The Princess and the Horse Lord

by Oshun

Summary

This novel begins as a coming of age story set in a time of war and its aftermath. Interaction with a dramatically changed Arda reveals new challenges for beloved canon characters. Their stories are not recounted with ponderous reverence, but with humor and sympathy for individuals who are flawed, passionate, funny, and conflicted. This is not one's standard Eomer/Lothíriel formula romance. (Awards: 2006 MEFA Second Place, Romance-Incomplete; 2012 First Place, WIP The Tree and Flower Awards)
The young woman stood for a moment in the doorway of the long hall, lined on each side by beds and cots, and breathed a sigh of relief. She was well pleased that the sun, albeit a pale wintry one, was shining on that chilly March morning. It entered through the many windows of the rambling set of interconnected buildings that made up the Houses of Healing on the sixth level of Minas Tirith and illuminated the ward where she would work today.

She wheeled the heavy cart through the doorway, approached the nearest bed and presented a grey-haired, but ruggedly handsome, soldier of Rohan with a metal plate holding a cup of tea and a fat slice of fresh bread.

"May I ask, Mistress Lothíriel, what it is that brings a smile to your pretty face this morning?" he inquired easily in the Common Tongue.

"Why, the sun, of course! Only two days ago we thought we would never see the sun again," answered Lothíriel. She could feel her smile broadening. The older warrior was one of her favorites among the Rohirrim who crowded this particular hall.

Leaning closer to him, she whispered conspiratorially, "Also, this ward is my preferred assignment and I will be working here all week."

As she continued to push and pull her wheeled cart down the center of the ward filled with soldiers of Rohan, she recalled how the Houses of Healing had been crowded well beyond capacity, even before admitting all of the wounded from the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. But already, a little more than two days later, the beginning of a daily routine was in place.

Since yesterday, she had mopped floors and scrubbed every surface and object in her work area many times. In the brief training she received less than a week ago, the Warden of the Houses of Healing impressed on princess of Dol Amroth that cleanliness was at least as important as skill in the care of their patients. The Warden originally had seemed skeptical about her ability to carry out
orders without questioning, execute menial tasks, and withstand the necessarily repulsive sights and sounds.

"I can scarcely imagine a less likely place for the pampered Princess of Dol Amroth, or any Gondorian lady for that matter," he had said gruffly.

"I was raised the only female in a household of warriors, Warden. And I am unused to idleness. If you are displeased with my work, I promise to leave immediately without argument," she had told him.

She had not been afraid of staying alone in the castle of Dol Amroth, although she had argued it would not be safe. She knew she would have had defenders there and have been among the last to die, as she would be here, if it came to that. Her terror had been of the waiting, the not knowing. She was surprised that Prince Imrahil had allowed her to come to Minas Tirith, until she realized that perhaps he wanted his children near him as much she wanted to be here.

The noises from the Pelennor Fields, those terrifying hours when Lothíriel first witnessed deaths of unspeakable horror, mutilations, and the no less hideous amputations and surgeries, had finally passed. Relief in the knowledge that her father and brothers lived, and that her dear cousin Faramir would survive, replaced the cold fear that had rested in her chest like a ball of iron. But the joy of that reprieve had passed like a transitory flash of light.

Those she loved best had come to see her a number of times. She could not, would not leave this place; there were so many who needed care and so few to tend them. Her father promised that he and her brothers would come again to say farewell. She read in their eyes that they did not expect to return from the next, last battle. She kissed her brothers and her father, touching their dear faces repeatedly, and tried to smile. They would leave without regret, although not without dread, and she would let them go, stoically clinging to the fool's hope that they might return.

No one talks of probabilities. We live in the moment. There are injured men to feed; there are bandages to change; there is comfort to be given and the dead to be honored. Tomorrow those men who can walk or ride will leave for the Black Gate of Mordor.

This morning it was quiet. And she was, for the moment, content to have rested a few hours and to have discarded yesterday's bloodied clothing for a clean dress. She was pleased to look after these brave men of Rohan, far from the sights and sounds of the most seriously injured. Some of them, especially among the older men, spoke the Common Tongue, and even those who did not could convey gratitude, and pleasure at the sight of a pretty face, with their eyes and smiles. They did not brood, although their losses had been horrific. They were confident that their honor was intact. Their manners were not elegant, but they treated her with a natural respect, which made her feel safe even as a lone young woman among men.

Especially when they are all bedridden, she thought wryly, and there is no alcohol available. Yes, I love them for their pride and what they suffered in defense of Gondor in her direst hour, despite scant hope of victory. They have lost their king and many valiant warriors. Yet, they treat me, a privileged young woman of Gondor, as though I do something gracious for them. If the memory of their heroism clouds my reason a little, I do not mind. But, I think I do not exaggerate their nobility of soul.

Then she caught sight of him again: a nameless captain of Rohan, handsome, strong and tall, with a thick mane of straw-colored hair. He had captured her attention and admiration over the last day and a half. She had seen him several times now. He frequently came to check on his countrymen. He
walked through the rows of recuperating Rohirrim, tough graying warriors and bright-haired young men, clasping hands, or kissing foreheads or cheeks. He spoke briefly to each man and even softly laughed. Although she had not spoken to him or to anyone about him, she had given him the name of "my horse lord." Does he bring comfort to or draw comfort from these men? No matter, he brings great solace to me. He looks toward me and warms me with a boyish smile and I return it with the same candor with which it is given. Here, at the end of all days, there is no time for downcast eyes or maidenly false modesty.

Walking toward her, he smiled broadly and spoke, not in Rohirric nor even in common speech, as she had expected, but in Sindarin as spoken by Gondorian nobility. He teases me, she thought, as though to tell me that he finds me out of place here. He is much younger than I had thought. "My lady, are you a healer?"

He touched his shoulder and moved it gingerly with an annoyed grimace. His bold yet tender eyes, which met hers and held them, betrayed him as a man who truly liked women and expected they would like him in return. His manner held nothing of the urbane formality of a noble of Minas Tirith, or the exaggerated courtliness of her coastal homeland.

She answered him in the Common Tongue, to let him know she was no elegant lady here, "To call me a healer would be to greatly devalue the profession, but since you are on your feet, smiling, and I see no blood, I am likely to be the best you will find. Our most skilled healers deal only in matters of life or death. Would you like me to look at your shoulder?"

"Yes, my lady, if you would be so kind. I must leave before dawn and I need to be able to use my sword," he laughed dryly.

She led him to an alcove lined with shelves holding small towels, narrow rolls of cloth, and jars of herbs and ointments. A pot of steaming water bubbled gently over the flame of a small stove. Suddenly shy, away from the eyes of her charges, she blushed slightly and said, "My lord, we will need to remove your tunic." Together they managed to pull it off with only a little discomfort on his part.

He is well made and agreeably muscled; unlike my youngest brother, he has the body of a fully-grown man. Perhaps he is 25 years of age, or a little more or less, Lothíriel thought. I truly cannot guess. Men of our lineage come slower than many to their full maturity. I have tended Rohirrim warriors these last two days, who, while exceedingly tall and broad, would be thought mere boys in Dol Amroth if years alone were considered. She gasped at the extent of the mottled red and purple bruising, covering a large portion of his upper right chest and shoulder and extending under his arm and onto his back.

"It is not pretty," he said, "but surely you have seen worse these last two days."

She nodded grimly, "That I have. Yet, before that, I would have considered this a grave injury. This may hurt a bit, but I will try to be careful," she said, almost laughing at how like one of the experienced healers she sounded. Firmly, but gently, she kneaded the bruised area of his chest, shoulder and back, searching for bone beneath the muscle. Nothing appeared to be broken or out of place. She found the ointment she sought on a shelf behind her and rubbed it thickly on his skin. The smell was strong but not unpleasant. She cautiously wrapped the area with bandages. "Can you move your arm?"

"Yes," he answered, raised his arm and swung it gently, as though he held a sword.
"It is not too tight, is it? The bandages should give you support without restricting your movement."

"I think you have done very well, my lady. Now, are not you supposed to tell me to rest and not use my arm for ten days?"

Lothíriel sighed and laughed bitterly, "Indeed, in a perfect world I would. But I have seen how your men depend on you and I am sure your new king does too."

He laughed aloud. *His easy joking manner reminds me of my brothers.* She began to wash her hands and dry them, when he took the towel from her and slowly finished drying her hands. *I caught my breath at his gesture. So simple, yet so provocative.*

"Tell me, how does a lovely lady of Minas Tirith learn to do these things?" he asked leaning toward her slightly.

"Very quickly," she responded, not moving away. "One of the healers told me to think of it as similar to checking my horse for an injury. The difference is that I did not fear you would kick me," she laughed again. "But I am not a lady of Minas Tirith. Ladies of Minas Tirith do not tend their own horses. *They have not had the freedom I have had to sneak off into the stables, saddle my horse and ride along the beach.*"

"I am sure you are a fine lady by your bearing and your speech. If not of Minas Tirith, then are you an Elvish princess of an enchanted realm?" he asked, taking hold of her lower arms and drawing her closer. *He has been schooled in more than horses,* she thought, *but not in the conventions of my peers which would forbid him to touch me thusly.*

"I have little experience with men, my lord, but I have heard that flattering remark expressed in those precise words before."

"Then, if I cannot compete in compliments with the high lords of Gondor," he laughed, "I will try Rohirrim directness. Will you hearten this soldier with a kiss before I set out for Mordor with Armies of the West tomorrow?"

*He did not need to add that it was unlikely he would return and he did not have to ask twice. In an instant, with no thought of discretion, or the honor of Dol Amroth, I was in his arms. For if our world did end, prudish propriety would have been of little use. I would have a kiss from my horse lord. I was not sure that I would know what to do, but he taught me. Though he was careful with his hands, perhaps afraid that otherwise I might bolt like a skittish horse, he was not cautious with his kisses. His bare skin was warm beneath my hands. Finally, I cast off the tattered remnants of my pride, summoned all my courage and asked him, 'You will find me when you return?' He answered, 'If I return, my lady, you may be certain that I will find you.'*

Now, as I wait, I think of him when grim reality is more than I can bear.
The first light revealed the bold standard of Rohan with its valiant white horse on a field of green, a golden-rayed sun in the corner. The morning the Host gathered on the Pelennor, I left the Houses of Healing and walked until I could find a more open view of the fields. It was quite dark when I first slipped out. I had slight hope of seeing much, but I could not stay away. The wall was crowded with many others: women, children, and the elderly. Where did they all come from? It was rumored that there were few left in the city. I had not the opportunity to see for myself, as I had not left the grounds of the Houses of Healing in days. Doubtless many had returned over the past two days.

At first we saw only dots of torchlight here and there. Then as the sky began to lighten, I saw what I had hoped to see. The first light revealed the bold standard of Rohan with its valiant white horse on a field of green, a golden-rayed sun in the corner. How brave and daring it seemed to me, like those soldiers I had grown to love. My horse lord must have been somewhere near that banner. Silent tears, one, two, and yet another, trickled down my cheeks.

As the sky grew brighter I recognized our own dear banner of the silver swan-prowed ship upon blue. Was that Papa mounted next to it? The horses of the Swan Knights were much alike and the armor of my brothers is a good deal like that of Papa. Surely it was Papa. Finally, there was light enough that I could distinguish an elongated sable banner I had not seen before. It held the white tree of Gondor surrounded by glittering stars and above all of it the winged crown. I had been told it had been raised on the ships, which brought the King to the City, but I had witnessed none of that. At that sight, all my years of training in princely comportment and self-control were for naught. I nearly strangled trying to control myself and finally sobbed aloud like a child. Sorrow and joy, fear and hope all mingled with the momentous awareness that I was looking upon a sight I had truly never dared dream of seeing: the legendary standard of Elendil.

At last I could make out the entire host of the Lords of Gondor and their allies. So small they appeared on that vast expanse: so few mounted and so many on foot.

I watched them as they slowly moved out. I bawled, wiping my eyes and my nose on my nurse's apron like a heartbroken peasant girl. Thank Eru, no one here knows me, I thought. Just then a warm arm clutched me around the waist and a familiar voice said, 'Come on, little one, let us go back now.' I looked down to see dear, unflappable Ioreth, whose head barely reached my shoulder, offering me a clean handkerchief. Little one, indeed! My sobs turned into a hiccuppying laugh as I looked down into her hopeful face.

'Did you see the standard of the King, Princess?' I could only nod. Never at a loss for words, Ioreth, went on, 'What I have seen these past few days, Elves, Halfings, a Wizard and a Dwarf and now the return of the King. It gives me hope we will see these men return and with them a brighter
tomorrow. Your father and brothers are with them, aren't they, dear? How proud and frightened you must be.'

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Walking back toward the houses of healing, Lothíriel looked up to find that the flag of the Lord of Dol Amroth had been removed from the parapet and the white flags of the Steward of Gondor flew as they had throughout her life. *Then Papa had departed with the Host as he planned and relinquished the stewardship to Faramir, which meant that my cousin must be greatly improved. I was grateful for that. Although I would be strong, I did not want to be left wholly alone in these days. Depleted as Gondor is and threatened, there is some hope if its governorship can still be shared among such worthy caretakers.*

Back in her Rohirric ward, Lothíriel felt much calmer, as she tried to assimilate the events of the morning. The extremes of her hope and fear had subsided. She had arrived a little late and quickly began to serve breakfast to her patients. Finding them awake and much subdued, she was uncertain as to whether she should leave them to their thoughts, or to try to raise their spirits. She knew, from how badly they had behaved yesterday—lying and conniving to be declared fit—that they were loath to be left behind. She wondered if they would find it worse or better to know the details of the departure of their countrymen. Her horse lord would not be here today to give them courage. She finally decided to tell those with whom she could converse what little she knew.

She did not speak of how pitifully small the force of 7,000 warriors had looked on the Fields of Pelennor or how fully half of the Riders of Rohan had walked rather than rode. Most asked if she had seen the man who would be King of Gondor. Some asked of Éomer King of Rohan. She made it clear that, although she was too far away to identify anyone with precision, she believed her father the Prince of Dol Amroth had ridden at one side of the returned King of Gondor, with the new Rohirric King on his other side, and next to him had been the silver Elven flag of Imladris, which she believed was carried by the sons of Elrond. She described the flags and banners she had recognized, with emphasis on the sable banner with the emblem of Elendil. They were not as conversant with the legends and history of Gondor as she was, but were rapt with her explanation.

Too late she realized that, in her eagerness to provide details, she had inadvertently revealed information about herself that was of avid interest. Many questions followed about her father, the answers to which were greeted with knowing, smiling nods.

"So, the Lady was raised in the household of a warrior prince and knows what it is to see her father and brothers ride off to battle?" a doughty gray-haired Rohír asked with a smile. "'Tis no wonder you are so brave and plucky amidst all this blood and gore." She understood that she had been paid a heartfelt compliment, although she felt it largely undeserved, for never had she been so close to war or its consequences. Later she perceived that, although she could not understand a word, this information was being eagerly passed around the ward.

"What are they saying?" Lothíriel asked.

"They say that Éomer King speaks highly of your father. They say your father is a fearless warrior. That Dol Amroth is an important ally for Rohan." She did not find out until much later that he did not report that many said if their King wanted this dark-haired southern Princess they approved. Almost universally her gaze met with smiles more affectionate than before. But disturbingly, there had been some mischievous rolling of eyes and chuckling as well.

Breakfast was finished and Lothíriel prepared the men to receive their usual morning visit from the chief healer. She could not begin to understand their reaction to learning that she was the Princess of
Dol Amroth. It was apparently a welcome, but humorous, bit of knowledge to these men. Was it funny that she was serving here? Was it laughable that she had an illustrious parentage? She was beginning to become irritated with their sudden curious interest in her when the Warden of the Houses of Healing arrived, with Ioreth in tow.

"Good morning, my lady. Ioreth tells me that you watched your father and brothers leave with the troops this morning."

Did she also tell you that I became hysterical? Lothíriel thought with embarrassment.

"The Lord Steward has also inquired of you and asked if he might see you. Ioreth has offered to look after your charges today. You have more than earned a day of freedom."

Ioreth volunteered superfluously, "I think they can suffer an old lady like me for one day, don't you, your ladyship? They know enough of wartime to realize that it is not usual to be nursed by such a pretty fine lady. But, what do I know of Rohan and what they may expect? Their own Lady Éowyn is without a doubt most lovely, even though she is still pale and far from well. In any case, they can do without you today. You need some time to yourself. And Lord Faramir could do with a visit from his kinswoman I would say." The solemn Warden allowed himself a tolerant smile.

"Thank you both very much," Lothíriel replied graciously. "I would like to see my cousin. He has been sleeping every time I have found a moment to look in on him. Is there anything I should do for him?"

"No, my lady, he does quite well. He is reading in his room now; but, if he wishes, he could walk in the garden later. He is expecting you." The Warden bowed in dismissal.

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Faramir looked battered and pale, but, surprisingly, not despondent. He dropped his book and came to her, taking her into his arms, favoring slightly his injured shoulder, and stroked her long dark hair. And, finally, he lifted her chin, and looked into her eyes, "My dear little cousin, how good it is to see you."

"I will not let you make me cry again," she said with a quavering smile, willing the tears in her eyes not to spill over. I am always surprised at Faramir's face, his grey clear eyes fringed with heavy dark lashes, his broad white forehead with that wastrel tendril of curling black hair that he can never keep from falling onto it. He is so like and yet so different from my father. Yet he has more of my father in him than my own brothers do. It had often been said that Faramir and I resemble one another most among my father's and his sister's children. In those days when I had time for such vanities, it had pleased me that we were considered the handsomest of the lot. I knew not why, but that thought made me smile and the immediate danger of tears passed.

"I went to the wall alone to look down on the departing host today," Lothíriel said. "It was magnificent and terrible. Something I will never forget. When I saw the banner of Elendil, I squalled like a newborn babe. And in front of a large part of Minas Tirith! I was blowing my nose on my apron. Father would have been proud indeed," she laughed with chagrin.

"Lothíriel, your father is proud of you. He told me yesterday how proud he was, and in front of Kings and mighty Lords too," he said teasingly and then continued more seriously, "The King spoke to me of the defense of the City and then Uncle Imrahil asked me to look after you."

"You are truly the Lord Steward of Gondor! What times we live in," she choked out, with a feeble laugh and a stifled sob, for Boromir, not her uncle. But Faramir knew how to make her smile, "Yes,
little cousin, today in Minas Tirith you are only outranked by me."

"What am I thinking? Papa and the Warden entrusted me to look after you as well. You should not be standing so long so soon," she answered, leading him back to his chair and sitting at his feet. The Lord Steward of Gondor merited a small carpet even in this modest cell. I wanted to hear more about how Papa, who I thought I might never see again, loved me, was proud of me. I wanted to drink in the affection in my beloved cousin's gentle eyes.

"Did Papa tell you that the Warden here complimented me to him for not fainting or vomiting the night of the Battle of the Pelennor?" I wanted Faramir to laugh with me, to lighten his burdens as well as mine, and he did.

