard to measure the passage of time. But that did not mean there was no light. Although the sun found few true breaks through which to shine, still it illuminated the upper leaves and made them gleam. And when the sun failed altogether and the trees were at their gloomiest, there was other illumination. Fungi grew around the lower trunks in stepped or laddered luminescent clumps, and fairy rings of bright bell-capped mushrooms appeared on the ground from time to time as well. When Maevyn saw these she was careful to walk around them. There were stories she had heard in her old village of folk who stepped into those little rings and were not seen again, or fell asleep and never woke up, or fell asleep but woke up with something missing, like a finger, or an eye.

She did not want to fall asleep. She didn’t want to leave any part of herself in this place.

Once she found a little worm that gave off light. She saw the tail end of it burrowing into the detritus of old leaves. Picked it up and held it in her hand. The body emitted a pale glow that lit only the immediate interior of her palm, leaving her fingers untouched. The head did not glow at all, and it was hard and beetlish. Was it a true worm then, or was it some kind of bug?
She had talked to Leni about eating bugs once.

It was a day of small luck foraging, but Bragdagash had said there was to be no fire that night, and that meant no cooked meat. They were looking up and down the length of a tree that must have come down in a gale some seasons before. The wood was dark and rotting.

“Grymawk does it. Here, look at this.” She kicked at part of the tree until the crumbling wood gave way beneath her foot, then dug in with her fingers, prying a piece of dusty bark away in her hands to reveal the thriving culture beneath: startled ants grabbing their small larvae and hurrying from the scene of disturbance, earwigs, woodlice.

Leni watched, bemused, as Maevyn picked up a thick wiggling white grub. “What are you going to do with that?”

“Grymawk says they’re energy food.”

“…We do not have to eat insects.”

“What if we get really hungry?”

“It is a moot point, because we will not get that hungry. Not tonight anyhow. In any case, how would you eat it? Would you not want to cook it first?”

“Grymawk just puts them right in his mouth.”

“What, alive, poor creatures? Well I would not do such a thing. And you do not look as if you are eager to either, not from the way you are looking at it. Let it go, Maevyn! You are not going to eat it, and it only wants to be put down…”

The glowworm did not wriggle the way the grub had. It started to move, but when she touched it with her forefinger it became as instantly still in her hand as a pill bug. Only instead of a ball it made a circle, end to end in a band of faint radiance.

She imagined slipping it on like a ring and wearing it around her finger. She wished that Leni was with her so that Leni could see it too.

A cough came from the branches overhead, and she stooped at once to scoop some of the leaves and dirt out of the way.

“What’s that?” asked the craban as she blocked its view of the little pocket she had made.

“A secret,” she replied, and covered the little creature so the craban would not find it.

“…are we there yet?” she asked some time later. She didn’t ask it with any great eagerness. She was thinking about what was coming to her when she got out of here. A beating for sure; probably more than one. It wouldn’t just be Grushak she had angered this time, but Rukshash and Bragdagash as well. She was supposed to be watching Grymawk, and it was hours gone now since she had left.

Maevyn doubted that he’d come to any mischief in her absence. Most likely someone had been set to look after him as soon as they realized she was missing. But, how could she really know, one way or another? She had learned how quickly circumstances could change, how terrible, permanent things could happen in the space of a minute, while you were daydreaming, or talking to someone, or
avoiding a particular task. Terrible things might happen to you or someone you carried about, or
someone that you never even knew. Thatch burning in a village she would never see. At any given
moment something was being born, and something was dying. Someone was hurting someone else.

If something happened to Grymawk, it would be on her. If something happened to Grymawk,
though, would she ever even know about it? Or would she be left to wander in this creepy forest
forever?

Maevyn frowned, her eyes searching the gloom up ahead. The craban had never answered her. She
looked for it along the ground, and in the overhanging branches. “Hullo?” she called. A little
frightened now: “Hullo?”

“Here,” came the craban’s voice from somewhere up ahead.

Irritated by how it had not answered her at first, she turned in the direction from which the words had
come. As she got closer she realized there was something else up ahead, something large and oblong
and upright.

She stopped. “What’s that?”

“You’ll see.”

She stayed right where she was. “Is it your secret?”

“… It’s a secret.”

Cagey as this answer was, she relaxed a little. If it wasn’t the secret, it probably wasn’t too
dangerous. They had come a long way. The craban would not want her killed before it showed her
whatever it was that they had come to see.

But the thing, whatever it was, was still unnerving. It was tall, tall-as-a-man tall, and absolutely still.
There was something eggish about it, but eggs don’t sit on end. Anyway, what would make an egg
as big as that? She had seen Eagles, and their eggs were huge, but they were still much smaller than
the thing she saw in front of her. This was as big as a person.

She stopped again, her skin prickling. Then, carefully, she turned her steps so that she was walking
around it in a wide arc, eyeing it sidelong all the while.

When she finally saw what it was she stepped closer, amazement beating out caution.

It was a person: a man sitting, as tall seated as a normal man is standing up. Not a real man, of
course, but the figure of a man, broad-bodied and round, with thick arms folded over his belly and
thick legs crossed beneath. That was why, from behind, it had looked like an egg. All carved of
stone it was, from one great piece of stone. She reached toward it, curious to know if it would be
smooth or rough beneath her fingers, but stayed her hand at the last moment. The thought came to
her that if she touched it, it would have the warmth of living flesh.

The features, what she could make out of them, were worn with age, but the brow was heavy. The
eyes were like dark holes underneath, fixed on something behind her. She turned and looked, but
there was nothing there. But something caught her attention as she turned her head, and she looked
off to the side. Through the trees some distance off was another oblong figure; looking the other
way, she saw another.

Standing stones: huge figures of men. The first Men she had seen since she was taken from her
village.
Silent as a shadow falling, the craban landed on the ground somewhat to the rear of the figure. She did not see where it had come from and she was too distracted to wonder about it. “How many of them are there?” she whispered, staring off into the dark.

“How many?” said the bird. “They make a ring around the center of the forest.”

“But what are they?”

“They’re watch-stones. Púkel-men.”

The name meant nothing to Maevyn. Entranced, she walked toward the second standing figure, so fascinated that she didn’t notice how her footsteps were swallowed up in the quiet, as if she walked on a thick blanket of dust.