"Indeed, he did and how the wounded Rohirrim have adopted you. They say you are too hardy for a Gondorian noblewoman, that you belong on the plains of Rohan. I sniffed at that, thinking of how they were laughing at me today. Then I remembered how when my horse lord was kissing me I wondered what it would be like to ride across those wide plains with him. My brothers are right, I thought. I am but a silly, spoiled child. Always the youngest, the weakest, among all these men I loved. My mind must have wandered for some time, because Faramir took my chin and lifted my head again and spoke to me.

"Lothíriel, would it be too painful for you to tell me what you saw today? I should have been there. I would have insisted, but the King entrusted the City to me and I gave him my word." Faramir wanted to be cosseted too, but I would not have him turn morose on me.

"Silly Faramir!" I spoke to him as I did to my brothers. He and Boromir had ever been as admired older brothers to me, although less judgmental and more indulgent than my own. "Aside from your duty to Gondor, and the fact that only today the Warden has decided you are well enough to walk in the garden, you were nearly given up for dead little more than three days ago. You are as pusillanimous as those wild Rohirric soldiers under my care. They were in an uproar yesterday afternoon. One of them fell and ripped the stitches out of his wound trying to prove to the Warden that he could stand and walk. But, if you promise to behave, I will tell you everything I saw." I got the laugh I wanted.

The rest of the morning passed swiftly. Lothíriel remembered a great deal more than she had thought she would. Faramir filled in missing details, from reports he had received the day before, and, amazing to them both, from his knowledge of myth and legend of times they had thought long past. He confirmed that Lothíriel's memory was correct, the narrow silver banner was indeed the standard of Imladris. He added that the sons of the Lord Elrond, Elladan and Elrohir, who had ridden out with the Dúnedain Rangers and her father's Swan Knights, surely must have carried it. At his prodding she accounted for the majority of allies who had joined the forces overnight. No one growing up in the house of Imrahil was short of knowledge of Gondor and its politics.

Finally, she suggested he should rest and she would return soon and, if he were not already in the gardens, she would fetch him and take him there. As she was leaving, she stopped in the doorway and asked, "Faramir, can it be that we have lived to witness these wondrous things only to see them pass away forever in an instant?"

"I too am filled with fear and dread, but am not without hope," he answered.
Waiting in the Shadow of Doom

The days passed slowly in Minas Tirith. Following the departure of the Host, Lothíriel's duties lightened. The Warden released many of the Rohirrim from her care. They were a sturdy breed and even the threat of doom could not keep them down for long. Those freed from their confinement returned to visit their convalescing comrades, bringing gossip and offers of help, which she gladly accepted. And when they came, and strolled among the bedridden, she recalled the kindness of her horse lord to his injured troops in those first days after the assault on the City had been turned back.

He asked me for a memory, Lothíriel thought. But I am the one left with time on my hands to remember. His thoughts cannot be of me, but of his duty and the almost certain doom he faces. If I do not have the remembrance of love, at least now I have known desire, and though it pains me greatly, I have no regrets. No, gratitude. I would not have lived without ever having known this at least.

The days passed slowly in Minas Tirith. Even the most garrulous were hard pressed to produce any but the paltriest scraps of information. With no news at all, even rumors are hard to create. There was much argument in the ward as to the speed with which the host might be traveling and incessant calculations of how many days it might take to reach the gates of Mordor. The earliest day upon which it was surmised that the armies of the West might have reached their goal came and passed without event.

Despite the shadow under which they lived, spring would come. The hardier of the first blossoms were replaced with ones that required more sun in those few, but seemingly endless, days. Faramir, obviously smitten, was often to be found in the garden in the company of the Lady Éowyn.

She is beautiful, of that there is no doubt, Lothíriel thought. But the source of Faramir's attraction to Éowyn was lost on her at first. It was hard for Lothíriel to imagine her as the shield maiden of Edoras who brought down the Lord of the Nazgul, so self-pitying she could seem at times. Faramir had warned Lothíriel of forbearance, saying Éowyn had told him more of her suffering than he could share with her and that he suspected there were dark things of which she would not speak.

Walking into the garden Lothíriel spied them together and sighed audibly. The Perian Merry, stepped into her path, startling her.

"Sorry, milady, I didn't mean to give you a fright," he said agreeably.

Laughing, Lothíriel replied, "Oh, Merry, I did not see you."

"You don't seem pleased to see them together," he nodded in the direction of Éowyn and Faramir.
"Perhaps you are right. My cousin is the best of men and yet she treats him so coldly and seems to ignore his obvious feelings for her."

"Surely, as the Princess of Dol Amroth, men sought after you when you had little interest," Merry said. "Her heart is breaking for another, who will not return her love."

"She told you that?" Lothíriel asked, surprised.

"She is not a lady who keeps much to herself. She is as honest as they come. Reminds me a bit of you in that. But you've had a happier lot in life." This time it was Merry's turn to sigh. Lothíriel blushed. She wondered for the first time if Éowyn's toleration of Faramir's attempts to comfort her could be perceived as kindness on her part.

Lothíriel did feel affection for the White Lady of Rohan. She liked Éowyn for her lack of pretension and ready wit. But Lothíriel's own irritability, throughout the endless wait, caused her at times to want to grab Éowyn by her lovely neck and strangle her for her relentless brooding. Faramir bore it with what seemed to Lothíriel to be heroic patience.

But Éowyn's melancholy did lessen slightly day by day. And there were times when they could and did talk and even laugh companionably for short periods. Lothíriel learned that the Lady of Rohan could be most easily distracted if she told stories of the virtues and foibles of the Rohirrim in her ward or when she made humorous comments on her own behavior.

One day, desperate to break the Lady's gloom, and, as much as she loved them, thoroughly tired of talking of horses, Lothíriel found herself speaking of her own secret obsession.

"There was a Captain of Rohan who came many times to see the injured before the Host departed. I am sure you would know of him. I liked him. I spoke with him, but I do not know his name," Lothíriel ventured.

She had caught Éowyn's attention. Focusing a sharp eye on Lothíriel, she said, "Marshall, probably."

"What?" Lothíriel smiled, mimicking Éowyn's tone, catching Faramir's eye. He slyly smiled back at her. She had grown accustomed to, actually enjoyed, Éowyn's abrupt unpretentious remarks. Éowyn did not deal in courtly mannerisms. Lothíriel did, and could do it well, but preferred not to, especially among friends.

"I meant he is probably a Marshall. Captain is a term used in Gondor. What does he look like?"

"He is nearly as tall as Faramir and has a lot of long golden hair, a little darker than yours." At that, both Faramir and Éowyn laughed uproariously—her description fit the majority of the Rohirrim in Minas Tirith. Lothíriel saw the humor in her remarks and was forced to join them. What a fool I am to have started this, she thought. Faramir gives me that infuriating, patronizing smile that I have seen so many times on my brothers' faces. But, at least I have made them laugh.

Undaunted, Lothíriel gave Faramir a peevish look, and ploughed ahead, "I think anyone would judge him extremely handsome. He looks very strong, but is not one of those broad, heavily built men you grow in Rohan. He has an easy boyish smile."

"That eliminates all but a few. Do you have any other clues you can give me?" Éowyn asked.

"He first addressed me in Elvish. I think he sought to taunt me as a fine Lady pretending to work as a nurse."

"That would be my brother," Éowyn said flatly.
"Éowyn, I do not think that he could be your brother," Lothíriel said, blushing, something Éowyn missed, but Faramir did not. "The men obviously look up to him, but he is not formal and they joke and even argue with him—not at all in the way soldiers would interact with their King!"

"Think what you will, Lothíriel, but these are men of the Mark and not of Gondor. The people of Rohan are warm," Éowyn replied stiffly. Faramir caught Lothíriel's eye and he gave her a warning look, knowing she thought Éowyn most cool.

Éowyn continued, "They owe their allegiance to the House of Éorl and obedience to the King as its representative. But they are warriors, not politicians. Many of them have ridden with my brother since he was sixteen years or younger. He is their King, but also their brother-in-arms."

"Éowyn has a point, Lothíriel," Faramir said. "There is the question of circumstance. Rangers under my command treated me differently around a campfire in the wilds of Ithilien than they would have in the halls of Minas Tirith in the guise of the son of the Lord Steward of Gondor. You have observed these men in a situation of informality that you would not witness in the normal course of events."

"So you are saying the man I met was the King of Rohan?" Lothíriel asked with agitation.

"How many Rohirrim of command do you think there are who are young, fair of face, are able to speak Elvish, and would have the audacity to flirt with a Princess of Gondor?" Éowyn asked.

"None of them knew me to be a Princess," Lothíriel insisted.

This time Éowyn grinned and laughed, "There is a saying in the Mark, 'You would know her to be a Lady if you met her slopping the hogs.'" Lothíriel was unsure if this was a compliment or insult, but she suddenly felt unexpectedly cornered.

"I did not say he was flirting with me," Lothíriel protested.

Faramir interjected, "You did not need to say so. As your manner betrays you as a noblewoman, so your blushes tell us that this man has captured your heart. Since I assume that you did nothing to pursue him, he must have done something to catch your attention."

"He asked me for a kiss," Lothíriel blurted out.

"And you granted his request," Faramir stated. "I do not think badly of you, Lothíriel, these are difficult times. But, as you know, your father asked me to look after you and I would hope if there was anything more you would tell me."

"Then it must not have been my brother you encountered after all. He is always discrete when it comes to women. I cannot imagine that he would kiss a young unmarried noblewoman unless he intended the honorable pursuit of her heart," Éowyn quickly added, with a surreptitious and wicked wink at Faramir.

"I have stayed much longer than I should have. I have to go back to the ward." Lothíriel flounced off with an uncharacteristic abruptness worthy of Éowyn herself. Faramir was uncertain if she was angry or embarrassed or both.

The White Lady of Rohan sighed deeply and looked, as was her wont, toward the East with a melancholy gaze, after a few moments she spoke, "Your cousin is a young woman with a generous heart. She dislikes seeing me despondent and exerts great effort, even at her own expense, to distract me. I can easily understand why my brother has fallen in love with her."
"My Lady, your perspicacity surprises me," Faramir answered with a smile.
At the Morannon

Prince Imrahil observed Éomer as the young king circled the campsites talking with his men. His cheerful, determined manner appeared to infuse them with courage. Éomer manifested no outward sign of his awareness of the dire circumstance, except that he did not settle in one place.

The smoky grime-filled air burned Imrahil's eyes, causing a heavy congested feeling in his chest, and left a bitter metallic taste at the back of his throat. He could hear wolves howling in the distance and rustlings outside the periphery of the camp of unseen evil things. Among the quiet campsites of the host, the only ones that still gave off the sounds of muffled conversations and occasional soft laughter were those of his own Rohirrim warriors and of the Swan Knights of Dol Amroth.

Imrahil noted how Éomer greeted every rider as a friend and brother, and saw how the sight of their king moving among them comforted all. His easy comradeship, rather than reducing his kingly stature in any way, increased his nobility in the eyes of his troops. This young man is not only a fierce warrior, Imrahil thought, but a magnetic leader and has the potential to be a wise king. Would that our world survives tomorrow to see that promise accomplished.

* * *

Éomer ambled toward a fire where the sons of Imrahil were resting. Greeting Prince Imrahil in passing, he squatted near Prince Elphir, the Dol Amroth heir, and his brothers. Éomer shook his head and gestured that he did not wish to interrupt, when the young men made moves to rise to welcome him.

Éomer glanced at Amrothos, Imrahil's youngest son. He had a look about him that was almost Elvish in grace and demeanor. Perhaps the legends of the ancestry of the line of the princes of Dol Amroth had some truth in them. Éomer was struck that Amrothos appeared too slender, boyish and fair for his role in tomorrow’s confrontation. But he had seen him on the Pelennor Fields and knew he was not only older than he looked, but a fully trained and blooded Swan Knight. Amrothos smiled charmingly, unselfconsciously in recognition of Éomer and continued with the story he had been telling.

"Then, after we finished dancing, I guided her out of the doorway and onto the terrace. But when I tried to kiss her, she pushed me away from her with both hands, squealing like a stuck pig."

"And, when, little brother, in your limited and citified experiences, have you heard such a pig squeal?" Elphir laughed.

"You should follow father's advice. Stay away from young noblewomen, unless you have serious
intentions," Erchirion added intolerantly, clearly making a point he had made countless times before. "She will either react as your young lady did, or worse yet, if she have her wits about her, you may find her father approaching ours the following day demanding you make an honest woman of his not-so-fair daughter."

"I only approach the ones who are fair of form and face, brother. I have not your taste for courtesans or discreet women, as you name them, who are old enough to be my mother," Amrothos answered.

"Such refinement, Amrothos. Courtesan is an elegant name indeed for the majority of our dear brother's regular female companions," chuckled Elphir.

"I object to your 'old enough to be my mother' portrayal. Since when did women in Dol Amroth start bearing children at eight or ten years of age?" Erchirion growled.

"What about you, Elphir? You pursued and won the heart of an aristocratic woman without resorting to bored old wives or, if the word courtesan is too refined for your taste, paying whores for comfort?" demanded Amrothos.

"I must insist that the two of you keep my esteemed wife out of your barracks room' twaddle," Elphir said with a pretense of superciliousness, giving Éomer a droll wink. "However, in her defense, I must admit that she certainly did not squeal like a farm animal when I first touched her. I recall the sound she made was more of a low charming moan of pure rapture." At that all three of the young Dol Amroth princes laughed at their own nonsense. Éomer quietly rose, gave them a small nod, and, walking off a short piece, lowered himself to sit cross-legged next to Prince Imrahil.

"My sons are actually less shallow, young or capricious than they sound at times like this. But I am sure you have heard this talk often enough and rougher," Imrahil said. "It is the universal method soldiers use to stave off fear and thoughts of death the night before a battle."

"I will admit that such talk sounds less rough in Elvish words than it does in Rohirric," Éomer answered lightly.

Imrahil laughed, "I was not thinking of the tongue, or even skill in its use, but of the fact that my sons' joking is tempered by the fact that their father is listening. I was much the same at their age, but have made it a point not to engage in such banter with them. A man has to hold onto some dignity at my age."

"I cannot pretend to age or dignity, but I have to admit that unexpected responsibility and loss seems to have had a recent chilling effect on my humor," Éomer answered, sounding tired. "When I walked among my men just now, their talk was much like that of your sons, but, as you correctly noted, rougher—horses are always a welcome distraction for the Rohirrim—not in the same context, mind you," he chuckled dryly. "They boast of the prowess of their horses and exchange bawdy jokes about women. But I heard no words of loved ones left behind or mortality. Those subjects are too close to the dread they seek to push back."

"In such circumstances, my escape would be to mull over and argue strategy," Imrahil said. "But unfortunately that as well is unavailable as a topic tonight."

"True," Éomer replied. "You put it well in our last debate in Minas Tirith. We are like children threatening a mail-clad knight with a bow of string and green willow."

"Yes. As Mithrandir pointed out, we cannot win victory by arms, but in taking up arms again we can give the Ring-bearer his only chance, frail though that may be," Imrahil said.
After several minutes of silence, Imrahil spoke again, "It is a necessary gamble, but the stakes are too high. Success tomorrow would give life to our longest held dreams but the result of defeat would be unthinkable. I like to drink, but have never been much of a gambler," Imrahil sighed.

The scent of pipe-weed grew closer, discernable to the two men even on this heavy air. They stood and greeted Aragorn wordlessly, clasping his hand and slapping him on the shoulder in turn. Aragorn settled himself down with them, drew calmly on his pipe, and replied quietly, "I am sorry, Imrahil, my friend. I can offer nothing that will improve our odds on the morrow, but I can provide a drink--compliments of Elrohir and Elladan. I think it will satisfy even your discerning taste."

"I am most grateful, my lord," Imrahil answered, and, raising his voice slightly, asked. "Amrothos, please, can you find three cups for us?"

Éomer appreciatively took the cup that was offered. He stifled the urge to ask how the sons of Elrond had agreed to part with this rare vintage, without at least insisting upon sharing it, when he realized that they doubtless had not the stomach for it on this night. Then, so softly did the sound drift in the windless air that at first he thought he had imagined it, he heard two voices singing of the creation of the stars. Looking in the direction of the music, he saw, illuminated in faint firelight, the tall form, strong and relentless, of the Elf Legolas. With the reflection on his light hair and pale visage, he appeared as luminescent as one of those High Elves of ancient legends, staring off into the darkness seeking the source of the melody as well.

"My brothers," Aragorn said, his expression impassive, "usually so lustful for life and eager in war, revert to their pensive Elvish side tonight."

"I am sorry there are no stars for them here," Éomer, having learned something of Elvenkind in these past weeks, said sympathetically.

The three men, calm and resolute, touched their cups and were content to wait out this night together in silent trust.

When he finally stretched out on the unyielding ground, Éomer allowed himself to think of her. In his imagination, she was a light to counter his personal darkness. Thoughts of her delicate fragrance, the feel, through all those layers of cloth, of her slender yet womanly body, her long fall of raven hair and clear grey eyes, her fragile Elvish beauty so cunningly marked by the charming flaws of mortality, could make long hours of riding pass swiftly.

But, those were not the qualities that drew him so strongly to her, he thought. As a man used to assessing qualities of others quickly and making swift decisions on their employment, he had unconsciously formed strong opinions of her in the three days he had observed her in the Houses of Healing. He had deduced that she was highly born and the sort of woman who had never been spoken to in cold anger or contempt, much less ungraciously touched, and yet she had calmly tended repulsive wounds and reassured combative, gore-covered soldiers who were half crazed with pain and terror. She had none of the battled-hardened courage of those with nothing left to lose, but nonetheless had held her head high when faced with the knowledge that all she knew and loved could soon be mutilated and destroyed. She comforted the coarsest of his countrymen with the same grace she would show a prince.

Instead of feeling the aggressor, as he might have felt in dealing so forwardly with such a young maiden, the lost child in him had sought solace in her self-assurance. Her ability to see and accept his weakness renewed his spirit. Perhaps a woman of her compassion and resourcefulness, although young, might be a fit queen for my beloved and beautiful land, war-torn and plundered as it is. The courage to embrace him, a stranger, a seasoned warrior, so nearly embittered at times by loss and concern, and not fear to be tainted by that shadow, showed that she had strength and hope.
It is childlike foolishness to entertain such thoughts, he judged, but even here so near the end, it is hard to push down yearnings in the hearts of mortal men. He flushed then at the memory of the quick heat in her response to his kisses, despite her obvious innocence. Hope and despair rushed through him in equal measure and he thought of Imrahil's earlier words. Tomorrow will bring the realization of dreams or unspeakable horror.

* * * *

Thanks to William Shakespeare for providing images and inspiration for this chapter in Henry V, which will always be for me the quintessential night-before-battle description and whose King Henry shares multiple traits with my Éomer.
Lothíriel considered leaving the Houses of Healing to stay overnight at her family's townhouse. It was also on the Sixth level of the city but at the far end, facing the West. Unlike the Lady Éowyn, she preferred to look to the West. It soothed her to turn her gaze toward the sea, toward the Bay of Belfalas and her beloved Dol Amroth, all of which she feared she would never see again.

It was late evening when Lothíriel finally thought to leave the Houses of Healing. However, a profound reluctance gripped her at the notion of returning to the now darkened halls of her Minas Tirith home, empty except for a minimal staff of family retainers.

The ghosts of the city house should have been soothing ones. Her father's occasional trips to Minas Tirith always turned into holidays if the rest of the family accompanied him. The rooms of Prince Imrahil's townhouse had echoed over the years with Boromir's booming affectionate voice and Faramir's compassionate amused one calling out to Lothíriel and her brothers. The older cousins had been good with children and as they grew older served as mentors to her brothers. In turn, the Dol Amroth heirs provided Faramir and Boromir with a familial intimacy and acceptance missing in the Steward's residence since the death of their mother.

Throughout her childhood, their Minas Tirith home had been a place of song, music and laughter--most of all, laughter. Lothíriel recalled the merry warmth of family gatherings, where even her Uncle Denethor's dour countenance had occasionally softened a little. As she grew older, there were glittering diplomatic affairs, where she had basked in her father's praise for her adeptness as a hostess.

All of these things formed a part of her cherished memories of that house. Instead of making that short walk, Lothíriel had collapsed again physically and emotionally exhausted on the narrow cot in the Houses of Healing that she had claimed as her own more than a week ago.

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Lothíriel's Dream
The dream came to Lothíriel, not with the feverish grip that Faramir, Boromir and Imrahil had described in their recounting of visions of foretelling, but as a gentle falling into a softer reality. The images shifted, not slowly enough to examine carefully, but melting one into the next too swiftly to focus upon. The Minas Tirith townhouse, brightly lit by hundreds of candles, was the scene of a celebration, of Mettarë perhaps, she could not be sure. She saw herself, much the same as now, but with her hair piled high upon her head in the style of a married woman. Viewing everything as an observer from a distance, she saw her horse lord approach her, put his arms about her waist and pull her close against him with a seductive smile.

Then her perception shifted. She felt his lips touch her bare shoulder and the feathery caress of his whisper against her ear. It would have been an inappropriate gesture, too intimate and frank to be acceptable in Gondorian society as she knew it, but in her dream those around them observed the couple with smiles of sympathetic acceptance. Then she saw Éowyn, proud and beautiful as ever, but with a tender, happy countenance, look up at Faramir with blushing admiration. The dream faded and the images disappeared like a shoreline overtaken by a heavy fog.

When Lothíriel arose from her cot shortly after dawn, she also immediately recalled her dream. What use are wishes and dreams, she thought. Finally, we have come to the end of it all. She immediately flushed with shame. She remembered her father's kind, courageous face, her brothers and, of course, the lord of Rohan who had claimed her heart. Then she imagined her cousin Faramir's grave earnest voice. He would have added, "...or a perhaps a new tomorrow."

Éowyn's Dream

Nearby in her modest chamber, Éowyn tossed fitfully and at last descended into her own dream. She stood on the walls of Minas Tirith in bright sunlight. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her in what seemed an accustomed, familiar embrace; she leaned into him, secure and content. As she lifted her head turning slightly to look up at him, she rejoiced at sight of his tousled dark hair and his clear grey eyes. His body felt solid and utterly right pressed against hers. His scent was that of fresh pine soap. His beardless cheek as soft against hers as that of a boy, told her that it could only be Faramir. He took her by the shoulders, turned her around and claimed her mouth with an ardent lingering kiss, warm, tender and meltingly sensual. She slowly opened her lips to him, allowing him to coaxingly touch her tongue with his own.

As Éowyn slowly awakened in the dim early light, she remembered her dream, at first longingly and then with annoyance. As though to cast off an unwelcome spell, she shook herself, and thought, that tenacious man haunts my every waking hour and now he even insinuates himself into my dreams. Well, I have never denied, even to myself, that he is a remarkably attractive man.

* * *

That the morning, the warm sunny weather of the previous week had fled replaced by what seemed a malevolent return of winter. A chill wind whipped around the walls of the Sixth level of Minas Tirith. One week had passed since the Armies of the West had set out for the Gates of Mordor. The day had come when the host would engage the enemy and the last chance to create the diversion upon which all hope for the future rested.

When Lothíriel came into the kitchen, she found Ioreth supervising the kitchen staff, bustling about loading up a wheeled cart with heavy plates and cups, a giant kettle of tea, baskets of bread and, of all things, a large ceramic bowl of steaming boiled eggs.

"This large one here is yours, my lady. Look. Things are returning to normal. There is an egg for each of your men. There also will be meat and fresh vegetables to make stew later today," she
announced cheerfully. Lothíriel knew that Ioreth was not so foolish as to believe there was anything ordinary about this time and place and sought only to give comfort. Nonetheless, instead of being glad at Ioreth's kindly words, Lothíriel thought acidly, *Does she think I am child to be soothed with pretty tales?*

It was all Lothíriel could do to control her tongue, which she feared grew more caustic with each passing day. "Thank you, Mistress Ioreth," she replied evenly. "It has probably been months since any of them have seen an egg."

After seeing to her patients, Lothíriel could no longer bear to be alone. Despite the bitter wind whipping about the garden, she walked outside, shivering in the light cloak she had quickly grabbed as she left the hall. She hoped to find Éowyn or Faramir. The garden was deserted. Nothing, not even birdsong, competed with the skittering of a few dry leaves and twigs driven along the ground by the blustery wind.

At last, she found Éowyn in her room staring out of her window with its repellent eastern view. Shuddering, Lothíriel snapped, *Ai, Elbereth, Éowyn! How can you be anything but morbid looking at Orodruin all day!*

"Good morning to you too, Princess Sunshine," Éowyn answered brusquely.

"Do you mind if I come in?" Lothíriel answered, entering and flopping herself on Éowyn's bed, somewhat mollified. She had learned that if Éowyn barked back, it was a sign that she was willing to accept company. Silence would have meant a refusal. Noticing that Éowyn was again wearing the same flowing white dress, she said, "I knew I should have gone to our house last night. I have wardrobes filled with dresses that you could use. They might be a little long, but we could easily hem them."

"It is clean. I even ironed it," Éowyn replied.

"I see. But it is going to be threadbare soon from so much washing," Lothíriel said.

"Perhaps, or maybe I will not need it for much longer," Éowyn answered. Lothíriel laughed bitterly.

"You may be right. I was furious earlier because poor Ioreth tried to tell me things are returning to normal, because we received a new supply of food that included eggs," Lothíriel admitted grudgingly. "But I want to stop thinking about all that. I am weary of my own thoughts. Tell me a story."

"You tell me a story. You and Faramir are the ones with all of the stories and poems," Éowyn countered.

"You know them all already. Tell me about Rohan. Tell me about what your life was like before," Lothíriel pleaded.

"You do not want to hear about sadness, death and treachery. Not today," Éowyn said.

"There is more to tell, Éowyn. You love your people, your country, your brother," demanded Lothíriel. "Tell me about the good things you remember."

"You met my brother..." she began.

"We are not sure that was your brother," Lothíriel objected, "I do not have enough information."

Éowyn laughed, "Lothíriel, why do you refuse to accept that the man you met was my brother?"
Lothíriel could not answer at first, but after a moment, spoke faltering, "If he becomes too real to me, then, should I lose him, it would break my heart. Since I do not really know him, then my unfulfilled desire for him remains just another wish which makes it bearable."

Éowyn looked skeptical and asked, "Have you had so many faded dreams? I would not have thought you of all people had."

"Oh, Éowyn. Have not we all? Some that seemed enormous at the time and others that I knew were small but that I tried to make grand, out of what my father calls an excess of passion. Things that I wished for and could not have—everything from dresses, to horses, to men. But this one, if I permit it, would make all of those seem as nothing," Lothíriel replied.

"There were men?" asked Éowyn.

"The first one was someone you actually know. When I was five years old and he was a handsome young soldier, I decided that I would only marry my cousin Faramir. My brothers tortured me mercilessly over that and teased him about it—in my presence no less," Lothíriel laughed. "Sweet Faramir held me on his lap and promised that if I stopped crying he would read me a story."

"But after you were grown?" Éowyn asked.

"There was a minor noble of Dol Amroth. He was fine to look at indeed. The same type as Faramir: tall, lithe, pale, black hair, with that air of a handsome Elf lord out of an ancient tale. He was a captain of the Swan Knights. Oh, to see him on a horse!" Lothíriel shrugged self-deprecatingly. "He never really looked at me. I did not know that he loved another and while I wished I were just a little older and waited, he married her. I am grateful that my brothers never learned of that one. And you?"

"There is someone. Faramir knows of him," she said. "I think even Éomer guessed, although I did not tell him. I am surprised that you have not heard the tale. There is little enough privacy and a surfeit of gossip if one is of the ruling houses of Gondor or Rohan. I wished to be loved by Lord Aragorn, but he could not love me," Éowyn answered steadily.

"Oh, Éowyn! I am sorry. But you could not have truly known him, not even as well as I knew my Swan Knight," Lothíriel said.

"I knew enough," Éowyn insisted stubbornly.

"You knew he was the heir of Elendil, the king returned, a brave warrior, a leader in battle," Lothíriel responded. "Would you not have known more, before giving him your heart?"

"And you, Lothíriel, what do you know of your so-called captain of Rohan?"

"I know his kisses and I recognize his need of me. I have observed him with his men and not only the way he sat a stallion. That is improvement on my history and at least a place to begin," Lothíriel said. "But, I also know enough to fear my own reckless intemperance," she laughed bitterly.

Éowyn answered, "I am weary of this talk. Would you still have me tell you a story?"

"Yes, I would. But I worry when you are so miserable," Lothíriel said. "Éowyn, you have become my friend, almost a sister in these dark days where we stand nearly alone at the brink. What would I have done without you and Faramir?"

Then Éowyn shrugged and briefly grasped Lothíriel's hand, "Never mind, let me tell you of my handsome brother. That will provide you something to think about when you are in need of distraction. He is brave and generous and has an easy laugh. You have brothers. You must know
how much I love him, for I have only one. He looked after me when our parents died. He wiped my
tears and rescued me from my nightmares. Others consider him a most gallant and valorous warrior.
He is known throughout the Riddermark for his bold passion for justice. I know him as a profoundly
decent and honest man.”

Lothíriel said, "I dreamed of him last night-I mean the man you believe is your brother." Éowyn
laughed, shaking her head.

"And did he kiss you again in your dream?" Éowyn asked with a tolerant smile.

"Yes," Lothíriel answered, "I mean, a type of kiss. He softly kissed my shoulder. I was wearing an
elegant low-cut gown."

"I had a dream last night also. I received a far superior kiss in my dream," Éowyn scoffed.

"Was it Lord Aragorn who kissed you in your dream?" Lothíriel asked, instantly wary.

"No. It was not. It was another. Someone who, according to your logic, I know much better. In my
dream he certainly knew how to kiss,” Éowyn said sighing. "It does not matter. Dreams are but the
result of restless sleep--too much tea, too late at night," she continued mulishly.

"That is not necessarily true. Dreams can foretell the future, or at very least reveal one's innermost
wishes that one has not admitted to while awake," Lothíriel insisted.

"Your dreams, or Faramir's, perhaps," Éowyn laughed. "But my dreams are just dreams and nothing
more. At least I am grateful that it was not a nightmare."

* * * *

Much later Lothíriel rushed to the window because a great howling wind had arisen suddenly. She
spotted Éowyn and Faramir standing at the wall looking toward the East. They stood close together.
It blew their hair, black and gold, streaming out behind them, mingling in the air. The dark, smoky
clouds completely shadowed the weak morning sun and a final ominous wave of fear and dread
swept over Lothíriel. At that moment the wind carried all the darkness and clouds away and a
brilliant sun burst forth in the cleared blue sky.

Then the Eagles flew over the city singing:

Sing and rejoice, ye people of the Tower of Guard,
for your watch hath not been in vain,
and the Black Gate is broken,
and your King hath passed through,
and he is victorious.

And, so it was that Lothíriel, Éowyn and Faramir and all of the city of Minas Tirith learned of the
destruction of the one ring, the fall of Sauron and the victory of the Armies of the West before the
Black Gates.

Minas Tirith still waited, for it would be days before the first couriers began to arrive from the host
with news of their families and friends. However, it was a far different sort of waiting. Lothíriel
thought of it as hope based in reality, rather than the fragile thread of hope tied to will alone that she
had held onto for so long.

Éowyn stayed in the Houses of Healing. Éomer sent messengers to Éowyn, begging her to join him
in Ithilien where the armies were resting, recuperating, and great celebrations were planned. She
refused to leave Minas Tirith.

Faramir energetically attended his duties as the Steward of the City, preparing for the return of the king. He had less time than before to spend with Éowyn in the Houses of Healing, but sought her company whenever he could. Lothíriel saw less of both of them, as she continued her work with her Rohirrim, taking time each day to return to the Prince's townhouse, to open it fully, and supervise preparations for the return of her family and any guests they might bring with them.

On her way one day from the Rohirrim ward to work at the townhouse, Lothíriel stopped by Éowyn's room and, not finding her, went into the garden. Éowyn sat alone, a book unread in her lap, her shoulders slumped forward, the corners of her mouth turned down. Lothíriel sighed with the now habitual exasperation she felt when she found Éowyn like this.

"Éowyn, I have come to ask you to travel with me to Ithilien in two days time. I know your brother has sent for you. My father has sent a guard of Swan Knights to escort me, and extra horses. If you are able to ride, you may have your choice of mounts, gentle or lively, whichever you prefer. The Swan Knights have quality horses, even by your standards." Lothíriel spoke quickly, hoping to talk over the expected objections.

"If you do not want to ride, I can arrange for us to go by the river. What is your preference?"

"I cannot go, Lothíriel. I will await my brother here," Éowyn said. "I thank you for your offer."

"Why not? What keeps you here?" Lothíriel spat out. "If you will not go for yourself, then go for the sake of your brother."

"Please do not press me, friend. I will not go," she answered.

"Fine. As you wish, Éowyn," Lothíriel said and stormed off.

Lothíriel left the Houses of Healing, not to return until mid-morning of the following day. I will ask one more time. It is not healthy that she continues to brood and mope about when the rest of Arda rejoices, she thought as she sought out Éowyn.

Again, she found Éowyn outside and alone. Éowyn looked up at Lothíriel, brightly, expectantly, as she entered the walls of the garden. The change in Éowyn was extraordinary, but Lothíriel was too preoccupied with her mission of deliverance to notice.

Lothíriel, sighed deeply, and asked, "I leave tomorrow, Éowyn. Will you come with me or not?"

"Oh, Lothíriel, I wish to stay here with Faramir. He cannot leave the city and I would have this time to be with him before everyone returns," Éowyn said softly, with a rare blush.

Lothíriel squealed with joy, ran at Éowyn and grabbed her, hugging her tight.

"You love him? Faramir is the best and bravest and noblest of men. You will never regret it."

Éowyn smiled, tears filling her eyes, and kissed Lothíriel heartily on both cheeks. "Yes, I do. Yes, he is, and I know that I will not."

The image of "their hair black and gold, streaming out behind them, mingling in the air" and the song of the Eagle are taken from "The Steward and the King," Return of the King.
When they came to the northern part of Ithilien, Lothíriel was escorted to the wide green Field of Cormallen on the eastern bank of the Anduin between the great river and the Ephel Dúath mountain range. All around she could see crowds milling among tents, booths, wagons and stalls under a glorious sun. It resembled nothing so much as the great midsummer fair held each year in the environs of Dol Amroth. How all of these people had come here so quickly was in itself a marvel to Lothíriel. There were stalls vending every form of food and drink, puppet shows, jugglers, ropedancers, and such like. And throughout the crowds walked minstrels with their lutes, the majority from Dol Amroth, which was famed throughout Gondor and beyond for the number and artistry of its singers and storytellers.

It was not difficult to spot the tent of the Prince of Dol Amroth, even among the multitude of colorful tents and pavilions. It was one of the largest and the most elegant, colored blue and white, flying the silver upon blue flag of Dol Amroth, with its swan-prowed ship faring on the sea. So anxious Lothíriel was to see her brothers and father that she handed over her horse to the nearest Swan Knight esquire, picked up her skirts, and ran.

She heard her brother Amrothos' laugh before she entered the tent. Inside she found her two younger brothers, seated at a long camp table with a diverse assortment of Rangers of Ilithien, Swan Knights, and other guests of high and low stature. Some she recognized and others she did not. Amrothos reached her first and, catching her in his arms, lifted her off her feet and twirled her around. Erchirion was not far behind him. They all three laughed like they had as children and her brothers kissed her repeatedly. They taunted her that for once she was the one who smelled like horse and sweat. She insisted that while she was certainly dusty enough, and may have smelled a bit like horse, she did not stink of sweat.

She asked after her father and oldest brother and was told that they were out and would not be back for a couple of hours, but that she could easily find them.

Erchirion nodded at her dusty, inelegant split-skirt riding habit and said, "I think you will want to clean up a bit and change. Father will want you to meet everyone."

"I will need my luggage," she said. And could scarce believe her eyes when Amrothos hurried out to find it. "Among all the wondrous things I have seen since legends have stepped forth from myth," Lothíriel laughed, repeating a phrase that had become common place in Minas Tirith over the past few days, "that of Amrothos jumping up to wait on me is perhaps the most marvelous."
Amrothos entering the tent with one long large pack, answered, "Of all the wondrous things I have seen, the most astonishing to me, is that our precious Princess of Dol Amroth traveled all the way from Minas Tirith on such a festive occasion with only one bag."

After performing a quick wash up in a curtained area and changing into a light white summer dress, for it was hot that spring day in Ithilien under the brilliant southern sun, she quickly released her long hair and combed it, letting it fall loose, and reappeared.

"Now that I am presentable, brothers, where can I find Papa?" she asked.

Erchirion and Lothíriel walked down a wide avenue created between the tents, arrayed on the long green lawn. All manner of folk strolled around them: riders of Rohan, Rangers from the North and the South, simple farmers, elegant noblemen and women of Gondor, minstrels, tradesmen and vendors. She stopped to look at the wares of a vendor of floral wreaths and on an impulse bought one, wrought of a wildflower, which graced the spring woodlands of Ithilien with its brilliant blue bell-shaped blossoms. These are nearly Dol Amroth blue, she thought. They will wilt quickly, but Papa will appreciate the gesture.

I spot Elphir and Prince Imrahil and rush toward them. Papa embraces me and kisses me on the forehead and then takes both my hands, stands back, and looks at me approvingly. All I can think of is that my darling Papa and brothers are alive and the long years of shadow well behind us.

"You look radiant, my dearest daughter," Imrahil beamed. Elphir for once agreed. "You are beautiful today, Lothíriel, truly beautiful," he beamed at her proudly. I am pleased that my critical older brother thinks I am a fitting representative of Dol Amroth amidst all this joy and splendor. I am clinging onto Elphir, too happy to say anything, when I glimpse, out of the corner of my eye, that Papa has turned to greet someone.

"Éomer," Imrahil said, "you know our entire family, except for my youngest. This is my daughter Lothíriel."