This second figure was like the first figure, but not. She leaned toward it, looking up into the stern face; she could see that it had something like an arrow carved on its chin. A tattoo, maybe? Or perhaps it was meant to give the impression of a beard. The other figure didn’t have that. There were other differences, but that was one stood out the most.

She went to the third figure, thinking to see if its face was different too, and was startled to see heavy breasts pillowed over the folded arms. This figure was that of a woman. And she realized that all of the figures in this ring, this enormous circle of stones, were different from each other in some way, but they all faced inward, with the same black hole gaze.

What are they watching, though?

“What are they watching?” she asked out loud

“Deeper,” said the craban. “You have to go further in to see.”

She stopped and looked at it.

“Go on,” said the craban.

“Aren’t you coming?” It had followed her as she walked the inner periphery of the stones, but it had not come within.

“This is as far as I go.”

Maevyn looked over her shoulder. She thought that she could make out something in the middle of the circle, something very big, but it was night, and the ring was wide, and there were trees between her and the center.

She looked back at the bird. “Why aren’t you coming? Isn’t this your secret?

It didn’t answer, only watched, its eyes like shining beads of jet.

She felt that she did not want to go on by herself, here, now, at the last. She thought, *I don’t have to do this. I can leave still – any time I want.*

But her feet wouldn’t move.

She looked down at them, body tensing. She willed herself to pass between the standing stones and out of the circle. She gave herself a direction: walking toward the craban where it watched her with its glittering bead-button eyes.
“But you can’t, can you?” it responded to a question that she had not asked out loud.

Abruptly she turned and walked quickly back the way she had come.

It was like walking along the inside of a wall. She could not see the wall, but it was there and her body would not let her pass through. She came to the place where she had entered, at the first stone, but it was the same there. She could not leave the circle.

“Why can’t I get out?!”

“It’s the stones. You can’t get out once you enter. They’re supposed to keep it in.”

“Keep what in, though?”

It turned its head, looked at her out of the other eye. “You have to go deeper.”

Here, then, was the trick. Here was the knife in the dark. It had brought her here and trapped her. It had guided her to the heart of the forest, to the fairy circle at the very center, and now she was stuck but good.

“This is stupid,” she said. “What do you get out of it? I can’t get out, but you can’t reach me either, so why would you bring me all this way? What do you get from me dying here?”

“Well, you have to admit,” said the craban. “It is very funny.”

Cold crept over her.

“You’re not the first, of course. Maybe that joke would get thinner if we had more visitors. But the last was several years ago now.”

The last…?

“You can see him over there, if you walk over. Under that tree.”

“What – ”

“That ash tree there. No, more to the left… That’s right, there,” said the craban helpfully.

Was that something there, leaning against the trunk of – something that might once have been – ?

She wrenched her gaze away, began to stalk widdershins along the inner curve of the circle. She tried as she did to feel for some kind of gap or chink, but the wall was nothing tangible. It was a thing of will, a will that made itself her own will, because she could not, would not move to step out. She was inside of it, but it was inside of her as well. It was like trying to move her hand when it had fallen asleep, but not. When her hand was asleep she could still feel the pins and needles when she tried to move it.

There was no leaving the circle. She could think of leaving, but thought would not become action.

“I’ll get out,” she gasped. “I’ll get out – and when I get out, I’ll tear your wings off!”

“That’s not a nice thing to say. When I brought you all this way, too.”

She stopped for a moment. Hands balled into fists, she fought to control her breathing.

“You should go deeper,” said the craban, behind her. “You never know. Maybe you’ll be the one.
Someone is bound to get out one of these times. Why not you?"

“You don’t really think that,” she snapped.

“No. But if you did, I’d dearly love to hear about it. We still want to know, you see. What’s there inside the ring.”

There were things she might have done then. Yelled at the craban. Tried again to force her way out through the stones. But being inside of them had a queer muffling effect, and she felt the way her anger was being tempered by fear. What were the watch stones watching? What else was inside the ring with her? If she really vented her fury on the bird as she would have liked, what would happen?

She thought of the ash tree and shuddered. The temptation was there, of course, to go and see if it was really was what the craban had as much as said it was. But it was too awful! And besides, that was just what the bird wanted her to do.

So she began to walk again around the inner ring, fast at first, and then to run. She was testing as she went, trying to see if it ever changed, thinking always to veer, to swerve right, through the figures and out, but her feet wouldn’t do it. The stony figures of the Púkel-men passed by in a blur of general sameness, small differences in form and feature lost as she ran. Their strangeness and sternness and the way that they stared straight ahead into that middle distance, that place she did not want to go, filled her with helpless frustration.

Let me out, she thought as she looked into each set of empty eyeholes. Let me out, I’m not the thing you’re looking at. I’m not. I’m not.

Then her foot caught on something, and she was falling, and the way she was falling she should have fallen right through the circle and out of it, but instead her body twisted in this strange way that she had no control of so she skewed left as she fell, still within the inner circle of the stones.

It wasn’t a hard fall, but unexpected torsion knocked the breath from her. She sprawled in the grass on her side, gasping queerly for a few moments, and then carefully pushed herself up until she was sitting in the grass with her arms pulled around her.

“Ow,” she said quietly, rocking a little. “Ow.”

No one came. No one knew where she was, except the craban. She supposed it was still out there past the ring, watching her, that it had seen her fall, but if it had, it wasn’t saying anything. In the circle, all was still.

At that moment she felt very much alone. She was alone in a circle of standing stones, and she was all she had.

She had got so used to not crying for her own self and for all that had happened, but as she sat there, she felt the treacherous old prick in her eyes. Squeezing them shut, she squeezed the skin over the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger, pinched and pulled until the sensation went away. Then she made herself get up.

She finished her circuit of the stones in subdued fashion. She did not look into the center of the circle, but kept her gaze rightward, looking up into each face carefully. Running like a panicked thing – she was lucky that she hadn’t hurt herself. Certainly it had done her no good. She needed to find the first three stones, to find the place where she had first entered the circle. If she ever...when she got out of here again, she would have to orient off of the place where she had first entered the
stones. At least that way she would be facing in the right direction.