I faintly hear my father's voice, over a tremendous roaring in my ears caused by the rush of blood to my head.

"Lothíriel, this is my dear friend, Éomer King of Rohan." Lothíriel let out a small surprised cry, which her father chose to ignore.

It is he, my horse lord, whose memory has comforted me through all those ominous nights and long dread-racked days of waiting. So, he is, indeed, the heroic young King of Rohan.

Lothíriel's face turned hot. Their eyes met and held. Princess Lothíriel, mistress of the castle of Dol Amroth, ever confident and at ease amongst the ranks of the proud and powerful, shy before no one, struggled to open her mouth and failed. She attempted a bow, but a jerky movement, something between a curtsy and a nod of the head, was all that she could manage.

His tanned face flushes red, not unlike my own, but his warm brown eyes hold mine boldly. A warrior's courage? He takes my trembling hand, and raises it to his lips, and kisses it, holding it a moment longer than courtesy would allow. "It is you," he says, his surprise and delight transparent.

Imrahil asked after Faramir. Elphir commented on the crowds, the plans for assemblies and festivities, and all praised the magnificent summer weather. March had been a cruel month for all, but on the Field of Cormallen that cruelty was but a memory. After a few minutes, Lothíriel looked up at Éomer and softly said, "I have news for you of your sister, my lord."
Éomer turned to Imrahil and said, "Prince Imrahil, your daughter and I met in Minas Tirith in the Houses of Healing, although we were not introduced. I beg you to permit me to deprive you of her company for a short while, for I would hear how my sister fares and your daughter and I had other things to discuss but were abruptly interrupted by our immediate responsibilities when last we met."

Elphir's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Imrahil nodded gravely, his eyes darkening, and replied, "Of course, go for a stroll. Have your talk and enjoy the day."

"Would you like some company?" Elphir asked with a grin and wink.

Éomer restrained a smile, though his eyes were laughing, and answered evenly, "No, Elphir, but thank you for the kind offer."

"My sister? Is she well?" he asks. "Yes, she is. Very well. But I must leave the details for her to tell," I smile.

"And you? Are you happy to see me?" he says huskily, his eyes dancing with barely contained jubilation.

What a fool I feel, so completely enthralled I am. I cannot answer him. Instead, I throw my arms around his shoulders and I pull myself up to cover his mouth with mine again.

"Oh, my pretty, pretty princess," he says, his expression softening, "I shall take that as a 'yes.'" Then, once more turning the tease, "I have imagined endless possibilities of what you would say to me when I found you, but never that you would say nothing. But I am forgetting that we are strangers."

I finally speak, albeit in a hoarse whisper, "I thought I knew you, Éomer, when I did not know your name. But now I am not sure I know you at all. I cannot address him as king after such familiarity, without feeling utterly foolish and pretentious, although my manners tell me I should.

"But you do still want me, little princess?" Éomer asks. His eyes tell me he needs no answer, but the intimacy of his tone, elicits a sound, a small moan, hardly more than a short gasp for air from me.

"I thought you looked a king, all golden, tall and strong, but too much like one to be one," I whisper.

"I think I know you, Lothíriel. I should have imagined that you would have such a name—Lothíriel, flower-garlanded maiden. But you had no flowers in your hair." He straightens my wreath, which has slid precariously to one side, pleasing me with his familiar warm smile.

He holds my face with both hands as though to study it carefully and he laughs aloud, "You also look a great deal like your father and your youngest brother, though I did not see it until now. I am not a complete stranger; your father knows me and likes me well enough. That is, he did, until a few minutes ago."

"If he objected, he would certainly have followed us. Or at very least sent my brother after us," I laugh back.

"That is better. She speaks and even laughs," he smiles at me. He kisses me, gently this time, first on the lips, then softly on my forehead, my eyelids, the end of my nose, and enfolds me in his arms,
resting my head gently against his chest and stroking my hair. He sighs contentedly. We remain this way in silence for some time. Finally I raise my head to look into his handsome face.

"Now what do we do?" I ask.

"We learn to know one another better. Do you prefer chicken or fish? Wine or ale?" he asks, with an endearing grin.

"Need you ask? I am from Dol Amroth, with the best seafood in Gondor," I laugh, "but chicken is fine too. I certainly prefer wine, but I could learn to like ale. I have heard it is the drink of choice in Edoras," I say, blushing when I hear the presumption in my words—in Edoras!

He appears not to notice, but then says softly, "Then you truly might consider leaving a magnificent castle on a cliff by the sea for the windswept war-torn fields of a barbarian king?"

"Do not start teasing me with your exaggerated cultural distinctions," I protest. "You forget I already know your people well, from the time I have spent with them in the Houses of Healing."

He laughs aloud and then asks again so softly, "You did not answer my question, Lothíriel. Would you consider leaving Dol Amroth for the Riddermark?"

"That would depend entirely upon you," I say, trying hard to sound playful and not overeager, but I feel far from tranquil.

"Then I will do whatever I must to convince you," he says, and kisses me again, this time lustfully and long. He takes his mouth from mine for an instant and whispers, "Will you come with me? Will you be my love?" If I was not already, I am utterly lost from this moment. If he asks me to walk into the waters of the Anduin with him, I will, without a backward glance.

He must see it in my face, because he does wait for my answer but takes me into his arms and begins kissing me more urgently still. Finally, I am aware of our crowded surroundings and the fact that we must appear positively indecent to anyone passing by—all this impassioned kissing and frantic clutching. I gently withdraw from him.

"Then I may speak with your father?" he asks.

I have never made promises lightly, but so desperately in love am I that I am afraid to risk an hour.

"Yes, yes, oh, yes," I answer.

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Composed and careful to appear to be only the best of friends, Lothíriel and Éomer, her hand placed through the crook of his arm and his resting lightly upon hers, walked back slowly toward the spot where they had left her father and brothers. Even amidst this glittering assembly, they made an arresting picture. He was glorious sunlight, with his hair of beaming gold, and she was a whisper of midnight, black shining hair, her dress as white as a summer moon. Lothíriel held her head high, actually to keep her flower garland in place on her silky straight hair, but the effect was regal. Éomer appeared to onlookers much as Lothíriel saw him—kingly, strong and valiant.

Imrahil, Elphir and Erchirion had moved only a few feet and had been joined by Amrothos, the Elf Legolas, and Elrond's sons. The entire group turned as one, upon noticing that Amrothos was smiling broadly in the direction of Éomer and Lothíriel, and watched the couple approach.

Seeing all eyes upon them, Lothíriel's face turned crimson. Éomer moved almost imperceptibly closer

"Éomer King, Princess Lothíriel," Elladan said, "I was just telling the princes of Belfalas, that we are playing messengers to King Elessar this morning, who requests that you attend him at the royal pavilion shortly."

"Lothíriel," her father asked, "have you made the acquaintance of everyone here?"


"I might have guessed that," Imrahil said flatly. "You seem to have met a great number of people in Minas Tirith."

"Princess Lothíriel, I am pleased to see you again, and looking so refreshed and lovely this time," Elrohir said with an amused openly flirtatious grin. Elladan shot his twin an impatient frown. Legolas mimed impassive innocence, with the bare suggestion of a smile. Éomer's mien was carefully controlled, while Lothíriel's brothers, to a man, sparked with suppressed hilarity.

Lothíriel, feeling herself the butt of an incomprehensible joke, nonetheless answered undaunted, "Thank you kindly, Prince Elrohir. The lack of dirt and gore becomes you as well."

"Well done, Princess," Elrohir said brightly, while the others, with the exception of her father, laughed heartily. "Please accept my apologies. I carelessly included you in an unfortunate attempt to tease Legolas and my brother. When we spotted you earlier with Éomer, Legolas waxed eloquent on how exquisite is your beauty with its evident mix of Elven blood and the intensity of the mortal. My more prosaic brother acknowledged your loveliness but noted that he almost did not recognize you, having last seen you careworn in a bloodstained dress."

"My lady," Elladan interrupted, "I am sorry that my brother's all too infrequent attempts at apology often add to the original offense. My encounter with you on the night of the Pelennor may not have been with a joyful maid wearing flowers in her hair, but has reminded me more than once that valor is not limited to the battlefield." Legolas, Elrohir and the three younger princes of Dol Amroth appeared thoroughly entertained.

"All apologies are accepted, lords Elrohir and Elladan. In the future I will have no difficulty in distinguishing between the two of you, though you are equally enchanting. I need only remember that Elladan is the kind diplomatic twin and Elrohir the wicked reckless one," Lothíriel replied with an enticing laugh. She looked to Éomer to see if he was laughing. He distinctly was not. Oh, Valar!

Lothíriel thought, I see what the Elves mean by the intensity of the mortal.

In the distance, trumpets sounded and cheers echoed. Dragging himself back from whatever thoughts had silenced him, Imrahil said gravely, "It is best that we be going. We ought not to keep the king waiting." Then turning to face his daughter and Éomer, he said blandly, "Did the two of you complete your unfinished discussion?"

Éomer answered, his somber expression giving way to a slow easy smile, "We did not finish, my lord, but we made a good beginning."

The handsome company made its way toward the king's pavilion, swallowed up in the increasingly noisy throng moving in the same direction. Lothíriel once again placed her hand on Éomer's arm and looked up at him. His face softened as he caught her eye and leaned in close to her, whispering
mischievously into her ear, his breath on her neck causing her to shiver with pleasure, "Flirting with Elves, my love? I should make you pay for that."
The Celebration

The sweet high tones of clarions announced the assembly on the long lawn of the field of Cormallen as their small group walked toward the dais. Lord Aragorn waited for Prince Imrahil and King Éomer to take their places with him as the leaders of the armies of the free peoples of the West. As the two men walked away from Lothíriel to join the returning king, she studied Éomer and thought: *The love I have for this man could help build the unsullied future for which we have yearned. My line is old and diluted. But, I can hope to unite Elvish legend of ages past through the legacy of the faithful of Númenor to the young blood of the resilient truehearted Rohirrim.* Suddenly the audacity of her own ambition frightened her. *Do I attempt to turn my passion and his need into something more than it is or could be?*

For the first time since she had arrived in Ithilien, Lothíriel looked at her father searchingly and saw the cost of this victory on his gentle face. Despite his noble Númenórean mien, Imrahil had visibly aged in the past month. His face was strained, stretched thin, and he hid a haunted look beneath his smile. She remembered the night he had led the near suicidal sortie out of the city gates to rescue Faramir, only to nearly lose him again to Denethor’s final descent into madness. The Battle of the Pelennor followed and, finally, the march to the Morannon where he again risked not only his life, but also those of his three sons.

Her brothers bore their scars as well, perhaps more deeply concealed. Their characteristic high spirits persisted, but she made out a guarded glitter in their eyes that was not there before. She had seen that look before—of too much horror and bloodshed—in Éomer she realized. She had sensed this darkness was not as new to Éomer as it was to her brothers. Yet, here in the sunlight amid this great assembly held to honor the heroes of this struggle and pay homage to its fallen, she believed that each of them could now begin to heal. She did not try to blink back the tears of recognition that, at long last, the darkness had truly passed. The shadow that she had known throughout her life, tamped down and controllable at times, or sinister and looming as it had been those last days in Minas Tirith before the fall of Sauron, had now ended.

Lothíriel took her place at the front of the assembly along with her brothers, Riders of Rohan, Swan Knights, Northern and Southern Dúnedain, and the Lords Elladan and Elrohir of Imladris. In places of honor stood the stalwart luminous Prince Legolas, the doughty Dwarf Gimli, and the two youngest *Periannath*, Pippin and Merry, awaiting the foremost among their fellowship, the Ringbearers, to make their appearance. On all sides, the sun reflected harshly from rank upon glittering rank of the armor-clad warriors who had risked all for this victory.

The wearied Lord Aragorn that Lothíriel had observed in the chaotic Houses of Healing the night of the Pelennor had transformed. As King Elessar, he stood before them high and glad of face, kingly, lord of Men, dark-haired with eyes of grey.
"My friend," Aragorn said smiling as he warmly clasped Prince Imrahil. Turning to King Éomer, he caught him in a rougher embrace and with a sudden wide grin, said, "brother." Lothíriel could not resist peeking at Amrothos, who was near to bursting with suppressed amusement. Each instantly understood what the other was thinking. Lothíriel thought, *Amrothos thinks of Denethor! He could not have greeted his own sons with such affection. Everything, indeed, has changed and for the better.* As Lothíriel turned from her brother, she caught Éomer's eye and knew by the flash of his slight controlled grin at her that he had understood as well.

Aragorn turned solemn, straightened and looked out over the crowd, which hushed instantly, expectant. Then Mithrandir the wise led the Ringbearers, Frodo and Sam, to the front of the assembly, whereupon they were greeted with glad shouts and the clatter of raised swords and spears.

Minstrels sang out in Elvish and in the Common Tongue:

*Long live the Halflings! Praise them with great praise!*
*Praise them with great praise, Frodo and Samwise!*

"Praise them with great praise," the crowd shouted in response.

Aragorn stepped forward and fell to one knee in homage before Frodo and Sam; the entire assembly followed. Rising, he embraced each of them in turn and led them to take their places on either side of him on the dais. The clear voices of minstrels rang out with more songs of praise and joy.

Finally, a war-hardened, grey-bearded bard of Rohan took up his battle harp and began a Rohirric lament, nobly pathetic and heroic, in honor of all the fallen and their own Théoden King. The bard did not accompany his deep sonorous chanting with any melody, but with a profoundly moving growling bass harmony laden with all the sadness of mortal men. After the bard completed his chant, Éomer rose to his feet, nodded to the old harpist to play for him as he chanted a translation of the lament into the Common Tongue.

*Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?*
*Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?*
*Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?*
*Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing?*
*They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow.*
*The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.*
*Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning?*
*Or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning?*

His voice was pure and deep. Lothíriel looked up at him. He was magnificent. His manner was free of pretension and he was utterly unembarrassed at his own tears. *I will love this man and stand by him forever,* Lothíriel thought. *By all the Valar, I hope that we do not take on more than we can handle. His people have suffered so much. He is young, I am younger, and he was not raised to be their king.* There was a moment of silence and then a gigantic roar went up from the Rohirrim warriors. Amrothos leaned close to Lothíriel, sensing her need for reassurance, and whispered to her, "They adore him, for he has served Rohan valiantly and risked banishment and imprisonment to stand up to Grima's treachery in defense of their king." For the moment, Lothíriel took comfort from her brother's words and linked her arm with his.

After more songs of sorrow, praise and jubilation, Aragorn stood; the vast assembly rose to its feet; and he led them into the pavilions to a sumptuous banquet, where they ate and drank for the rest of the day. Lothíriel sat between her father and her oldest brother, but this was no formal dinner of the sort held in the great hall of Minas Tirith or even the castle of Dol Amroth. There was much moving about and visiting among all of those seated near them. Several times Éomer came to sit on one side
or the other of her, as Elphir or her father moved about to speak to others.

Her father seemed more relaxed than he had earlier that day and for the first time she had the opportunity to speak with King Elessar. She had told him of the recovery of Faramir and of Éowyn, what she knew of the repair efforts on the first levels of Minas Tirith and of her work with her much loved Rohirrim in the Houses of Healing.

Lothíriel delighted in the kind and gentle manner of this handsome new King of Gondor and spoke with him in complete candor.

"You surely have learned some Rohirric then?" Aragorn asked her.

"Yes. Like the words for ale, mead, and beer. All things in short supply in the Houses of Healing," Lothíriel laughed. "And several words for horse," she added, "eoh, hengest, hors, and meah are a few that I remember."

"Among all of those valiant young warriors no one thought to teach a beautiful young woman any gentler words?" he teased her, laughing lightly.

"You mean like words of love. Oh, no, the Rohirrim soldiers are most respectful to me and Éomer speaks perfect Elvish, with a charming accent," Lothíriel said. Then flushing a furious red, she continued, "I have no talent whatsoever for dissembling."

"That is a characteristic that will serve you well, if you become attached to Éomer. The Rohirrim value straightforwardness," Aragorn answered seriously. "The last Gondorian consort of a king in Rohan had little of that and scant respect for its people or customs either."

"Yes, you speak of his grandmother, Morwen of Lossarmach. I know something of that history. But, Éomer has not raised the topic with me," she answered.

"Speaking of love in Elvish was more urgent, perhaps," Aragorn said smiling. "But I do not doubt he has considered it."

"He has had the opportunity to observe my interest in his countryman and their affection for me," Lothíriel answered. "Perhaps that reassured him."

"Perhaps you are right. I have observed that, although he is willing to take risks, they are calculated. The loyalty he receives from his men has been earned," Aragorn added thoughtfully.

From a distance, Imrahil watched Lothíriel speaking with Aragorn with interest. He thought, she is a fit consort for any king--beautiful and the highest-ranking woman in Gondor. She is but a girl and yet appears as self-assured with this great man as she is when she speaks with her brothers. However, like all of us, she deserves a respite. Circumstances have forced her into tasks beyond her years in this past period.

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Later in the evening Prince Imrahil was speaking with a Gondorian noble in a somewhat isolated corner. Éomer followed him and lingered nearby waiting to catch him alone.

Éomer finally was able to approach Imrahil. "My lord," he asked earnestly, "may I speak with you about Lothíriel?"

"I presume you wish to tell me that you want to marry my daughter," stated Imrahil flatly, impatient. Éomer found himself reddening, but fought his rising irritation at Imrahil's dismissive tone.
"Want to marry her? With all my heart, I do. So, I gather, would half the men of Gondor. More importantly, she has told me that she also desires to be bound to me. I believe that she can be the queen that Rohan needs. She is loved and trusted already by my troops. But aside from all of that, for myself alone, I want you to know that I never have and never could love anyone as I love her," Éomer declared.

Imrahil listened and then replied, "I have told all of my children that I would never hold them to a match based purely on political expediency. I have also promised them I would not object to any reasonable choice of their own based upon love. However, Lothíriel is a girl of scarcely twenty years of age. I cannot agree to her betrothal at this time."

"Sir, I did not come to you expecting a formal agreement here and now, but to admit that I have spoken to her of love and would not hide this from you," Éomer replied softly.

Imrahil's face shadowed with thought, "I appreciate your honesty, but must ask you to have patience. I do not wish to discuss this matter now."

Éomer's eyes narrowed, "So, prince, we will discuss it again later." He turned away from Imrahil with a small, sharp bow. Imrahil apologetically grabbed his arm and clasped his hand firmly as he left.

* * *

After the full moon had risen, the feasting gave way to music and dance. The music of flutes and viols joined that of the harpists and pipers and Lothíriel was immediately swept into the whirl of it. There were so many men and so few ladies. She danced with Swan Knights she had known for years, with her brothers, with her father and many others. Rohirrim who she had met in the Houses of Healing bowed to her with a fierce, untutored grace and led her onto the floor. When their comrades-in-arms saw she was adept at not only the elegant courtly dances of Gondor, but also with the rollicking swift movements of their own lively tunes, every Rider of Rohan wanted to partner the dark-haired Elvish beauty who had captured the heart of their young king.

Lothíriel did not see Éomer when he came upon her from behind and claimed her for a dance. Éomer caught his breath at her look of such apparent pleasure in her surprise. He took her in his arms and whirled her about in the slow graceful movements of a tender courtly melody. "I have always wanted a man who could dance," she grinned.

"You do not lack for competent dance partners," Éomer chuckled. "The Dol Amroth knights seem particularly skilled."

"The people of the coastal regions of Gondor are known for their love of music and dance. Yet, you are the equal of any of them. I find skill without passion rather boring," Lothíriel teased.

"The truth is, Lothíriel, I find being this close to you so provoking, so irresistible, that I am surprised I am not stepping all over your feet. Is that passion enough for now?" Éomer shifted closer, his mouth pausing just a finger's width from her lips and whispered, "I love you and I shall never tire of telling you so, little princess."

She whispered, "I love you," back to him with a tremor in her voice. The power of her physical craving for him combined with her foresight of a shared destiny mesmerized and overwhelmed her. He smiled down at her tenderly. "Do not fear. No matter what the obstacles, I will love you forever and will never, ever let you go."

Lothíriel reached up and brushed the unruly straw-colored hair away from Éomer's eyes with her
Fingers. Her voice caught as she asked, "What obstacles?"

"It seems your father is not ready to release you yet," he answered softly.

Éomer leaned down and covered her tiny, confused "Oh" by touching his lips to hers, briefly, chastely when the music ended. "Do not worry, Lothíriel, I will fight for you."

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Lothíriel approached Imrahil and asked, "Will you dance with me, Papa?"

"Of course I will, my darling girl," he answered, relieved that although he had seen her speaking with Éomer, who he thought had doubtless told her of their discussion, she apparently was not going to pout or complain. His reprieve would not last long.

As they moved onto the dance floor Lothíriel looked up at her father, waiting, relentless, to see what he would say to her. He recognized her expression of ardent stubbornness. Imrahil knew that look so well. *My children have no fear of me,* he thought. *I have Denethor to thank for that. I avoided at any cost that I would ever see in my children the silence and apprehension I saw in Faramir and Boromir in their father's presence.*

Imrahil finally sighed deeply and spoke, "So, Éomer King tells me he is quite taken with you and that you share his interest."

"Share his interest?" Lothíriel hissed sarcastically. "Papa, what did you say to Éomer?" she demanded icily, careful to suppress the wild anger she felt growing in her chest.

"I did not say I looked unfavorably on his suit. Éomer is unquestionably a man of honor and trust. He is as capable a field commander as I have seen and has inspired loyalty and confidence in his people. But, he is a young man and has been thrust unexpectedly into the kingship of a devastated, war-ravished country."

Lothíriel realized that her father spoke in complete seriousness and obviously expressed a strongly held opinion on the relationship between her and Éomer. It became clear to her that an immediate betrothal with a short waiting period was not at all in Imrahil's plans, which, although she had not realized it until that exact moment, was exactly what she had been hoping would be the result of this discussion.

"Papa, listen to me. We love one another. He needs me," she nearly sobbed.

"Neither of you are competent to make such assertions. He is a young man; one who has a suffered much for his years, and is starved for beauty and the comfort of a woman's love. You are caught up with an ideal of a handsome, noble warrior," Imrahil said, losing patience.

"You think I know nothing of war and warriors, after those terrible days in Minas Tirith? If you believe that I can still romanticize about such things, then you must think me a fool, indeed," she insisted.

"I should not have left you there alone, with Faramir so ill," Imrahil said sadly.

"Your precious, righteous Faramir was not too sickly to fall in love and no one will try to keep him from the one he has chosen," she answered bitterly.

"It is impossible to have a rational discussion with you, Lothíriel."
"But I love him, Papa. That is all you need to know!" she cried. Imrahil reared up, outraged.

"Love? What do you know of that emotion, Lothíriel? You who are barely twenty years old and brought up sheltered and protected? You and Éomer do not even know one another."

"Do you truly think we are so blind and stupid? I could simply take him as my lover and you would be none the wiser," she spat back at him.

"Neither of you would settle for that. You are both too aware of your obligations," Imrahil insisted, his voice softening.

"You contradict yourself, Papa. You cannot have it both ways," Lothíriel answered, almost regaining some control. But then she felt a surge of pure panic, "Papa, you cannot do this to me. How can you deny me this?" she asked desperately.

They stood staring at one another in the middle of the dance floor. Tears of rage and frustration spilled from Lothíriel eyes. "Papa!" she whispered frantically. Her father took her arm, led her from the dance floor into the darkness on the side, and then took her face in his hands.

"You frighten me, Lothíriel," he said gently. "It is your unbridled, near frenetic, passion that worries me. The two of you are as transparent as glass; everyone sees it. I have seen such attachments before and they did not turn out well." Imrahil signaled for his esquire, miming that he wished a drink.

"Papa, you lived the life you chose and raised us to be independent. Is it not a little late for you to change your practice?" Lothíriel stated, her voice betraying anger and disappointment in equal measure. Imrahil was encouraged that she did not pull away from him.

"I feared I would never see you again and you cannot give me one single day of peace." Imrahil asked, taking the glass his esquire offered and placing it in Lothíriel's hands.

"Thank you kindly, Papa. This should solve my problem," she answered disdainfully downing the small glass in one quick swallow. Imrahil's love of spirits, excessive according to Lothíriel, who could nag him like a wife at times, was a subject of long-standing dispute between them.

Back on more familiar ground, Imrahil shook his head in frustration, "Stay here until you are calmer. We cannot discuss this now. I will send Amrothos to talk to you," Imrahil said, thinking of how Lothíriel favored him of all her brothers.

"That shows astonishing judgment, Papa. Sending Amrothos to lecture me about love," she retorted to Prince Imrahil's retreating back.

* * *

The description of Aragorn "high and glad of face, kingly, lord of Men, dark-haired with eyes of grey" and the song of praise to Frodo and Sam is taken from "Field of Cormallen," *Return of the King*. The Rohirric lament, "Where now the horse and the rider?" and description "laden with the sadness of mortal men" (used by Legolas to describe the language of the Rohirrim, but I use it to refer to a form of their music) are from *The Two Towers*, "The King of the Golden Hall."
Lothíriel was a little tipsy when Amrothos arrived to play the dutiful brother to his purportedly unreasonable sister. *Whatever was in the glass Papa gave me was not the light wine I expected. I should not have tossed it down like a sailor on shore leave,* she thought grumpily.

"Do you want to talk? I take it from the opaque details that father provided, that Éomer—how is it said now—asked for your hand?" Amrothos snorted with a mock elegant bow, "and that father tried to indefinitely defer the discussion," he continued with a pompous glowering look. Lothíriel could not restrain a hiccup and a giggle.

"Oh, Amrothos, he is threatening to turn my life into some sort of farcical court spectacle, or worse paint Éomer's proposal and my acceptance as a tasteless prank by love-struck children. I am stunned and furious and now, thanks to him, very nearly drunk," she said, with a self-deprecatory groan. Hearing the humor in Lothíriel's tone, Amrothos felt relieved enough to laugh.

"Surely it will not end so badly, little sister," Amrothos chuckled, putting his arm around her shoulder in a comradely clutch. "I know he likes and admires the man. Who would not? If father has only blundered into vexing and mildly insulting the two of you, I think Éomer will be man enough to handle it. I wondered all day how you and Éomer found the time to become so involved."

"This is not a joke, Amrothos, I am madly in love with Éomer," she said.

"Sister, may I suggest you not use the words 'mad' or 'insane' or any others of that nature the next time you speak of this to father?" Amrothos advised in a solemn voice.

Lothíriel laughed, "What would I do without your impudence?" Together, arm in arm, they began to walk in the direction of the light and music.

At that moment, Elrohir and Elladan, dark-haired, grey-eyed, their faces elven-fair, appeared, blocking their path. "Oh, Valar!" Lothíriel groaned aloud, rolling her eyes. Elrohir seemed unduly pleased with her greeting with no attempt to control a wicked grin.

Elladan began, "It seems, my lady, that for the second time today we come to offer you an apology."

"Please, my lords, spare me further apologies. Your last ones cost me dearly," she moaned.

Elrohir, very nearly looking penitent, "I am sorry, my lady, it was not my intent to instigate a lover's quarrel."

Lothíriel replied, "You instigated no such thing. But, you overstep yourself, Lord Elrohir. I will not insult the House of Imladris by assuming you learned such behavior there."

"My dear lady, are you implying that I have the manners of an Orc?" Elrohir asked contritely.
Elladan threw his head back laughing, "Princess, you have already made enough conquests for one day, if you continue to speak to my brother in such a stern voice, he will be groveling at your feet and following you around like an abandoned pup. He does love an assertive female."

"I have had more than enough trouble for one day," Lothíriel sighed. Amrothos was relishing the exchange. Giving his sister an opportunity to work out some of her bad temper seemed desirable and if there were ever two beings who could withstand her assault without sustaining any damage, these were the ones.

"My dearest sister has had a difficult hour or two. Perhaps one of you gracious lords would invite her to find solace in music and dance," Amrothos suggested, a perfect parody of supercilious courtliness.

"Princess?" Elladan asked, offering her his arm, bowing gracefully, "May I have the honor, as I fear my brother cannot be trusted?"

"Thank you, my lord," Lothíriel said taking Elladan's arm. "My head is far from clear. Perhaps moving about will help."

It took courage for Lothíriel to touch the Peredhel, despite all her fascination with the First Born and her apparent capacity to argue with them. She had heard tales of Elves from childhood and, as a young girl, the stories of her own Elvish ancestry had driven her to the library, but she had never thought to know one. Now she knew three and, to her surprise, they could be as humanly annoying and impertinent as her brothers. Still, to find herself in the arms of one, the idea of such close contact with one of these so exotic beings, unnerved her. As the couple moved onto the dance floor, Elladan's strong firm grip on her waist reassured Lothíriel. Placing her hand on his muscled shoulder, she mused, *this is no delicate mythical Elf, but, for all his beauty, a large, strongly built warrior who exudes attractive masculinity."

As she looked up at him, Elladan gave her a warm, knowing smile and suddenly, a blaze of his disconnected fragments of thought, of unspoken dreams and surprising desires, hit her. Her eyes were drawn to his sensuous lips; she shook her head and broke the gaze.

"My lord, please stop. I do not mean to be impolite. However, I am a little tipsy. I unable to close my mind to your thoughts," she said, her cheeks growing hot.

"I am sorry, princess," Elladan said, totally taken aback. "I am accustomed to mortals being mind blind."

"I have never heard that expression. My experience with the capacity to sense another's thoughts or communicate in that way is limited to my immediate family and, somewhat less so, with my cousin Faramir. I was taught as a child that it is rude to read thoughts unbidden and equally inconsiderate to open your mind to others carelessly," Lothíriel said earnestly.

Elladan, who she realized had gone very quiet, answered, "I understand perfectly. I do apologize."

Suddenly afraid she had offended or embarrassed him, Lothíriel spoke quickly, with an uneasy little laugh, "The exception for me is my brother Amrothos. He is incorrigibly intrusive, with me at least. But, there is no harm in it, since I keep nothing from him anyway."

"My brother Elrohir and I share that type of bond as well. But, the gift of seeing into another's mind is not a widespread one, even among the Eldar," Elladan commented. "I meant no disrespect."

"Lord Elladan," she said, as the music ended, "No offense was taken on my part. I am flattered, but I did not think you intended your thoughts to reach me."
"I did not," he said.

"I did not wish to violate your privacy," she said.

"You did not. I was careless," he answered. He took her by the arm and they walked together to the side of the floor.

Elladan was now still and inscrutable, "And you love a most worthy mortal man and I respect that," he said gently. "I would hear more of the remarkable qualities of the heirs of Dol Amroth. There are many things that our races could know of one another."

"The great library of Minas Tirith contains wondrous old volumes with some references, but they are largely speculative as to our origins," Lothíriel said. "My father gives them little credence."

"Legolas, on the other hand, is quite sure of your Elvish antecedents, despite his ambivalence about the nature of his own roots, and who are we to argue such unprovable matters with one who talks to trees," Elladan said with a playful irreverence worthy of his twin.

Laughter was a release for Lothíriel: a relief from what she saw as her father's obtuseness, her own anger at Imrahil, her bewilderment at Elladan's dangerous longing, and this whole unexpected new Arda that promised everything and, so far at least, granted nothing.

"You refer to Legolas's habit of calling himself a simple woodland Elf, when by now we all know that he is a prince of Taur-nu-Fuin, the son of its illustrious Sindarin King Thranduil," Lothíriel said. "It is becoming tiresome how you and your brother continue to tease him, after he has explained his position on adopting Silvan culture."

"I cannot speak for my brother, but I worry that Legolas's refusal to face his legacy will cause him unnecessary pain. He already feels what he calls the sea-longing, the desire to leave for Elvenhome in the West," said Elladan.

"Do you think he will do that?" Lothíriel asked, intrigued.

"Not soon. He fights it. He is a stubborn Elf," Elladan answered.

"Do you feel that longing?" she asked.

"I have not yet, but then I also have the blood of Men. Perhaps I never will," Elladan answered sadly. "And you, fair princess, why do you deny that you might have Elven heritage?"

"It is an annoying pretension common among certain classes of people in Dol Amroth to make much of a rumor cloaked in myth," Lothíriel answered, "as though the blood of the noble exiles of Númenor were somehow unworthy."

"I look forward to you meeting my sister. You will see that you are very like her—your hair, your eyes, your bearing," he laughed.

"Well, for that matter, you bear a certain superficial resemblance to my brothers. Who knows what is true or possible in these days when legends come to life," Lothíriel said skeptically. She scanned the crowd anxiously, wanting the support of Éomer's vibrant presence. He saw her and greeted her from across the dance floor with one of his predictably open smiles. My own true love needs no extraordinary faculties to make his thoughts known, she mused. Moving easily through the crowd, Éomer quickly reached Lothíriel and Elladan.

"Lothíriel, your brothers want you and Elladan," Éomer said, "Come with me. We have been invited
Éomer placed an arm around each of their shoulders and guided the two off the dance floor and onto the lawn into the dark night. Moving down a soft grassy slope, he led them toward a small group lounging on blankets on the grass. A small lantern lighted a cloth spread with cheese, cold cuts, bread, fruit and pastry, flagons of wine and cups. Soft voices and the sounds of muted laughter met their ears before they could identify the participants of this small feast. Legolas sang a Periannath drinking song, which was doubly humorous coming from his lips and met with much applause.

The sky was black and spotted with bright stars. A cool breeze now moved through the trees on the edges of the large open field, carrying the scent of their red blossoms through the air. The summer day had turned into a fresh spring night.

The newcomers came upon Lothíriel's three brothers, as well as Elrohir and Legolas. Amrothos inclined back, supporting himself on his arms, knees bent, while a lovely, auburn-haired young lady used his knees as a prop. Elphir jumped to his feet to greet his guests.

"Permit me to introduce our cousin, Nimrodel," Elphir said.

Erchirion quickly added, "our kissing cousin," with a mischievous look at Amrothos.

"Kissing cousin?" Elladan asked arching an eyebrow, while bending and kissing the lady's hand.

Elphir explained, "It is an expression used to describe a kinsman distant enough to be considered marriageable." Nimrodel laughed unselfconsciously and Legolas launched into the first lines of the Song of Nimrodel, "An Elven-maid there was of old, A shining star by day..." whereupon the entire original group broke into loud groans and guffaws. Legolas stopped singing and shrugged his shoulders, with one of his ingratiating, almost credibly guiltless, smiles.

Erchirion said, "Apologies, my friends. You are at a disadvantage. We must explain the rules of engagement here. This gathering has established its own set of regulations, two of which Elphir and Legolas just flagrantly violated."

Amrothos interrupted him and announced with false sternness, "First, there are to be no further jokes at the expense of Nimrodel, based upon her name or possible ancestry, Elvish or otherwise." He then gazed disarmingly into Nimrodel's eyes, who returned his mooning look by provocatively wrinkling her nose, a gesture revealing simultaneously that she was wise to his pranks and affectionately tolerant of them.

"There will be no more talk of marriages or betrothals, or any recent not-to-be-named disputes regarding the same," Elphir said, with an apologetic glance at Lothíriel and Éomer.

"Since we are all friends here, the use of titles or names indicating the rank, office or nobility, or lack thereof, by any of us is prohibited. And, lastly, at Nimrodel's request, we agreed to avoid gory tales of battle," Erchirion finished.

"If you will agree to abide by these conditions, of course, within the limits of each person's wit and level of sobriety, please make yourselves comfortable and have a drink," Elphir said.

Éomer straightened himself into a posture of regal authority and bowing to his two companions, asked, "May I speak on behalf of our party?" He received amused nods of acquiescence from Lothíriel and Elladan.

"We gladly accept, with one additional provision. Anything that is said or happens here tonight remains within this group," Éomer added with wide-eyed innocence. Greeted by a chorus of "yeas,"
he gracefully collapsed into a seated position, unceremoniously pulled Lothíriel onto his lap and kissed her soundly. Lothíriel reluctantly moved her mouth away from his briefly and then resolutely returned his kiss fully.

There was a brief silence followed by general approving laughter and a short, low whistle from Amrothos.

Elphir said, "Éomer, my friend, I was well aware of your prowess in combat, but you impress me tonight with your formidable skill in peacetime negotiations as well."

"I am cold," Lothíriel complained shivering. "When I dressed today it was more like midsummer than spring. I had no idea I would be out so late without changing."

"Move closer, my love. I will keep you warm," Éomer said his lips barely touching her ear, enfolding her lovingly in his arms and caressing the skin of her exposed arm with his large warm hand. She sighed contentedly, laying her head on his chest.

"I do not see how she can get any closer!" Elphir scowled. "Catch this," he said and tossed a lightweight blue blanket at Lothíriel, which hit her in the head, unfolded, and draped itself over her face. Éomer grunted, took the blanket, wrapped Lothíriel cozily in it and enclosed her again in his arms, kissing her lingeringly on the lips, immediately eliciting her breathless response.

Lothíriel snuggled closely against Éomer's chest and few minutes later, sweetly said, "Thank you, Elphir. That is much better." Lothíriel's playful reply did little to dispel her brother's uneasiness.

"Humph," Elphir grumbled, "I suppose you are cold too," he said, casting a rueful glance in the direction of Amrothos and Nimrodel. Amrothos, knowing his brother well, reached up and easily caught with one hand the blanket Elphir threw at them.

Éomer murmured, "Is your brother really irritated?"

"No," Lothíriel whispered, "but he thinks he should be. He tries to be the diligent older brother, but is always sympathetic and he knows I do not offer myself to you light-mindedly. If it need be, he will take our side with Papa."

"And to think that Amrothos told me the ladies of Dol Amroth are distant and cruel," Éomer whispered, nodding in the direction of the other couple who were now sitting side by side, arms around one another. Amrothos had tucked the blanket securely around Nimrodel's arms and shoulders and she was blissfully permitting him soft, but frequent kisses.