There were other lady-stones among the Púkel-men, but it didn’t keep her from recognizing the first lady-stone when she got to it. Beyond that was the Púkel-man with the arrow on his chin, and she knew that she was back where she had started. Standing there, facing out into the forest beyond but unable to pass through, she saw the shapes of trees, vague and hard to make out in the larger dark. Turning, she found visibility within the circle was better, but there were trees there too, and look as she might, she could not make out the shadow-thing in the center of the ring. She could see the ash tree, though, and the huddled shape at its base.

Maevyn took a deep breath and steeled herself. She did not know if the craban was still there watching her, but it didn’t matter. She knew that she could not put it off any longer.

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She had seen dead bodies before, but she had never seen one like this. It looked like a stick person. A stick person in an empty set of clothes. She stood looking down at it and felt neither shock nor fear. What was there to fear in something that had sat for so long dead? It was dry and shrunken and thin, and there was no telling how long it had been there. Skinny stick arms resting in a ragged lap. Head hanging down. A brown patch of skull showed through the hair at the back of the head. The clothes were bare tatters, but they looked like boy clothes, so she supposed it had been a man once. How long had he been sitting here under the ash tree, all by himself?

She did not try to touch him or move him. She only stood there, thinking of what she had thought before: that the Púkel-man was the first Man she had seen since she had been taken from her village. But that wasn’t true. This was her first Man, and he was dead, and there was no telling how long he had been here, only that it had been a long time and he was all alone.

She thought of her village and of what they did when somebody died. About the gathering of herbs and flowers. But she did not know the herbs, or what flowers would suit. What did it matter, in the end? It had happened a long time ago. He had been so long by himself with no one else to keep him company. Surely he himself was gone as well, where nothing and no one could hurt him.

Closing her eyes, she said a little prayer. She did not think of what she prayed, only whispered the words that came to her, and she did not remember them when she turned away at the end.

Up ahead in the very middle was a hillock of some sort, the dark shape she had seen from the edge of the ring, and as she came closer she saw that it was stones. Not stone figures, but stones like the kind you would pile up, overlapping, to make a wall, but these had been mounded up instead to make a cairn.

It was not the first time she had seen something like this. There had been a barrow some miles from her old village, and in the spring it was luminous with little white flowers. When the flowers were gone, in summer, they used to go to it – the people of her village – with more flowers of other kinds and colors, and heap them up. In the winter time it had been the loneliest place in the world, that lovely old barrow, but it had still been beautiful, sleeping under its blanket of snow and dreaming of spring.

She knew that the barrow was not just dirt and grass. Beneath the dirt and grass were stones, and under the stones the dead lay sleeping. When people died in her village (she closed her mind’s eye to the memory of that last day, to the blood and the smell and the flies) they were washed and buried with flowers and herbs in a place close to the village. But the barrow stood alone. There were stories about the barrow and why it was where it was. One was that there had been an illness, and folk had feared to bury the bodies too close to the village and so had taken them further away and
covered them over in a great mound. Another was that there had been a battle, and the soldiers from
the battle, who were all from elsewhere, had been buried in that place as a convenience. Maevyn did
not know which of these stories were true, or if the truth was another story again.

Was this what the Púkel-men were watching? The barrow?

Slowly, very slowly, she approached the stones. They were old too, she saw as she reached them.
They were old and mossy, with little patches of lichen. Nothing had disturbed them in centuries – at
least, that was what she thought. Then she saw, in the chinks and crevices between the stones, what
looked like broken pieces and splinters of bone.

Her brow furrowed.

Why would bones be on the outside of the cairn, and who had made the cairn to begin with? Was it
the same people who had made the standing stones? Did these stones cover their dead, or something
else?

She had not touched the figures. She had not touched the body under the tree. But she reached out
now to touch one of the stones, green and furry with moss.

Then she felt it over her, tall as the sky is tall, vast as the sky is vast, bent and bending. She
crouched still and stiff, all of her muscles seizing as she felt it over her. Stared ahead of her
into mossy crevices of stone and the shattered bones among them, a scream caught at the back
of her throat. She knew that whatever the enormous thing leaning over her was, it was
preparing to smash her down against the stones.

“Please,” she whispered, her head sinking forward. She was shaking. “Please.”

There was a sound behind her, the sound a tree makes. Not the sound of wind in the tree, but the
sound of the tree itself, of a groan that ran from root to crown. The creak of old timber, preparing to
fall, and she shuddered, an insect in the path of a heavy fist.

And nothing. It did not touch her.

She did not want to look. She did not know what she was going to see.

Carefully, oh so carefully, she lifted her head and looked behind her.

She could not see the sky, which was completely obscured by the thing that was in fact crouching
over her, real as anything she might have imagined. Not so tall as the sky nor so vast as the sky, but
tall as a tree is tall, vast as a tree is vast. It hovered over her, black and burnt – she could not feel the
heat but she could smell the burnt smell, and she knew that this not anything she was imagining,
because how could she have thought to imagine it? It was staring down at her out of a face that had
no eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I won’t touch them again. I didn’t know. Please don’t.”

She did not know what it was she did not know. She only knew that she would do anything, say
anything, to keep it from touching her.

It was unyielding. Nothing about it moved. It only continued to hang over her. Finally, twisting her
body so she stayed facing it, she slid out from between it and the stones. Only the head moved,
swiveling as it followed with its eyeless face.

It was not like looking into the faces of the Púkel-men. She never felt that they were watching her.
But this thing, burnt and big and eyeless. This was watching her.

She backed away very carefully, setting her heels back one after the other, trying to put herself out of reach without moving too quickly. She might have run outright but she feared to take her eyes off it. Feared, too, that a sudden movement like that might be what provoked it into following her.

This was what the Púkel-stones were set to watch, and there was no getting away from it. She was bound in the circle just as it was, and what had seemed a large circle no longer seemed very large at all.

When she finished parsing that thought she stopped. “All right,” she said, very quietly. “All right.” Slowly she sank down into the grass.

She did not know how it happened exactly, only that it happened when she blinked. One second the Burned Thing was there, bending over the cairn with its head turned all the way around, watching her. Then it wasn’t, and there was only the cairn of mossy green stones, the emptiness around it, and herself sitting all alone on the ground.

She took a deep breath, a breath that smelled of nothing but grass and earth, and let it out again.

Chapter End Notes

*Little fairy rings appeared from time to time as well, and when Maevyn saw those she was careful to walk around them. It may be strange to see the word fairy in Middle-earth, but remember, “It was often said (in other families) that long ago one of the Took ancestors must have taken a fairy wife” (The Hobbit, “An Unexpected Party.”)*

"What do you mean when you say that?"