"Dear as he is to me and always kind, Amrothos has been stupid and rude with women he thought he fancied. He has imagined his pretty face should be enough recommendation to endear him to any. He had not met a woman that he really cared about, although perhaps he has now," she whispered back to him quickly. "But he knows well enough that the women of Dol Amroth are said to be hot-blooded, a quality apparently related to the warm Southern clime."

"That I can more easily believe," he said laughing softly, carefree as a boy, and bit her lower lip seductively before running the tip of his tongue across it. Lothíriel was just able to suppress a moan.

"Éomer, be careful, please. There are limits to what even Elphir can tolerate," she whispered.

"I am going to speak to your father again tomorrow. Even if I cannot separate him from Aragorn," Éomer said forcefully in a louder voice.

"That is an interesting concept. I believe we may have an ally there. Aragorn knows I love you and
he encouraged me to learn Rohirric," Lothíriel said.

"Lothíriel and Éomer are violating the prohibition against talking about betrothal," Erchirion announced.

"Idiot. That does not count. The rule was intended to protect them against the insensitivity of the rest of us. They can talk about it if they want," Elphir said.

"It is a shame that these things are so difficult for mortal Men. All that is required among the Eldar is a declaration of intention between the lovers and physical consummation," Elladan sighed. Elphir choked on his wine, while Erchirion and Amrothos howled with laughter.

Elrohir, looking very serious, said, "It is not true that it is always so simple. What about the conditions our father has placed on the marriage of our sister and Estel?"

"Estel? Is that not the name you use for Aragorn?" Elphir asked. Elladan glowered at his brother.

"Do not look so worried, brother. Remember the pledge we made that anything that is said here remains here," Elrohir said placidly. "In all fairness, if the fact that Estel intends to wed our sister were known, one obstacle to Éomer's suit for the hand of Lothíriel might be removed."

Taur-nu-Fuin = Sindarin name used by Men for Mirkwood in the Third Age. I think it is too soon after the fall of Sauron for it to have been renamed Eryn Lasgalen.
A Long Night

What a joy it was for Lothíriel to be with Éomer for so many hours. Much of the anger, frustration and anxiety that she had felt earlier in the evening had faded as she nestled in the warm circle of his arms. Their goal no longer seemed unattainable to her. Lothíriel felt a surge of affection for her brothers and for the entire informal group on the grass, as she reflected on their implicit encouragement. Even Legolas and the Peredhil seemed supportive of their plight. All of Arda loves lovers tonight, she thought; all except my father, it seems.

Lothíriel looked up at Éomer in the dampening pre-dawn air surrounded by the wild smell of the wet leaves and bark. He had been intent on a story that Elladan was telling. Sensing her gaze, he looked down quickly, causing a heavy shock of hair to fall across his face. She felt protective at the sight of him, but reminded herself that he was no lad, but fully a man for some years now by the reckoning of his people.

The sound of her brother Erchirion’s voice interrupted her thoughts. He was nearly a year older than Éomer but not yet his own man by the customs of Dol Amroth. Free--no, actually compelled--to put himself in harm’s way in battle, but not to marry or dispose of his inheritance yet. Perhaps when my father thinks of Éomer, he compares him to my brothers in his mind, she thought.

Erchirion spoke softly, "All of you are have grown so gloomy, perhaps we should seek to dispel our ghosts by speaking of them aloud."

Elphir said, "My brother refers to an old folk adage of the coast of Belfalas, which holds that unexpressed longings lie heavy on the heart, while giving words to such spreads and lightens the burden. If all are in agreement, I will begin." Soft assents or nods from all, followed by the refreshment of a few cups, indicated the group was ready to participate.

The heir of Dol Amroth then sighed. "I wish my sweet wife and son were here. I wish that he were sleeping in my lap and she were resting in my arms now."

"My big brother is a dreamer, indeed," Amrothos teased, "If my nephew were here, he would not be sleeping but pestering both of them and his lovely wife would not be resting in his arms but would have been pleading with him to retire for several hours by now." Then turning very serious, he declared, "I wish to live in a house on the edge of the surf and sand and run barefoot on the beach with a lovely copper-haired mermaid."

Nimrodel grabbed his face with both hands, her sea-green eyes flashing. She answered laughing, "My wish, Amrothos, is that when you speak to my father of this dream of yours that he does not insist you are much too childish, foolish and unserious for me." She smiled at him and reached up to tousle his hair and then added, "For I would be happy with you."
Amrothos, after laughing aloud, stuck out his chest and answered, with his usual ebullience, "If he does, I will remind him that I am a heroic veteran of the Great War of the Rings and that he can deny me nothing!" Howls and hoots from the company greeted his remarks.

Lothíriel dryly stated, "I wish that Faramir and Éowyn were here, since all others who are most dear to me are with me in Ithilien already." She looked at Éomer and wondered if he noticed that she had mentioned Faramir and Éowyn together. If he had not yet heard of their love for one another, it was not her place to tell him.

"Faramir and Éowyn each sent me a letter," Éomer said, reading Lothíriel's uncertain expression. "They wish to marry," he announced, his soft smile betraying that he would accept this gladly.

Lothíriel's brothers had not heard this news. Erchirion said, without thinking, "Our quiet cousin has claimed the Shieldmaiden of the Rohirrim for his bride. I am truly impressed. What a sly one he is!" Blushing he turned to Éomer, "No disrespect to your sister intended." Éomer smiled complacently.

"None is taken. I was surprised myself. I want only my sister's happiness. But, you say Faramir is quiet? My sister is not exactly a sweet mild maid."

Elphir interjected, "Perhaps some would call him quiet, but he is not as gentle as he may seem. Faramir is a scholar and loremaster, but has served on the front line against the dark forces of Mordor as Captain of the Ithilien Rangers for years and is respected, loved and honored by those who rank among the hardest and most highly skilled defenders of Gondor."

"As was his brother, Boromir, whose loss we deeply mourn, he has ever been more brother than cousin to all of us," Amrothos said with uncharacteristic seriousness.

"Our cousin Théodred was like that to Éowyn and me. No one ever had a truer brother. My wish would be that Théodred were here with us tonight. He would have been happy in this company," Éomer said, his sense of loss and sadness transparent in his voice. Lothíriel wrapped her arms more tightly around his chest.

"Who is next?" Éomer asked hoarsely.

Erchirion said, "War and doubt have filled our lives from our earliest years and the threat of despair has ever clouded our happiest days. I hope all of that is indeed behind us. I think my greatest joy will be to enter the gates of Minas Tirith with Lord Aragorn and see him crowned the king of Gondor and Arnor." He glanced at Amrothos, half expecting a foolish retort, but instead his younger brother grasped and squeezed Erchirion's hand affectionately.

Elrohir then spoke quickly, as though he wished to have his turn behind him, "My joy would be complete tonight if I knew for certain that the worst had passed for my kinsman in Imladris and Lothlorien."

"Rest easy, my friend, I feel it in my heart, in the air and in the trees, that all is well tonight in your beloved lands, as well as in those of my father's people," Legolas said next. "My greatest hope is that this victory has been less costly than I fear."

"That leaves only Elladan," Elphir announced.

Lothíriel felt Elladan's cautious touch on her mind. "I am moved by the wonder of your mortal beauty." Surely he will not, she thought. She answered him, gently through the same connection, "No, you need not say that here. You have other desires you can share."

"And I wish my sister were here now," Elladan said tenderly, although not without sadness, "but
soon we will fetch her and bring her to Minas Tirith where she belongs."

For a few long minutes, the entire group sat silently, each with their own thoughts of love, loss, war, and their hopes for the future.

"Look, Elladan, Elrohir!" Legolas said suddenly, pointing upwards. "It is your grandsire Eärendil the Great Mariner. He carries the morning star across the sky."

"Ai," Elladan answered, "You are right, my friend. It grows very late." The Mortals of their company stared skywards, transfixed in wonderment beyond speech, reminded again that they lived in days when myths had become reality.

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Back on the main lawn where the festivities were winding down, Imrahil and Aragorn sat alone on the dais, tired and quiet.

Imrahil took a quick drink from the glass he had cradled unmoving for some time and tried to collect his thoughts.

*Why do I react so strongly to Lothíriel and Éomer? Why must I see Finduilas whenever I see her with him? It disturbs me greatly that they seem capable of falling in love in a single day.*

*I remember Finduilas when she was only a little older than Lothíriel, laughing, dancing, yes, even flirting, at celebrations in the castle of Dol Amroth. She had many suitors, but easily dismissed them all. Father did not press her. That trip to Minas Tirith that winter changed everything.*

*I remember that grand gathering at the Great Hall of Feasts in the Citadel. Denethor approached Finduilas for a dance. He was a surpassingly handsome man at that time, as striking as Faramir, although lacking his warmth and charm. I felt the impact of Finduilas's reaction to Denethor from across the floor. Then, for the first time I felt a door slam closed. It never reopened.*

*We were so young and careless in those days, never guarding our thoughts from one another, for there been no need to do so before. How we relished the guiltless intimacy. Then she barricaded herself from me. At the time, I did not mind. I thought I understood.*

*I had not thought Denethor was susceptible to such passion. I was certain Finduilas was, but never imagined such a cool, proud soul to be its object. Denethor's usually sober countenance beamed transparent that night in the first rapture of infatuation and desire. Finduilas was exultant in his response.*

*She did everything with fervor, with the enthusiasm of youth, so much like Lothíriel. Their courtship had been scandalously short. However, no one dared complain, it was a perfect match: the daughter of the Prince of Dol Amroth and the heir to the Ruling Steward of Gondor. The marriage negotiations had been maddening for the diplomats due to the relentless badgering for haste from both Finduilas and Denethor.*

*I recall the early years of their marriage—a visit to Dol Amroth, when Boromir had just begun walking. Finduilas and Denethor had both seemed entranced by the sturdy, irrepressible toddler. Boromir was a droll, funny baby. I vividly recall the three of us walking barefoot on the beach and my relief at Denethor's shy attempts to enter into our jokes and banter. Denethor clearly adored Finduilas and delighted in his son. He was more open in those days than I would ever see him again.*

*Once it began, Finduilas's decline was rapid and inexorable. She grew pale, thin and short-
tempered after Faramir was born and Denethor became Steward. She was particularly defensive when it concerned any implied criticism of Denethor. Denethor grew moodier and impenetrable. It was true the dangers to Gondor increased exponentially during this period, but even that could not account for such a dramatic change in Finduilas.

Her visits to Dol Amroth became infrequent. When she came with Denethor, she was silent and withdrawn. When she came without him, she spent the entire time in a state of agitation to return to Minas Tirith. The darker he became the less she could bear to be parted from him.

I saw that same passionate, single-minded look on Lothíriel's face today, when she greeted Éomer. She looked so like Finduilas looking at Denethor, that it chilled my blood. When she said "He needs me," I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. Éomer is no Denethor, but he has his dark side as well. My beloved older sister had said the same of Denethor, "He needs me." I see in Lothíriel's eyes, when she says those words, "He needs me," that she is drawn not only to Éomer's virtues, which I well appreciate, but to his darkness as well.

I saw the fatalism in him when he thought all was lost. The sound of his magnificent voice singing his blood lust as he rode to almost certain death froze my heart.

I would not have my daughter sucked into such darkness as my sister was.

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"You are pensive and troubled, my friend." Aragorn said.

"Do you remember my oldest sister, from the years you served in Gondor under Ecthelion?" Imrahil asked.


"I remember when she was at least as impulsive and full of joy as my Lothíriel," Imrahil said with emphasis. "She was reckless to taste all of life."

"Yes, she was like that when I met her," Aragorn said.

"Finduilas altered greatly after you left. I think her transformation was something other than the result of maturing; she changed after she married Denethor," Imrahil said.

"When I knew them, they seemed very much in love," Aragorn answered noncommittally.

"I never questioned that. You will recall then that, Denethor was older than Finduilas. He had not seemed inclined to look for a wife, although there was, of course, the expected pressure from his father to do so. He was a man of strong intellect and proven attributes as a military leader and statesman. I admired him, but I did not like him. Although he could be self-confident to the point of arrogance, he had a poignant and sensitive side that I think she found appealing," Imrahil continued.

"I saw that melancholy part of him as well. Women are often drawn to a man when they perceive he needs them. Finduilas had a generous nature," Aragorn answered.

"She was afraid at the end of her life. I was young then, but it was palpable to me, green as I was to life's problems. She sacrificed herself to Denethor's pain," Imrahil said with force. "It has been said she pined for her home by the sea, but I believe she was the one who could not bear to leave Denethor alone in Minas Tirith."
"Do you think she knew of the *palantír*?" Aragorn asked.

"What of the *palantír,*" Imrahil asked surprised.

"I thought you were there when Mithrandir spoke of Denethor and the *palantír*. He said that Denethor burned to death holding the *palantír* of Anor in his hands. Mithrandir believed that he used it and that through it was touched by Sauron," Aragorn explained.

Suddenly a series of events became clear to Imrahil. They had marveled for years at Denethor's presumed net of spies and resources so vast it seemed that they scarce could be believed. Denethor had seen things and had knowledge that could not be clearly explained to anyone's satisfaction. It was not foresight. He never had foresight. In fact, he had ridiculed Imrahil's and Faramir's dreams.

Then Imrahil knew. Certainly, Finduilas would have known if he had used the *palantír*. Denethor kept nothing from her. She would have seen his hopeless struggle to control it against Sauron. That would explain her fear of leaving Denethor alone. He had not lost his sister to Denethor, but to the dark force that her husband could never fully resist.

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Everyone helped the Dol Amroth brothers gather up the remains of the night's hospitality, when they finally stood up and prepared to leave. Lothíriel stared at Éomer when the lamplight fell upon him briefly illuminating his golden hair, his laughing eyes and endearing mouth, his lips so full and nearly red. Her heart quickened as always at the sight of him. Most members of the party carried a parcel or two and they walked in the direction of the Prince Imrahil's pavilion. Éomer and Lothíriel trailed at the end of their procession.

Where the ground began to slope upwards, Éomer stopped and Lothíriel turned to him. He dropped a heavy basket to the ground, placed his arms around her waist, and whispered, "Can you even begin to imagine what it has meant to me, after all I have seen and done," Éomer asked, "to have found such beauty?"

"Surely, you know that you are wonderfully handsome. But, without your bright *fëa* even fairness of such measure would have been worth little to me, but animated by it…" her voice broke and she could not continue.

"I spoke not only of your face, your eyes, or your body, although my need tortures me," Éomer smiled ruefully at his own wanton desire for her, "but of all of you," he finished, suddenly afraid of being misunderstood. "Do you remember when I asked you for a kiss? You already consumed me. I was afraid if I did not speak to you, that we would part forever."

She burst into light laughter, "So, you complained of your shoulder and then stood before me half-naked and asked me for a kiss."

"As I remember, it was you who removed my tunic," he said.

"You helped me. Your shoulder did need attention," she declared, laughing softly.

"It was sore, but I admit that I knew it would improve with three days of riding," he answered lightly.

"How shameless of you, but I cannot pretend I am sorry, for you were most pleasant to behold," she said. Éomer laughed.

"You always amaze me with your frankness. When you gave me hope that day, I felt all the love I
feel for you now—before I left for the Morannon. Did you not know it?” he asked.

"I hoped for it. Yet it all seemed too romantic, fraught with drama. Still, you became my hope, sometimes bright, and other times dim, but always there. I spoke of your kisses to Éowyn. I told her I knew not your name and she insisted it must be you. I was afraid it was you and afraid it was not," she said.

"I felt that too—the hope and fear I mean. I was only half joking when I asked in Minas Tirith if you were an Elf princess. The thought of you, the memory of you, renewed my resolve, but I wondered if you were my destiny or if I had been ensorcelled," he answered.

"Ensorcelled? Poor helpless boy," she touched her fingers to his lips. He kissed them and ran his tongue across her fingertips and then closed his lips upon them, as though to let her know that he knew how to enthrall her as well. She shuddered with pleasure and then continued seriously, "I went to the wall at dawn on the day you left. I looked first for you and the green banner of the horse and the sun," she choked up as she spoke. It had been something she had not admitted to anyone, not even herself, that her loyalty had been drawn first to her unnamed lover and Rohan.

"It was far too late by then for me as well," he said huskily, overcome with the truth of his words and a surge of desire, he kissed her passionately and she responded with equal urgency.

"When I thought of you, I felt that I had overstepped all boundaries and was already wholly yours," she answered. "I had a dream of a future with you and I together. I knew not if it was a gift of foresight or simply a reflection of my longing," she said.

"It does not matter for it will be so. My certainty about you confused me. I felt I had not known myself until I knew you. I accepted it. What else could I do?" Éomer said.

"Éomer, I want you now. I want you to make love to me. I want more than kisses and pretty words. I would not wait for the approval of others," Lothíriel said her voice unsteady, all the warmth of her youth and desire apparent in her voice.

"Be careful what you say, my love. I am but a mortal Man. There are limits to my control. I want with all my heart what you so easily offer." His hands slid down from her waist and grasped her backside pushing her pelvis firmly against him. He wanted her to feel his arousal, to know how he ached with need, half hoping it would startle her into temperance. Instead of drawing back in any form of maidenly reluctance or alarm, she pushed back against him, nearly undoing him.

Her response caused Éomer to jerk involuntarily, moan with his rising ardor, and then to catch his breath in an audible grunt. He grasped her by the shoulders and held her body away from his. "Ai, we must stop this torture now."

After a moment, he finally dared to lightly touch his lips against her burning cheek, and said, "Listen to me. I want you to stand by my side as the queen of Rohan. I cannot rule alone. It is too heavy a responsibility. I need your support, your light and energy. We must do this the right way."

"The right way? And for us to make love would be wrong? I want to bind myself to you, as Elladan said the Elves do. If we pledge our love in such a way then no one can part us," Lothíriel said seriously.

"Elladan, again," he laughed. "Of course it could not be wrong. But there are others who would judge it differently," he said with a smile. "I appreciate your Elvish reasoning. But remember, I have given you my word. I have pledged myself to you. Please, my love, for a short while, if we can bear it, we must play at politics and diplomacy. I promise you that if this tactic becomes too burdensome,
we will reconsider your more direct approach," he said cheerfully.

Mollified, she smiled up at him. "I will hold you to that promise," she said. "But my logic is not so Elvish as all that. Have you heard of Illúvatar's great music and how many believe that our fate is part of that song and cannot be altered?"

"Yes, my love, I have read of it," Éomer answered perplexed, thinking, not for the first time, that if only he had spent more time reading he would understand her more easily.

"I believe we are intended to be together, but that such a destiny is never assured. We must make it so," Lothíriel said with determination.

"Then, we are agreed. We will reach that destiny together. We will grab fate and bend it to our will," he responded jubilantly, dazzled as always by her boldness and his own good fortune. For Éomer there was something immensely compelling in the way she spoke. In contrast to her innocence, she was no meek soft girl but a determined woman. He had thought this of her when he first observed her and, as he knew her better, he was ever more sure.

He picked up the basket, took her hand and they climbed the short incline to find their party waiting at the top.

"You waited," Éomer said. "Thank you, my friends. I hope we did not keep you too long."

"We did not want to leave you to arrive at the pavilion, just the two of you alone together," Elphir said in matter-of-fact tone, with no hint of judgment or impatience.

"It was not so long," Elladan said. "I wanted to come look for you, but Elphir said we should wait only a few minutes and you would come. He was right."

The magic of the star-filled sky of the spring night was fading gently as it gradually lightened. It was darker near the river, but even there, faint mists on the reeds were becoming visible. At the front of the magnificent Dol Amroth pavilion, Imrahil and Aragorn now stood in conversation, their heads close together.

Imrahil did not look toward the approaching group until they were quite close, so absorbed he was in his conversation. However much anxiety he may have had for his daughter's future, when he turned toward them, he seemed untroubled as to whether his daughter would remain virtuous or if her brothers were capable of looking after her. Éomer mused that propriety or the lack thereof was not Imrahil’s principal concern. These Elvish Númenoreans of Belfalas seemed to Éomer as exotic as they were attractive and difficult to understand.

After many greetings, bows, handclasps and comments to Prince Imrahil and Lord Aragorn, the group grew quiet again, with a general reluctance to break apart.

Imrahil gestured in the direction of the entrance to the pavilion saying, "There is still wine and hot water inside if you would like a drink before leaving. No one remains to serve you, but Lothíriel or her brothers can assist you with anything you might like."

They entered the tent and Éomer looked around in surprise. Gilded finely wrought lamps hung from the supports, rich gem-colored cloths and intricately woven tapestries laced with golden threads draped every surface. Carpets and furs of strange animals covered the ground under their feet. The long table held crystal glasses and delicate porcelain cups, bowls of nuts and candies, curious fruits, and decanters of wine and fine liqueurs. A large filigreed silver urn steamed in the pre-dawn freshness.
Lothíriel caught Éomer’s eye and apologized, casting her eyes about her dismissively at the opulence surrounding them, "All of this is a monument to the trade that passes through the port of Dol Amroth, ostentatiously displayed for diplomats and courtiers who may find their way here over the next few days. Nevertheless, there is nothing to prevent us from enjoying it. Is there anything at all you would like to eat or drink?"

"No, thank you,” Éomer said absently, still looking around him. The impression it gave was more of a dwelling of desert potentate out of a fantastical tale of south Harad than that of a lord of Gondor. He considered the contrast to Rohan and wondered if Lothíriel would miss such luxury.

Reading his thought, Lothíriel answered swiftly, embarrassed, "We live more simply at home, certainly more tastefully. Would you like to look around?"

"For all its show, it is but one more big tent," she explained as they walked about and she pulled back curtains to reveal simple well-made camp beds, folding chairs and tables. "Here is a more luxurious alcove befitting a princess of Gondor's wealthiest province,” she wrinkled her nose in mild self disdain. "I see another cot has been added. Nimrodel will be sharing my chamber. She is always good company, and I am certain has gossip from home for me tonight, but I wish it were you sharing my space." Her comment, a straightforward statement of fact, contained no hint of flirtation.

"As I do," he said with warmth. She caught his heat and unconsciously stepped closer to him. She wanted to touch his face, to kiss him again, but hesitated, turning to see if anyone was watching them. The others had seated themselves around the long table, except for Imrahil, who, still talking with Aragorn, now stood inside of the door facing in their direction.

"We should go speak with Lord Aragorn and my father for a while. That would be the correct way to behave," she said teasingly, seeking to remind him of his earlier counsel. "I am sure they will want to confirm your attendance at the inevitable discussions among the illustrious and powerful tomorrow."

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Finally, the tent was quiet and Lothíriel and Nimrodel had retired to their private quarters. Lothíriel patted the bed next to her and looking inquiringly at Nimrodel.

"Come, sit here with me. Tell me all about it," she said.

"He is marvelous, Lothíriel. You know him better than I do. You must know of what I speak," Nimrodel answered, suddenly serious.

"Yes. Amrothos hides a large and generous heart and much discernment behind his youth and pranks. You are wise to have seen beyond all that," Lothíriel answered. "But I would ask one favor of the two of you."

"What is that?" Nimrodel asked.

"Beg him not to speak of his intentions just yet. I do not think Papa is ready for another surprise," Lothíriel answered. At that, both young women dissolved into giggles that they were helpless to control.
When the heat of the sun awakened Lothíriel, she found that Nimrodel had already left their alcove. She had heard nothing, but found that a small copper bathtub had been prepared for her and the water was rapidly growing tepid. She quickly bathed and dressed. It was nearly noon when she ventured from her alcove to find two of her brothers and Nimrodel sitting at the long table, silently clutching cups of tea. The sides of the tent had been rolled up to admit the cool spring breezes, and the open area was comfortable and pleasant.

"Too bad I am not a true healer; the lot of you look as though you could use some sort of draught or potion," Lothíriel said brightly. "Has anyone seen Papa yet today?"

Amrothos, holding his head as though he were afraid it might explode, said, "I cannot believe that you did not hear the hearty voice of your lover earlier. It was a painful way to wake up. He passed by to walk with father to meet with Aragorn this morning."

"How did Papa and Éomer seem today?" Lothíriel asked warily.

"Cordial," Erchirion shrugged without enthusiasm.

"And Elphir?" Lothíriel asked.

"Back to work. You know Elphir—eldest son, heir, and all that implies. He is stuck with Dol Amroth, since father is busy with the business of Gondor and the allies. He is off to see the troops and then down to the docks," Amrothos yawned.

"Do not scold, sister. We have promised to catch up with him and help," Erchirion added. "The entire camp is getting a late start today."

Suddenly, Lothíriel felt nearly as tired as her companions looked. Silently she poured herself a cup of tea and thought that it would be best to keep occupied instead of taking up yesterday's worries about Éomer and Imrahil.

"Nimrodel, would you like to go out with me for a while?" Lothíriel asked. "I want to call on the Periannath. Legolas said that they left yesterday's gathering early because Frodo and Sam are still tired and weak, but that they are welcoming visitors. We will not stay if they have too much company."
"Yes. I would like very much to meet them," Nimrodel answered.

"Then I want to stop by the healers' field and see if they need more assistance or supplies," Lothíriel added.

"Ah, she reveals her true obsession," Amrothos teased. "She cannot stay away from those rugged Rohirrim warriors." Lothíriel shook her head at her brother, with a mocking smile.

"I will not dignify that with a response," she answered, "except that I will promise not let any of them steal Nimrodel away from you."

After drinking her tea, Lothíriel found a basket and began to fill it with some of the most filling of the edible delicacies among the provisions of the pavilion. She explained to Nimrodel how she had learned from Merry in the Houses of Healing that the Periannath had difficulty convincing those around them of the quantity of nourishment they required, mistaking their size as an accurate measure of their appetites. She regaled Nimrodel with anecdotes of the Periannath's ongoing love affair with food that raised its choice, preparation and consumption to an art form. The two women agreed that stores of the Dol Amroth pavilion were uniquely equipped of all of those at Cormallen to satisfy those requirements.

Finally, struggling under the weight of her well-filled basket, she turned to Nimrodel and laughed, "This should do for tea at least."

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At the royal pavilion, Aragorn, Imrahil and Éomer had spent the morning consulting with the captains of their forces and greeting nobles of Gondor, high and low. Many came simply to have a better look at the man who would be king, while others--old friends and comrades at arms in the struggle to defeat the shadow of Mordor--simply came to share their satisfaction at long-held hopes fulfilled.

The three men made necessary decisions without difficulty regarding the welfare of the troops under their care, especially those recuperating from injuries. They reviewed plans for traveling to Minas Tirith by means of the Great River Anduin and discussed reports received of potential military threats. However, Aragorn put off suppliants seeking to garner favor or to present early petitions for their peacetime advantage. The uncrowned king replied that until he entered Minas Tirith and was accepted by the will of the people, such matters remained the province of the Lord Steward of Gondor.

Finally, with the most urgent matters dispatched and a lull in the steam of guests, Elladan and Elrohir sauntered in and seated themselves in the remaining camp chairs, with their usual confounding smiles. After quick exchange of conspiratorial looks, Elladan shrugged his shoulders and began, "Estel, we have a confession to make."

Aragorn raised his eyebrows, a small smile twitching about the corners of his mouth. "You have my undivided attention," he drawled.

Elrohir said, "There was a small private party last night. Imrahil's children, their kinswoman--a quite lovely young lady, Nimrodel of Belfalas--Legolas, and Éomer, of course. A most select and discreet group, I assure you."
"Somehow, the subject of our sister came up in the conversation," Elladan continued.

"So, you are here to tell me that all of Cormallen is by now gossipping of the news that this unknown Dúnedain from the north not only has the audacity to claim to be the heir of Elendil, but to intends to install an Elf as his queen?" said Aragorn, raising his eyebrows higher still.

"Not at all, little brother," said Elladan, completely relaxed. "They are all sworn not to speak of the matter to anyone who was not present." By now, Imrahil was open-mouthed with curiosity and Éomer's eyes crinkled under the forced suppression of a grin.

"The assurance of your absolute discretion relieves me greatly," Aragorn said wryly. Although he continued to scowl in the direction of his foster brothers, he seemed more amused than upset.

Turning to Imrahil, Aragorn continued, "My friend, I will not leave you in the dark, since all of your children are already privy to this news. Arwen Undómiel, daughter of Elrond, lord of Rivendell, has pledged to wed me when I am crowned King of Arnor and Gondor. Something that I had chosen not to speak of until that is an accomplished fact."

Imrahil recovered quickly from his surprise and replied smoothly, but not without humor, although it did require that he relinquish a hope he had entertained, if only fleetingly, for his daughter, "Aragorn, you may rest assured that I am at least as discreet as the most trustworthy of my offspring."

At that, Elladan jumped to his feet, followed by his brother, "Well, that is settled. And you forgive us, Estel?" he asked with a grin.

"Do I have a choice?" Aragorn asked, not expecting an answer.

The brothers bowed together with Elven elegance, "My lords," and exited the tent without further comment.

The three men sat quietly, while Aragorn filled and lit his pipe. Éomer, seizing the opening, drew a deep breath and addressed himself to Imrahil.

"Imrahil, when I presumed to ask for the hand of your daughter in marriage last night, you told me to wait for a better time…" Éomer began.

Imrahil interrupted, "When I asked for time, I had hoped that, despite the impetuosity and rashness with which both you and my daughter have pressed this matter upon me, I would receive more than twelve hours' grace before I would have to consider your proposal again."

"Imrahil, my friend, Lothíriel and I told you that our dearest hope is that we might be wed without delay. I know little of courtship and marriage contracts, as I have been concerned with naught but war and battle for my entire life. Nor did I expect to be in a position to have met, much less have fallen in love with, a high lady of Gondor such as your daughter," Éomer said, earnest and determined not to be put off, poignant with youthful longing.

"I raise the question here, in the presence of Lord Aragorn, for I feel such a union, under the present circumstances, is of concern not only to Lothíriel and me personally, but could serve as a further proof of our intent to reforge the historic bonds between Rohan and Gondor," Éomer added more softly.

"You must know that your worthiness as a suitor is not an issue for me, nor am I blind to the political
advantages of such a union. I have tried to communicate to you and to Lothíriel that it is the intensity and suddenness of your purpose that disturbs me. I do not wish to settle this matter so hastily. I must insist on the deferment of this match," Imrahil declared.

"I think you do not know your daughter as well as you believe, my lord. She is not a naïve young girl who will gladly accede to your position without argument. But in deference to your wishes I will accept a longer period of betrothal and beg her to agree," Éomer, said calmly, only the harshness of his usually faint Rohirric accent betraying his impatience and growing annoyance.

"You must understand me fully, Éomer. I want to delay the betrothal ceremony as well. I want my daughter to be free, not bound to you or any man, until she is of an age to choose," Imrahil answered coolly and composedly.

"I think that you know me less well even than you know your daughter. She will always be free. For it is not by a piece of paper or a council of old men that I seek to bind her, but by her love alone. I want only that which she freely gives, before or after any legal union." The quality of Éomer's voice now took on a strained unnatural timbre, displaying considerable effort at control.

"Éomer, my friend, I would not have you wroth with me over this. King Elessar and I have spoken of the difficulties you will face upon your return to Rohan. Gondor owes Rohan greatly and we realize your losses have been dire. Théoden did not ask the cost when he rode to Minas Tirith. You will receive all the aid you need to rebuild your ravished country in the coming years. I am fully sympathetic that your need is great and Lothíriel's dowry is lavish." In a white-hot rage, Éomer's hand involuntarily went to the hilt of his sword.

"I am sorry, Prince," Éomer bit off coldly, "I thought we spoke here of the happiness of your only daughter and the woman I love. I did not come here to bargain for a brood mare or discuss how to fill my depleted coffers. I pray you will excuse me, my lords," Éomer said standing and bowing stiffly to both men, "before I say or do something I deeply regret." He bowed deeply again and turned without a word. In his haste, he narrowly avoided a tent post and his sword clanged explosively against it as he found his way out of the door.

Turning on Imrahil sharply, Aragorn snapped, "Take hold of yourself, man," and swore under his breath.

"I merely intended to ease his mind," Imrahil said, stunned at Éomer's reaction. "I did not want him to fear we would leave Rohan without the means for survival."

"I know your reputation as a diplomat and yet you behave with Éomer, not as though you are engaged in a discussion with the king of a sovereign country over a matter of vital importance to him, and to Gondor I might add, but in a petty argument with one of your headstrong children," Aragorn said.

"I am sure you know Lothíriel has not reached the age at which women of the Dúnedain are accustomed to marry," Imrahil stammered.

"That I do. But what does Éomer know of your concept of youth? He had no youth. By the time he was Lothíriel's age he had battle experience as great or greater than any Lord of Gondor," Aragorn answered.

"My mother was considered a child bride by many," Aragorn continued. "Though I do not think she regretted her choice." He raised his eyebrows and observed Imrahil with a hint of a smile. "Perhaps
you should consult the Rohirrim troops and ask if they think your daughter is fit to be their queen. The answer may surprise you. Éomer may be rash at times, but he is no fool."

Imrahil opened his mouth, was about to say something, reddened, and finally said, "I do not think you realize how hard it is for me to deny my children anything."

"I do know that you have labored to be both mother and father to them for years. Perhaps you have been indulgent in reaction to Denethor's severity with his sons. But, it has been your acceptance of Lothíriel's independence and assistance that has put you in the situation in which you now find yourself now," Aragorn commented.

"Next I suppose you will tell me that I cannot expect her to forget the terror, filth and squalor of war. That after assuming responsibilities beyond her years, she cannot return unmarked to the calm, carefree youth that the relentless struggle against the Enemy took from her," Imrahil responded in desperation.

"No. Those are your words. What I do advise you is that for all of our sakes that you quickly make your peace with Éomer," Aragorn sighed. "Perhaps you are able to ascertain my attitude on the matter of your daughter's betrothal. However, my opinion is not paramount. This is something that must be settled among the three of you."

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At last prepared for their day's errands, Lothíriel and Nimrodel left the tent. The air was springtime fresh and soft breezes carried the faintest scent of the blossoms from the border of trees, although the sun glittered hot above them. The two women walked in the direction of a single large tent on a hilltop overlooking the wide river on one side and the open grassy fields on the other. Turning to her companion, Lothíriel pointed in its direction.

"The Periannath are staying there. If they are resting, we will leave the basket," she said.

Lothíriel unexpectedly spotted Éomer, sitting under an oak in the meadow that stretched out to the right of their path. He sat on the ground, his back against the tree trunk, his forearms resting on his raised knees with his hands dangling. His head drooped against his chest in a posture of exhaustion or defeat. Thrusting the hamper quickly at Nimrodel, Lothíriel said:

"Please, take this. Tell them I sent you. You will be greeted warmly I am sure," she said speaking rapidly. "Something is wrong with Éomer. I must speak with him." She quickly kissed Nimrodel on the cheek and ran down the sloping lawn toward Éomer.

Nimrodel stood, her lovely mouth hanging open in surprise, for several minutes before with a puzzled shake of head she moved forward toward the tent of the Periannath alone.

Éomer looked up at Lothíriel only as she dropped to her knees on the grass in front of him and clutched his face with both of her hands. His cheeks were flushed, nearly feverish, and his eyes were wild. He stared at her for a moment, looking battle-weary and confused, almost as though he did not recognize her.

"Éomer, my love, tell me what has happened." Lothíriel pleaded, her heart throbbing violently at the unmistakable signs of his distress.

"I came close to drawing my sword on your father," he said, his voice cracking with self-reproach.
Lothíriel released a soft sigh of relief, trying to move his head forward, fighting his resistance, to cradle it against her breasts, and said, "I am glad that you did not. What did the old fool say now to provoke you?"

"No," he answered. "You do not understand. Imrahil is not the fool. I am. I am out of my depth here."

She hesitated a moment and then asked quietly, "Were you alone? Was anyone else present?"

"Aragorn was there," Éomer said, still looking down.

"You must tell me what my father said to upset you," Lothíriel said, forcing her voice to remain calm and not to take on any sign of her rising sense of dread.

"He insulted me and called me a liar," he told her, with a despairing look.

"That sounds very unlike my father. Perhaps you misunderstood him; tell me exactly what he said," she demanded as softly as she could manage.

"Imrahil wanted to delay our betrothal. I said I would speak with you. Then he began to speak of the size of your dowry and Rohan's need. His implication was clear. He does not believe I love you, but that I seek your hand in order to rebuild Rohan with your coin," his voice icy with anger.

"That was an abominable thing to imply, but unlike my father. Perhaps he did not intend to be malicious. He will apologize. I am sure of it, my love. In any case, Aragorn will insist on it. But I cannot think of a better use of a dowry," she said, greatly relieved.

"You do not understand. He made it a matter of honor. I do not understand him. I thought I knew him. Such insinuations reminded me of Grima Wormtongue," he answered despondently. Éomer allowed himself at last to look up into her eyes. His sense of injured pride conflicted with the fierce longings of his heart and his desires for the future of Rohan and all of Arda.

For her part, Lothíriel was at first annoyed at the countless ways in which men could elevate anxiety or irritation into matters of pride and personal honor. However, the truly devastated look on Éomer's face, and the fear of what her father's ill-chosen words could cost her, squashed the possibility of any trifling response on her part.

A swirling rush of contradictory emotions flooded her. *Have I been too rash and inconsiderate with my father and forced him into this anxious opposition? Have I taken advantage of the passion and need of Éomer heedless of the weight of his responsibilities and burdens? Have I mistaken first love and the awakening of desire for some lofty destiny and in doing so threatened all the good I have wanted to accomplish?*

*Perhaps I cannot put it right, but I must try,* she thought. Still kneeling on the grass in front of him, she once again took Éomer's face in her hands, forcing him with her imploring gesture to look into her eyes and said:

"My love, if I have been the one who has acted thoughtlessly and caused harm to either you or my father, I am sorry. He is a good man. I am certain he did not intend to offend you," she said desolately. "I was the one who provoked him and treated him with neither respect or patience. Perhaps he truly was worried about the needs of Rohan and of depriving you of an obvious way to
"Lothíriel, you could be right. But his words directly touched something that has been troubling me. I have not made clear to you that I cannot offer you more than my love and respect. Rohan is devastated and life there is hard at best compared to what you have known. Your life with me will be difficult," Éomer sighed finally.