"When I say what?"

"When you said that...about talking to the trees?"

"...I do not understand the question. Are we not talking now, you and me? ...I speak to the trees as I speak to you now."

"Do they speak back?"

"Not always. Mostly they do not."

"So why do it, then?"

"Why do I speak to you? Why do you speak to me? We wish to be heard."

"That's not the only reason I talk to you, though."

"Why else, then?"

"Well...sometimes I need your help with something. Or I want to make sure you know something. Or I want to feel better about something, or I want you to feel better about something."

"Those are all good reasons. Those are also good reasons to speak to trees."

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When Eleluleniel was very small, and her mother was a giant, and her father and sisters were shapes just outside the periphery of her mother and herself, there were trees. Her mother would work in the garden, and she would bring the bassinet with her little daughter out with her and set it under the trees as she labored. Eleluleniel did not know how much of this was her own memory, how much was her mother's telling, and how much was told to her later by those same trees that threaded the sky above her head with their branches, whispering to her and dropping leaves or little sprigs of flowers to coax a smile or make her laugh.

When she was somewhat bigger, and her mother and father were otherwise occupied, and her sisters had no time for her (as sisters sometimes don't), she would go out through the kitchen door into the garden beyond, and the grass beyond the garden, and there she would lie for long hours, and there she would speak to the trees. They would share memories of her three older sisters, Haenes and Alageth and Nevhithien, when they were the age that she was then, and tell her stories of her parents, and chuckle over the funny doings of the animals and birds that lived in their branches, and Eleluleniel would lie there, listening.

They would comfort her later, when her grandparents departed for the West and her oldest sister accompanied them on the long roads that led to Linden, to the Gulf of Lune where Mithlond was and where the Gray Ships waited, and somewhere among them the ship that would take her sister away from Middle-earth forever.
“And she will never come back,” she whispered, sitting in the crook of the cherry tree. It was not the tallest of trees, nor was it nearest to the house, but it was the one with the most comfortable branches. So many times she had sat there peering down as Haenes sat below at her needlework, watching as her sister’s pale fingers made flowers bloom and ornate patterns unfurl over the shirt or pillow or handkerchief or cap she was embroidering.

Now Eleluleniel was alone, and she would never see Haenes there with her needle again, and when she went into the house her oldest sister would not be there. She was gone.

“But why did she have to go? She has gone away and left us, and she will never come back again. I will not see her, Mother says, until we go to her at last in the Undying Lands, where the ships have taken her.” She pressed her face against the rough gray skin of the tree, and the tears ran out of the corners of her eyes. “But I do not want to leave this house, oh! I do not want to leave you, to leave everything that I love here, and go away some place I do not know. Why? Why did she have to do it? Why did she have to go?”

There now, there child, hush little one, hush. And the cherry sang to her of endings, and the short lives of animals and birds: how they slept and went away and left their bodies behind them, but their children still crept and climbed and flew, and the trees remembered them.

You will leave us too one day, it told her. All things leave, all things fade, all things wither, all things pass.

“Elves do not wither,” she argued.

Elves do not wither, but they whither, and they hither and yon. You have legs that will carry you and a heart that will lead you. We are the ones who will stay and remember you when you leave. But no one ever really leaves while we remember. Your sister is not gone.

“But that is not what I meant.” And she pressed her cheek against the branch she held and stared in the direction of her mother’s cabbages. She was not one for sulking, but she sulked then. “Trees wither,” she murmured. “Elves do not wither, but trees do.”

But the tree was unconcerned. Rot sets in, and little gnawing worms, and the winters grow colder and longer, and we slow and fail. But the other trees remember us, the seed of our seed remembers us, and so we go on, and so we too continue.

And Eleluleniel was ashamed. She knew however honest her words might have been, they were meant for unkindness: an unkindness she felt the more keenly because the one it was meant for felt it not. She was unkind and she was ungrateful, and all the while the tree only continued to hold her. And so she was silent and fought no more, but allowed the peace of the cherry tree to penetrate her heart.

When her father left to fight and it was only Mother and her sisters, and Alageth rebuked her for asking too many questions and crying too much, she went instead among the trees to weep. And when her father came back and she wept again – this time for joy – the trees shared in her happiness, and gave thanks, and the wood around their home was filled with their benedicton.

And so she grew up among the trees, sharing with them her joys and her sadnesses, until the day that Kurbag came and found her in her mother’s garden.

She had known other trees in other forests that she had seen since, in the company of the Orcs as they went south and then north again, and she had learned what she supposed she’d always known, however imperfectly: All trees are not the same. The trees that she had known before her capture
were those of an Elf wood, gracious growth that provided shade and sustenance without resentment, favorably disposed to the Elves that dwelt there. Trees in places unaccustomed to Elves were still cordial and gently disposed toward her. Not all trees spoke, not in a way that she could readily understand, but she had felt the kindness of those trees, and it had been a comfort.

But there were trees too that were aloof or removed or overtly suspicious, even of an Elf, if that Elf was in the company of Orcs. And there were trees, like the trees in this forest, with no love for any creature that went upright on two legs, be it Orc or Man or Elf.

The trees in this forest did not speak, but she felt them. Old anger and resentment – and old grief – made them silent. Made them dangerous. Bragdagash had told them not to go into the forest, but Elelulenial had not needed that warning. She gathered what there was to be found at the forest’s edge, and she went no further than the temper of the forest permitted.

And Maevyn had gone into this place. This hostile, dangerous place.

“She may not be dead. Nothing to say she may not find her way out again…”

He was touching her face, speaking with words that she realized were meant as comfort. Briefly, very briefly, he succeeded. The sense of his words came through her fear and her grief. She felt the relief that came over her as she understood what he was saying, and for a moment all she felt was that respite.

Then the thought of Maevyn hurt or dead at Mushog or Kurbag’s hands was replaced with the thought of her alone in the trees: alone and frightened, or hurt, or dead. Just as dead as if they had done it themselves.

His hands were still on her. His mouth was still making words. She made herself go away from them, from hands and words, from the place where he was holding her, as if she drifted through the trees, as if she floated through the forest, unseen and untouched, looking for her friend.

It was not real, this imagining. She knew it was not real. But she would make it happen. She would go, when he was not with her, when he was not touching her, when none of them were looking. She would go into the trees and she would find her, and she would bring her back.

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Annoyed as Grushak was about his missing snaga, he was deriving a fair degree of malicious pleasure from watching Mushog squirm. The Uruk, who had become silent or sullen for much of his walk with Grushak and Hrahragh, came out with another rattle-burst of dialogue when they reached the top of the rise, going on about how this was where they had tracked the deer to before and it was a shame they hadn’t been able to get a proper drop on her, but of course there’s an art to a thing like that, trying to take such a big animal without a trap or a blind, without more cover at least. Hrahragh was not paying attention to him, or to Grushak and the noises that he made from time to time to keep Mushog going. Hrahragh proceeded straightway down the hill, but Grushak kept pace with Mushog, nodding along to what he said all the while he watched the Uruk sweat it out.

When they reached the bottom Hrahragh was standing and staring down at a patch of grass, which Mushog was very careful not to look at. None of them had to say anything at this point. There was a thick smell of blood here and several noticeable stains on the long dark blades.

None of them had to say anything, but Grushak did anyway. “Hey Mushog,” he said, a dangerous good humor in his voice, “looks like something killed this doe you fancied so much, or at any rate gave her a considerable injury. When do you suppose this happened?”
“Oh. Er. Must have been after us, I guess – I don’t remember noticing it before.” Mushog scratched the back of his neck, peering over at the trees. “Wonder if she bedded down nearby? But no, I suppose she’s long gone by now. What do you reckon did it? No wolves in these parts as far as we’ve been able to tell, or bears, but then who’s to say what other creatures live in these woods? Could be the same thing that thumped Pryszrim earlier.”

“You know, it’s interesting,” said Grushak as he watched Mushog’s face. “Most prey animals aren’t that partial to open spaces. Kind of unlikely, if she took her injury in the woods, that she would come out here while she was bleeding so heavily, but if she took her injury here, I’d expect to be able to sniff out what did it. But there really isn’t much of a scent here, is there? Just you and Kurbag, and…” He trailed off meaningfully.

“Yeah,” said Mushog. “Weird.” He was clearly torn between paying attention to Grushak, who insisted on tormenting him with speculation and rhetorical questions, and watching Hrahragh. Hrahragh had followed the tark girl’s scent to the very edge of the woods, establishing a point of entry but finding nothing to indicate she had come out again. Nevertheless he continued to cast back and forth, looking for something more, something he might not know to expect. Then he stopped abruptly, bent down, and drew something up out of the grass. Both Grushak and Mushog were silent as he came back to join them.

Grushak made no move to touch the bolt, only canted his head a little as Hrahragh examined it. “No blood,” said Hrahragh. “Hit the ground so…” He used his hands to indicate the depth to which it had penetrated the soil.

“Nevertheless,” mused Grushak. “Another one like that should have just about done the job on that deer of yours. Don’t you think, Mushog?”

Mushog didn’t say anything.

Grushak looked at Hrahragh. “You haven’t noticed signs of any other two-leggers in this area, have you?”

“Only us,” said Hrahragh, turning the shaft in his fingers. “And the snaga too…also?” His mouth shaped the words again: *Too? Also? Too?*  

“And our only archer is out of commission,” Grushak murmured as if to himself. “Funny thing. This looks just like one of Grymawk’s, doesn’t it? But I suppose one bolt may easily look like another. Only, if it *is* one of Grymawk’s, I wonder how it got to be down here?”

“Could be,” Mushog ventured slowly, “the, er, tark…”

Grushak was watching him, the smile still on his mouth, but entirely gone from his eyes.

“Might be she followed us out here. I’ve been thinking that…well, you can smell her, right?”

“Followed you and Kurbag, you’re saying.”

“That’s right. When we were tracking the deer. Guess we didn’t notice her.”

“And she, what. Threw a crossbolt at it?”

“She must’ve brought Grymawk’s bow with her. Maybe that’s why she hasn’t turned up again. She knew she’d get in trouble for it.”
“Hmm. That’s a fair guess as to what might have happened. But I saw Grymawk’s bow earlier, while I was searching back at camp. It’s leaning right where it’s supposed to be.”

“Ah.” Mushog stumbled on this too-obvious trap. “Well, maybe – ”

He got no further, doubling over the fist that Grushak had driven into his belly. The breath left his body in a terrific whoof and he would have stumbled if Grushak had not leaned in to catch him helpfully, as if the act had nothing to do with violence, as if Mushog had tripped and he was only looking to steady him.

“Careful there,” breathed Grushak. “Careful. You’re doing better now, and that’s good, but I want you to think just a little more carefully. You can think when you take the time, right?”

Wheezing, Mushog nodded.

“That’s right,” said Grushak, and he gave Mushog a thump to the kidneys that dropped him. Stared down at him, then glanced at Hrahragh: a glance born of historical habit, and the off chance that some spirit of Uruk solidarity might rear itself. Grushak liked Hrahragh, but it was still wise to remember such things.

Hrahragh shrugged. He hadn’t come to this place to help Grushak beat up Mushog, but he wasn’t going to get in the way either.

That left Grushak free to get back to the matter at hand. “That’s good,” he said, looking down at Mushog’s groaning body again. “About the Brat…and where she came to be, as relates to you and Kurbag earlier. I think you’re starting to remember now, yeah?”

A garbled sound, which Grushak took for assent. He got down carefully, angling his body in case Mushog had some thought of trying to unbalance him or to slap him in the testicles, but it was obvious the other Orc was in no condition to do better than moan in pain. “Right then,” said Grushak. “You just take a breather, and we’ll have ourselves a little chat…”

“-.-.-.-.-

“How’s he coming on?”

The old Orc rolled his eyes. “No different than he was earlier.” Rukshash had little patience just now for questions of this sort, forced to sit attendance on Grymawk: the same duty he had so satisfactorily unloaded onto the tark child these past few days. Rukshash was not without a soft spot for the Brat. She was entertaining, and she had proven useful on several occasions. Just now, though, he was feeling more resentful than fond.

“You said that he was improving earlier,” noted Shrah’rar.

“Aye… And he’s in the same state of ‘general improvement’ that he was then.”

Shrah’rar shrugged. “Only I miss having someone shorter than me around, is all. If he could hurry it up, I’d be much obliged.”

“Perhaps you might bend over and whisper that in his ear,” suggested Rukshash with heavy sarcasm.

Smirking, Shrah’rar did so. “Only to take the piss out of the old bugger,” he murmured into Grymawk’s ear. “You take as long as you need, pal, just so long as it’s sooner rather than later.” He patted the goblin’s shoulder.
“I heard that, you know,” said Rukshash.  “I may be old, but I’m not deaf.”

Shrah’rar grinned as he straightened. Then he cocked his head.  “Hi, look who’s coming back.”

Rukshash followed his gaze, wondering if it mightn’t be the girl after all, but it was only some of the bigger lads: Grushak and Hrahragh, and limping a little in between them…  “Oh ho,” said Rukshash. “Looks like we missed a show.”

Mushog was not looking his best and brightest just then, and from the way he was resolutely not looking at the two Orcs either side of him, it was obvious he’d been in for a spot of rough treatment.

“Shit.  Why does no one ever hold these things until we can see?” complained Shrah’rar.

Rukshash stood up, stretching ostentatiously.  “Watch yer mate, Shrah’rar.  I’m for finding out what it’s all about.”  He ambled over to where Bragdagash, Nazluk and Prysrim were sitting beside the fire as the returning trio arrived.

Bragdagash frowned as they approached, taking in Mushog’s disheveled appearance and the rather grim set to Grushak’s face.  “’Lo, boys.  I take it you have something to tell me?”

Mushog glanced off, keeping his mouth shut for a change.  “No, nothing much,” said Grushak easily.  “Only to say we’re down one snaga and I don’t expect that’s going to change.”

“Anything I need to do anything about?”  He glanced at Mushog.

“Nar.”  Grushak shook his head.  “It’s sorted.  There is someone else I need to talk to, though.  You wouldn’t happen to know where Kurbag is, would you, Boss?”

Bragdagash shook his head.  “But I expect he’s findable enough, for those who care to look for him.”

“Ah.  Well there you go, I’ve changed my mind.  It’s just as easy for me to wait on him, swallow a bit of draught till he comes back.  I think this one needs some too – ” (indicating Mushog.)  “He had a bit of a fall earlier, while we were out and about.  Might do him good to have a little sit.”

There might have been an awkward moment, even with that cue, if Rukshash hadn’t spoken up at once.  “I guess we should be able to accommodate that.  Come on, lad, let’s get you seen to.  You can be my drinking partner.”  He caught Mushog’s elbow, drew him back where he’d been sitting with Shrah’rar and the recumbent Grymawk.  “Now lad, this isn’t the time to be proud,” he muttered, “and none of your pig-modesty here, we all remember how that went.  Where did he get you?”

Mushog winced but did not try to resist him, only moved his hands to indicate where Grushak had hit him.  Shifted a little as Rukshash lifted the part of his shirt over his right flank and let him take a good look at the discolored flesh there.

Examining the bruise over Mushog’s kidneys, Rukshash hissed.  “Well, unless you want to do yourself a worse injury, I wouldn’t be too frisky with your pal Kurbag for a bit.  Prob’ly better avoid teasing Grushak for a few days as well.  Bleeding Eye!  What did you do to make him so angry, anyway?”

Mushog didn’t answer.  Rukshash was not discouraged. Of course it had to have something to do with the Brat and her disappearance.  He had no doubt the rest would come out soon enough.

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Nazluk took himself from the fire, where he had been keeping an eye on Pryzrim. Rukshash had a tender enough bedside manner when it suited him and he’d been attentive when it came to Grymawk and now to Mushog, but no one was very nice to Pryzrim, Rukshash included, and Pryszrim himself was so foolish, he couldn’t be bothered to pick the vermin from his own clothing; he wouldn’t know enough to come in out of the rain, or get out of the way if someone was kicking him. Stood to reason that when he got himself hurt someone had better look after him, he certainly wouldn’t.

Who better to look after a fool than another fool? Nazluk asked himself sardonically.

And he thought,

That’s three of us now.

Grymawk was still down for the count, and Pryzrim was in a sorry state, and Nazluk was none so fond that he would count some missing snaga tark as one of their own, but that did not mean he wasn’t nery of what her disappearing portended for the rest of them. Now here came Grushak and Hrahragh to the fire with another casualty. Never mind that Mushog’s injuries were plainly of Grushak’s making, not the work of some mysterious forest bogey. It was just…disconcerting, to see another of their number damaged in such a short span of time.

No prize for guessing who was next on the chopping block. They had all heard Grushak ask where Kurbag was. But Grushak wasn’t going to get Kurbag if the forest got him first.

Nazluk could have tracked Kurbag through a downpour if he had to. But the sky was clear, and the air was cool, and the grass whispered against his legs as he followed the scent of the half-Uruk and the golug. Trailed them at last to a little copse, and there he slowed, and stopped, and finally paced around it quietly, taking advantage of the meager cover afforded by the spindly trees. Waited in disdainful silence until it looked like the act was approaching its culmination, and then he coughed.

Kurbag’s head snapped up, blind and unseeing, his features thick and heavy with the black blood that flooded his face, and Nazluk felt his own blood quicken in response. He knew that Kurbag would not see him well, and was furiously glad of it. “Almost done?” he asked with mocking solicitude.

“You’re in trouble, you know,” he went on as Kurbag swore and gripped the girl beneath him. “Grushak just came back to the fire, and he is waiting for you. I don’t know what you did, or what he thinks you did, but whatever it was, he is furious. Something to do with the Man-brat missing, I take it? Did you meddle with her in some way? Not what I might have expected from you, but I suppose we all like a little variety from time to time.”

He said all of this and more while Kurbag got to his feet and did up his trousers again, pulled his hair back from where it had fallen about his face, then bent and pulled the Elf up out of the grass. Only then did Kurbag respond to the stream of snide commentary. “Shut up, Nazluk! Don’t you ever get tired?! What are you even here for, anyway? Wanted a little show or something?”

“Very little,” sneered Nazluk. “Not missing much there, am I? Oh, poor Squeaker. Look, she can’t even get up under her own strength but she needs you to drag her about. Maybe you shouldn’t bring her back with you, hmm? After all, she can’t run very fast in that condition, can she?”

Kurbag looked at him sharply. “Run? What are you talking about? Why would she have to run?”

“Muck with another Orc’s snaga, you think he won’t come after yours in return?” Nazluk rolled his eyes. “We all know you aren’t the sharpest blade, but I would have thought even you could see that.”
“Grushak’s got no call to come after –”

“Oh, is that what you’re going to tell him? Sha. Maybe I shouldn’t have tried to warn you, then. Much funnier to watch you come back and say that to him with a straight face… Yes, that stupid face, just like that! Very believable.”

“Warn me? You make me laugh. I’d do better getting advice from a snake.”

“I’m sure you think so, and more fool you. No, you roll around in your own pride a little more, see if you can rub some more of that stink on you before you come back to the fire. I promise, Grushak will love it.” Kurbag scowled and turned away with Squeaker gathered close under one arm. Nazluk swore in frustration. “Look. Stop. You fucking fool, will you listen to me? Listen!”

Kurbag stopped, turning on him in annoyance. “Gorthaur’s balls! What is it, Nazluk?!”

“I’m trying to tell you. He’s livid. Do you know what that means? It means stop for a moment, just a fucking moment, and think about how you want to come back and what you’re going to say when he sees you. I can’t do that for you. All I can do is tell you to be ready and you won’t even let me do that.” His eyes passed over Squeaker and stopped. She was standing staring at him, caught in the hard press of Kurbag’s arm. Nazluk’s gaze narrowed and he laughed suddenly, harshly. “I suppose you’d trust it out of your snaga’s mouth before you trusted it out of mine. Yes? Well, you hear me, don’t you, Squeaker. You know exactly what I’m talking about. It will come down on him, yes, but it will come down on you tenfold. Amusing as that might be, perhaps you really had better say something, eh?”

Kurbag stared at him, then down at the Elf, and Nazluk felt a sense of bitter satisfaction. Turning on his heel, he got out of there before he uttered something to his own detriment or offered Kurbag any excuse to discount what he had said. Through the golug, that was the key. He might have known that before. Saved himself a good deal of trouble.

Fool, he thought to himself. Fucking dunce. Keeper and defender of idiots. Lord of all fucking numbskulls.

Back by the fire they all looked up when he returned. He did not bother to hide his temper, and Rukshash commented on the sour look that he was making. “I tripped,” said Nazluk irritably, and let them put it down to that. Took a seat next to Pryszrim again and fixed the smaller Orc with such an ugly look that Pryszrim actually scooted away from him, proving that even a fool may show a little sense from time to time.

“Fucking Nazluk,” Kurbag said when he had gone. Fucking Mushog, was what he thought. It was obvious, from what Nazluk had said, that Grushak knew something of what had happened, and that meant it had to have come from Mushog. Though of course he had sent Mushog off so he could go face to face with Squeaker alone, so really, he might as well say Fucking Kurbag. It was his own fucking fault.

“He is right,” said Squeaker quietly.

Kurbag didn’t say anything. The Elf pushed tentatively against the weight of his arm, and he tightened it. She stopped, not fighting him, but spoke again. “You should leave me here. If you go to speak to him, you can tell him what happened. But it would be better for you to leave me, when you do.”
“I’m not leaving you here.”

“Somewhere else, then? …Is it better to let him wait, growing angrier all the while? Or is it better to finish it now? And if you go now, is it better to bring me with you, or to leave me here and come back after?”

“It isn’t safe.”

“Where is safe? …Is it more dangerous here than it is by the fire?” His grip slackened. This time, when she tested his arm he did not tighten it. Carefully she shifted his arm until she was standing free of him. “You should go,” she said.

“Stay here. I will come back for you. Don’t go fucking off.”

“I am hurt,” she told him simply, and did not remind him that he was the one who had hurt her.

He growled a little, hovering over her, torn but knowing the sense of her words. “I’ll come back for you,” he said, and then he left her there, going back the way Nazluk had before.

Back at the fire he did, indeed, find Grushak waiting for him. The other Orc was sitting, but when he saw Kurbag he stood up. “Ah, the very lad I was hoping to see.”

Kurbag stopped where he was. Round the flames the others sat in varying degrees of disguised or overt anticipation, including Nazluk, who sneered at him. Realizing it would do no good to be defensive off the bat, Kurbag went for nonchalant, scratching his jaw. “Hullo there, Grushak. What’s on your mind?”

Grushak’s smile broadened. “Not much. Brat’s still missing and we’ve been trying to find her. Your pal Mushog’s been some help, but not as helpful as he might’ve been if he’d just come clean earlier.”

Kurbag looked at Mushog, who wasn’t looking at him, or at anyone just then. His face was unmarked, at least it didn’t appear changed as far as Kurbag could tell in the flickering light, but it was obvious from the way he held himself that he was in pain. Whatever he had told Grushak, he hadn’t told it readily.

Kurbag remembered a conversation he’d had with Mushog once, arguing over who in their band would beat who in a fight – not a play fight or a practice bout, but a real knock down drag out brawl. They had come up with any number of matches: Grushak versus Bragdagash, Mushog versus Grushak, Bragdagash versus Hrahragh, Hrahragh versus Kurbag, and so on. Well, here was the answer to one of them.

“So you haven’t found her yet?” he asked.

“Why don’t we take a walk,” said Grushak. “I’ll tell you all about it.”

Kurbag glanced at Bragdagash. The chief’s black eyes were glittering in the fire light. He gave a very slight nod, and Kurbag knew that whatever Grushak was thinking of, he effectively had Bragdagash’s leave for it. Kurbag shrugged and came around the fire to where Grushak waited, and Grushak led him away from the fire, away from the trees.

“I know something of where she is,” Grushak said as Kurbag followed him, “but it is little use to me. You see, Braggy has told us he doesn’t want us going into the wood and I have no intention of going against the boss on this one. Even if he hadn’t expressly told us not to do that, this place makes my dick shrink, if you want the honest truth. It’s not the kind of place I want to go fucking
off into alone. Which is a pisser. I’ve grown accustomed to the little pest to some degree, and, well. She’s in there. I don’t anticipate that she’ll be coming out again any time soon.”

He glanced back at Kurbag. “I guess that you would be annoyed as well. If something like that happened with your own snaga.”

Kurbag responded slowly: “If she got lost, you mean?”

“Or meddled with, beyond what leave you give to meddle with her. I know you’re none too keen on that. You’ve said as much before. No maiming, marking, or murder, I think it was? I remember when you said that. I remember thinking, Those are good rules. Very clear. Kurbag’s a lad who knows how to draw a line. So it disappoints me a little, that you couldn’t show me the same sort of respect in return.”

“I don’t like to think I’ve disrespected you,” said Kurbag carefully.

“I’m sure you didn’t mean to. It’s not what I think of as your nature. But, these things happen.”

Kurbag eyed him. He knew this was not the end of it. “What would make it right, then?”

“Oh, well. I’ve hashed things out with Mushog, as I think you could probably see. You needn’t be angry with him. He didn’t get into the details, but I don’t doubt he’s the one who took the lead on this idiotic stunt of yours. I know you’re not so foolish as he is, even if you were fool enough to go along with him. But I do feel there is some settling that we must do yet, you and I. Tit for tat, and all that that entails.”

“And what does it entail, then?”

Grushak stopped. Turned to face him. “That, I think you know very well.”

“The Elf is off limits,” said Kurbag flatly.

“No? She wasn’t off limits before…”

“You weren’t looking to do something permanent before. I won’t let you touch her.”

“That is as may be. I noticed that you didn’t bring her back with you. Stashed her somewhere for safekeeping? Smart, but it doesn’t mean much in the long term, unless your plan is to leave her in this place altogether. In the end you’ll only have to run along and fetch her again, and after that? It’s just a matter of time. We all have to sleep eventually.”

There was a warning thrum in Kurbag’s chest. He realized that he was growling.

Grushak clucked in reproof. “Look. There’s no call for a fight here. Neither of us is going to kill the other; that would be far too dramatic. I don’t want to kill you, and – well, it’s unlikely that you’d kill me, but say you did. You wouldn’t gain anything by it except to make Bragdagash more annoyed than he already is. To say nothing of the fact that it’s your fault in the first place. Think he won’t remember that?”

“But I’m not unreasonable. That’s why I’m talking to you about it – that’s why I brought you out here to talk about it, where it’s nobody’s business but our own. I am giving you a choice. I can have it out of your flesh or hers, just as you please. You go a round with me, or I give her something for you both to remember me by.”

Kurbag’s feet were set in an aggressive stance. His face ached from the angry rictus it had assumed.
“I think that’s fair, don’t you?” said Grushak. His lips curved in a smile. “I’d even let you watch.”

Kurbag snarled and went for him.

There was this about Grushak. He didn’t drag it out. One minute Kurbag was charging him; the next he was on his back with the wind knocked out of him, and a sudden wretched pain in his side. “Your choice,” breathed Grushak, and kicked him again. “It might have been fun the other way, but I suppose this is quicker and cleaner. We’ll have it out, you and me, and there shouldn’t be any cause for resentment, and even your pretty little snaga will get to stay pretty for a while longer.”

Kurbag began to struggle upright; Grushak knocked him down again. He walked around the downed Orc, looking for a way to fuck Kurbag up without crippling him or putting himself in Bragdagash’s bad graces. “You and Mushog won’t be looking your most chipper for a while, but looks aren’t everything. You’ll be back in fine form soon enough. I am disappointed you wouldn’t let me have a go with Squeaker – not because she’s anything special, only it makes me feel slighted, you know? But, well – ” He brought his heel down on Kurbag’s crotch, and the other Orc fell to gagging. “There! That seems fair to me. If I can’t you can’t, and all that.” He chuckled. “I don’t reckon Squeaker will feel she’s had the worst of this particular bargain, do you? Gives her a break for a few days, doesn’t it?”

He finished up standing behind Kurbag’s head. Kurbag stared up, up through the foggy haze of pain at the dark shape of the mountain over him. “There now. It’s just as I said, isn’t it? Quick and clean, and we’re quits now, right?” Kurbag groaned, and Grushak leaned down and tapped him on the forehead. “Right?”

“…quits…sure…” gritted Kurbag, doing his level best not to be sick on himself. He pressed his hands over the nauseating pain of his injured genitals.

Grushak chuckled and swatted Kurbag’s jaw. “Good. You take care of yourself, now. I’ll tell the others that we can expect you back shortly.”

-.-.-.

He was still smiling when he left Kurbag, but as his steps lengthened his face resettled in a heavy glower. Grushak was not one for sentiment. Accustomed to the little pest, he’d said to Kurbag, and it was true, but the Brat was gone. He had expended effort trying to find her, and when he learned that she was beyond his reach, swallowed up by the trees, he’d got some satisfaction by knocking the shit out of the ones responsible. It wasn’t all he might have liked to do, but going further would have risked the displeasure of his chief. And Grushak was not Kurbag, to jeopardize group cohesion over the loss of one snaga.

Sometimes partial recompense must do in place of full.

Round the fire they looked up as he returned by himself. “Everything all right?” asked Bragdagash. “Sorted,” said Grushak, the second time that evening. “He should be back in a bit.”

“I hope there aren’t any other outstanding quarrels that you’re looking to settle this evening. I don’t think there is anyone else I can afford to spare just now.” There was a slightly dangerous lilt to his voice as he said it. “No bones to pick with anyone,” said Grushak lightly, “and none to pick with me, so far as I know.”

Bragdagash nodded, but his gaze lingered on the other Orc for a time longer.
She found the dark shape at her feet by starlight. If there had been cloud cover it might have been more difficult, but it was easy to find them where Kurbag had sloughed them off her earlier, leaving them like an afterthought in the grass. She did not hurry but bent and opened the pack and carefully shifted the eggs inside, turning and feeling them by hand. Closed the pack and stood and drew it onto her back. The straps pressed into her shoulders. The pack was heavy, but it was always heavy.

She faced into the forest with her left hand in a fist over her heart.

*I will come back for you. Don’t go fucking off.*

She had told Kurbag she was hurt. She had not lied. But it didn’t hurt so badly that she could not stand, could not walk. She had done it before. She could walk a long way if she had to. She could walk forever, if she had to. The trees rose like black spears against the starry sky. Pain slid through her like a blade. She closed her eyes. “It is nothing I have not felt before. It is nothing I do not already know.”

The trees said nothing, bound up in their own peculiar pain.

She took her first step into the forest.

**Chapter End Notes**

I must acknowledge draylon’s [Speaks to the Trees](https://archiveofourown.org/works/5117475) regarding the similarity of title. That and both involve – you know. Speaking to trees.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org/works/5117475) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!