He drew a deep breath and began anew more softly, "Yet, I imagined great joy and honor for us in that life. When I looked at you I did not see a privileged princess of Gondor, but a brave young queen who would face with me, despite all the hardship, the work of restoring Rohan in an Arda renewed."

Her voice was trembling as she answered, "I see now, that I have truly been vain and proud in my certainty that I deserve the trust you have placed in me. I want with all my heart to be worthy of that confidence." After a sniff and a sob, she managed a small grim, "The only thing I have done recently which shows good judgment is to love you."

"Then you are not afraid? You are still willing to join me in this challenge?" he asked hopefully, his face brightening.

"Perhaps I should be afraid, but I am not. I want to be with you in all things, unless you tell me to go from you," she said, still fighting back the tears in her voice.

"Lothíriel, I want you by my side," Éomer said, leaning down and touching her lips with the softest whisper of a kiss.

Sensing they were no longer alone, they simultaneously looked up to see Imrahil and Aragorn walking slowly toward them. Éomer struggled to stand as quickly as he was able and held his hand out to help Lothíriel. Imrahil reached them first and began to drop to one knee with the words, "King Éomer, I owe you an apology…" Springing forward Éomer grasped him by his forearms and lifted him to his feet.

"Prince Imrahil, please," Éomer beseeched the older man. "Both you and I have spoken with little thought and listened less well than we should have. May we put all that behind us and begin anew?"

"No, my friend. You must permit me to speak," Imrahil answered heavily. "I must apologize for things I said, with meanings I did not intend. Throughout this discussion, I have spoken too little of my true feelings. I sought to temporize and delay because I was not ready to accept that my daughter would leave me so soon. The terrible things that occurred in those last days before leaving Minas Tirith left me in a living nightmare. The loss of Boromir, Denethor's madness, my memories of my sister, my fear of losing Faramir as well, taking my sons to almost certain death at the Morannon, leaving Lothíriel to possibly face the onslaught of the full force of Sauron against Minas Tirith alone…"

Aragorn placed an arm around Imrahil's shoulder and added, "My friend, none of us escaped unscathed."

Imrahil leaned into Aragorn, seeking physical support, while addressing his words to Éomer, "You are so young to have already known so much death and such weighty cares. Lothíriel has seen things no maiden should have knowledge of and you have both clutched at life, so eager to build the future, while, since the Morannon, I have sought only a respite." Éomer looked at Imrahil with empathy and then grabbed him in a hard embrace.
"Papa," Lothíriel interrupted, asking in a tiny voice, "does this mean that you do approve our marriage?"

Imrahil threw back his head with the wholehearted laugh that Lothíriel knew so well, but had not heard in months. "My relentless youngest child," he chided her. "Yes, you have my approval, on the condition we do not have to discuss any of the details before we return to Minas Tirith."
The remaining time in Ithilien passed by all too quickly. Éomer had little time for personal dalliance during long days consumed by details of troops dispatches and information gathering relating to the remaining military threats. The logistics of moving the great host from the fields of Cormallen to Minas Tirith by ships, largely provided for or supplied from the Dol Amroth fleet, required considerable attention from all of Imrahil’s offspring. Nevertheless, they would look back on those days as the most peaceful and agreeable that they had yet experienced in their young lives.

Lothíriel and Éomer did find long evenings when they sought comfort together, entertaining all the hopes and dreams universal to young lovers. Lothíriel was greatly relieved when her father made Elphir happy by sending him to Dol Amroth in his stead, where he would be united his young wife and son, removing from Lothíriel the nagging fear that she might not be permitted to travel with the host to Minas Tirith. Amrothos and Nimrodel accompanied him and, while Lothíriel would miss their merry and playful company, she was thrilled for every additional day she could spend with Éomer.

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Late in the afternoon on the eve of the first day of May, the host of the West and its followers arrived finally at the Pelennor fields. The armies set up their great pavilions to await the planned entry with the King into the city at dawn. Lothíriel, radiant with excitement and anticipation at seeing her confidant and mentor Faramir again, hurried through the open gateway to Minas Tirith, bearing messages and reports to the Steward from both Imrahil and Aragorn.

She was not alone. The streets and passageways were crowded with returning citizens, visitors, and refugees, not only those who had arrived with the host from Cormallen, but others pouring in from all the surrounding areas. In all her experience of great feast days of the past in Minas Tirith and Dol Amroth, never had she been borne along amidst such a press of people. Nor had she ever experienced anything resembling the intensity of the city's collective outburst of joy and anticipation.

Level by boisterous level the crowds pushed Lothíriel forward and upward, through the White City, where she saw that gardens bloomed again and much of the worst of the debris and rubbish from the siege had been cleared. Half-ruined houses had been swept out and scrubbed clean; neat stacks of building blocks inside and in front of them stood ready for reuse. Faramir has been busy, she thought. One could not avoid being inundated with the euphoria, sheer relief, and wonder of the returning masses.

After several false leads, Lothíriel finally located Faramir and Éowyn at the wall on the sixth level near the residence of the Stewards looking out over the city, down upon the open fields of the Pelennor, and the darkening sky. Already a few scattered lights appeared among the tents and
pavilions below as evening fast approached.

Laughing and crying Lothíriel embraced and kissed both of them fiercely, and then clung to Faramir, burying her face against his chest until he pried her loose.

"Are you happy to see us, Lothíriel?" Faramir said innocently, his gentle tone betrayed by the mischievous grin that she loved so well.

"I have missed you, Faramir, more than you can imagine. We all did. You both look so wonderful! I have messages for each of you. Oh, Éowyn, I have never seen you look so well," Lothíriel gushed, fumbling in her bag and shoving a substantial bundle of letters at Faramir.

"We are both well, although Faramir has been working far too hard," Éowyn answered. "And can you tell me how my brother fares?" she asked her eyes suddenly merry.

"He is magnificent, Éowyn. He asked me to kiss you for him and tell you he is happy for you." Lothíriel grabbed Éowyn and kissed her again in earnest. Éowyn laughed, tightly embraced the younger woman, and then held her at arm's length and looked with mock gravity into her face.

"Should I be happy for him, as well?" she demanded.

"You were right, of course," Lothíriel admitted. "He has asked me to marry him. I love him so that it nearly rips my heart out every time I see him smile. He is so splendid. I am afraid I will never be good enough for him," she said as tears threatened.

"Ah, Lothíriel, I know Éomer far better than you do. You are exactly suited," Éowyn answered dryly. "He is as stubborn as you are willful. I do not think either of you will have a peaceful life, but it should be an interesting one," Éowyn said, unable to control another laugh.

Then Éowyn's eyes met Faramir's, whose look had grown sober and concerned, as he glanced up from the papers he had been reading. "Do not look so worried. My brother is a man of great passions, but with a heart as tender as yours, my love, and as steadfast. He will treat your cousin well."

"And my uncle, is he pleased with this turn of events?" Faramir asked, turning to Lothíriel.

"That is a much longer story and would have been a happier one if you had been there to advise me. But, I think I can say safely that he now accepts it with good grace," Lothíriel answered, piquing Faramir's curiosity and apprehension. "But we will speak more of that later. You are tired and need to review your correspondence. I will handle feeding us, at father's house or, perhaps it would be better at Steward's residence, since people may seek you there tonight."

Before leaving the wall, all three turned and gazed out in silence across the Pelennor, already dotted with small glittering lights, until the first star appeared in the sky. Faramir stood between them with his arms wrapped firmly around both women's shoulders. Lothíriel remembered that morning such a few short weeks ago when she, believing they might soon face the end of all days, had watched those same Armies of the West depart, which would reenter the city in the morning joyous and victorious.

Lothíriel went to the nearby Dol Amroth townhouse and quickly surveyed its readiness for her father, brother, and guests. She was pleased with the work she had done before she had left for Cormallen and found that it had been admirably maintained in her absence. After collecting a few bottles of her father's good wine, she rejoined Éowyn and Faramir at the Steward's house and supervised the kitchen staff on the preparation of a simple supper. They sat up late talking of many
things, elated and restless in anticipation of the portentous events of the coming dawn. Lothíriel took her leave first to prepare a large guest room containing two beds, leaving Éowyn and Faramir alone to share fond good night kisses. By the time Éowyn joined her, she was fast asleep.

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Éowyn awakened in the morning to the sounds of trumpets, songs of the finest Dol Amroth minstrels, a steady buzz of voices drifting up on the morning breeze from the lower tiers of the city, and the first faint streams of light illuminating the room from the eastern windows. Lothíriel had opened the curtains and the windows before retiring. Other signs of the younger woman's competency, which Éowyn still found incongruous and slightly disconcerting, were evident. Their gowns had been removed and hung outside the wardrobes. Éowyn's was fashioned of gossamer thin layers of white silk, elegant yet youthful—a nod to Faramir's fondness for addressing her as the White Lady of Rohan. Near it on the dressing table, Lothíriel had placed a bright green sword belt, heavily embellished with golden thread, that she had not seen before.

Éowyn thought, Lothíriel certainly has a highly developed sense of the dramatic. Perhaps she is right. It would please Faramir and Éomer, as well as the Rohirrim guard. Lothíriel's dress was made of a rich Dol Amroth blue with an iridescent sheen, simple almost Elvish in its cut. The cheeky vixen is quite the political tactician and well-organized as well, Éowyn thought affectionately. My brother may be love-struck, but he has never lacked in judgment. It seems he has made this choice with a clear head.

A soft knock on the door roused Lothíriel, who jumped out of bed, apparently able to switch from deep sleep to her usual restless energy with no period of transition. Faramir stood behind the serving woman, who swept by Éowyn with a clattering tray, muttering, "The Princess left an order for tea and toast, milady."

The sight of Faramir in the official robes of the Lord Steward of Gondor, his long black hair falling thick and shiny around his handsome pale face, nearly took Éowyn's breath away. The roguish glint that replaced faint anxiety in Faramir's eyes as he beheld her standing before him, clad only in a thin summer sleeping gown that revealed as much as it concealed, finished Éowyn's unraveling. She reddened all the way to her hairline, questioning Faramir with a husky voice, "My love?"

Éowyn was irrationally pleased at the twin dots of color that appeared on his cheeks at his recognition of her feelings revealed in the timber of her voice.

He collected himself quickly and held out to her the scabbard holding the hilt and broken blade of the sword that had slain the Witch King, his face becoming solemn again and wary. The famous weapon, extended as it was in Faramir's long arms, looked small and inconsequential. It had been fashioned for Éowyn's small frame. "A messenger just arrived bringing this from the Houses of Healing."

"Oh, Éowyn, do not be angry with me. It was merely a whim I had late yesterday," Lothíriel said quickly, "I wanted to speak to you last night but I fell asleep. There is a belt of Rohan green as well. I thought your countrymen would be proud of how magnificent you would look bearing your sword."

"Calm yourself, Lothíriel; it is a bold idea. I shall wear it one last time," Éowyn answered. She lifted her chin confidently, her face suddenly bright, looking up into Faramir's smoky grey eyes, which at that moment seemed to her to be undeniably appealing.

"Thank you, Éowyn," Lothíriel sighed relieved. "Now kiss her quickly, cousin, and go away. We have very little time to dress."
Kiss Éowyn he did, after he had turned to his cousin and teased, "Be at ease, Lothíriel. They will not begin without us, for I have the crown." Éowyn held onto Faramir tightly for a moment. When she finally released him, she thought: *I am the happiest woman in all of Arda to have found a love so ardent, wise, and comely.*

Lothíriel stood in front of the members of City Guard and Tower Guard assembled inside of entrance to the city, facing Éowyn who took her place along with Elfhelm, Marshal of Rohan, with the Rohirrim contingent that had remained behind. It crossed her mind that at events of great importance in years to come they would trade places. She would stand with Rohan and Éowyn with Gondor.

The morning sun shone brightly now illuminating the ranks of the Captains of the West. Its reflection against the polished armor of the long lines of troops still approaching the gate hurt Lothíriel's eyes. Behind and above her, the white banner of the Stewards snapped sharply in breeze for the last time over the seven-tiered Citadel of the Kings of Gondor.

When the last of the knights and soldiers of Gondor and Rohan had lined up outside of the gate, the Dúnedain rangers of the north, clad in silver and grey, formed ranks before the entire host. Aragorn then walked slowly to the front accompanied by Éomer, Imrahil and Mithrandir. Aragorn was clad in black mail, a white cape fastened with the bright emerald brooch of Elessar, his head bare except for the Star of Elendil on his brow.

Emotion overcame Lothíriel. She struggled to process the events as they surged forth around her. Faramir and Aragorn faced one another. Seeing them together, they seemed to her to be much alike, almost as brothers: tall and lean, fair of face and dark of hair, sons of Numenor, wise and valiant. Boromir had been handsome, but he never had the heart-wrenching Elven beauty that she had so loved in Faramir. Yet, today Aragorn shone brighter by far than her adored cousin—luminescent, kingly beyond measure, yet with all the pathos and warmth of the Edain. For a single baffling moment, he appeared to her to be the reincarnation of Elendil.

*I am much too overwrought. We have waited near one thousand years for this day. May the Valar grant that I do shame myself and faint,* Lothíriel thought, annoyed. She focused intently on Éowyn, who appeared unruffled, and forced herself to breath more slowly. Nearest her, on her right, stood a young officer whose hand Lothíriel firmly grasped with an urgent movement. *He will have to pick me up if I fall.*

Faramir knelt before Aragorn, held up to him the white rod of the office of Steward of Gondor, and said, his clear voice brave, not without joy, "The last Steward of Gondor begs leave to surrender his office."

She heard Aragorn speak and saw Faramir rise, retaining the rod of Steward. The wind had stilled, the sun burned brighter, yet Lothíriel shivered and felt the tiny hairs rise up on the back of her neck when Faramir began the words he had prepared the night before.

"Here is Aragorn son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dúnedain of Arnor, Captain of the Host of the West, bearer of the Star of the North, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the Elfstone, Elessar of the line of Valandil, Isildur's son, Elendil's son of Numenor. Shall he be king and enter the City and dwell there?"

The roars of "yeas" were thunderous. Faramir extended the crown to Aragorn and their eyes met—Faramir's exultant and Aragorn's solemn. The throng was silent again. Aragorn accepted the crown and raised it aloft chanting the words of Elendil, "*Et Eürello Endoreenna utúlien. Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar tenn'Ambar-metta!*"
Lothíriel trembled with an excess of happiness and relief that bordered on pain. She was surprised to see Éowyn turn her head slightly to one side and whisper in the Common Tongue, loudly enough to be heard by the ranks of the soldiers of Rohan behind her, "Those are the words of his ancestor Elendil: 'Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come. In this place will I abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world'." Everything passed quickly after that. Lothíriel tried to remember each detail. Aragorn gave the crown to Frodo, who handed it Mithrandir. Aragorn was speaking, loudly and clearly, but she could not sort out every word. He calls on the blessing of the Valar or expresses his personal gratitude to Mithrandir. Or both, Lothíriel thought.

Mithrandir placed the Winged Crown upon Aragorn's head and intoned the words, "Now come the days of the King, and may they be blessed while the thrones of the Valar endure."

Then Faramir announced: "Behold the King!" The crowd went wild. Blasts of trumpets erupted, along with seemingly endless waves of cheers from within and without the walls. King Elessar and his companions walked into the city.

After the King and his party had passed her, Lothíriel turned to the erect young guard beside her and said, "I thank you for your support. I am Lothíriel, daughter of Imrahil of Dol Amroth. I hoped you would catch me if I fainted." Her smile lighting up her face with merriment, she asked, "Please tell me your name?"

"Lasgon of the Tower Guard, at your service, Princess," he said bowing deeply, a boyish flush reddening his cheeks. "Thank you again, Lasgon of the Tower Guard, I shall not forget your gracious assistance," she answered.

Then Lothíriel fell into place with Éowyn, behind the three Elves and the Dwarf Gimli in front of the long lines of troops as the King's party made its way to the heights of the Citadel.

"Lothíriel, you gave me courage standing there so stern and tall," Éowyn said, slipping her arm through hers companionably. Lothíriel's mouth fell open incredulously. Éowyn continued, "I saw how you took that young soldier's hand, just as he looked as though he might die of fright. How thoughtful of you. Such gestures of personal warmth become a monarch and will serve you well as queen of the Mark." Lothíriel giggled.

"Oh, no! I wish I deserved your praise. I simply feared I might faint or lose my tea and toast at just the worst moment. I took his hand hoping that if I faltered that he would drag me out of the front line! To think you looked to me for courage. I tried to use you as my model. You appeared so serene and calm," she laughed.

"Astounded and beset would be a more apt description," Éowyn answered.

"Yet you had the presence of mind to translate for your men," Lothíriel objected.

"I did not. I wanted to translate the words into Rohirric, but my mind would not work. Instead I recited the phrase in the Common Tongue from a text I studied as a child, hoping most of them would understand," Éowyn declared. "How magnificent it all was. We are fortunate indeed to live in such days."

"Then, it was endurable for you to see him so kingly and admirable?" Lothíriel asked whispering. "It did not make you sad?"

"Nay, I am the happiest of women," Éowyn answered. Her smile and the softness of eyes confirmed the truth of her words.
"Now a new age begins! If this is but a dream, I hope I do not awaken," said Lothíriel brightly, with a huge sigh of relief. Both women laughed elatedly.

Éomer fell back a step to walk between the two women. "Show a little respect, ladies. This is an historic occasion," he said, the pretense of a frown switching into a wide grin.

Éowyn chided him, but with her fondness transparent in her voice, "I hope you will have the wit to be more nervous at your own coronation, dearest brother."

The ball was only just beginning as Lothíriel walked up the great staircase and entered the Merethrond with Erchirion. The Great Hall of Feasts was flooded with light. The sounds of chattering voices and laughter all but overpowered soft music. She quickly scanned the room, looking for Éomer, knowing he was there, while gripping Erchirion's arm in a sudden fit of nerves. Her brother placed his hand over hers reassuringly. And then she spotted Éomer, laughing, surrounded by a crowd of young Gondorian noblewomen, all wearing the elaborately detailed gowns in the pale lavenders, pinks, greens and blues that were so popular in the fashionable circles of Minas Tirith during the spring and summer months.

A few tall young men had joined the widening circle around the King of Rohan, clad in the black uniforms of Gondor, with the celebrated tree embroidered in white or silver on the front, or the bright blues of the Dol Amroth Swan Knights. However, Éomer, with his bright light hair, resplendent in green with gold braid, stood out among the dark heads around him.

Lothíriel caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. The shimmering grey dress shot with silver that she had chosen to match her eyes, seemed somber to her, lacking in color, and simple to the point of plainness. For a moment, she felt a pang, of jealousy perhaps.

"I am not going to vie with that swarm of giggling ninnies for Éomer's attention, she decided.

She saw Legolas bearing down on them, with a look of relieved recognition. He was dazzling, clad in silvery grey as well, the golden luster of his hair contrasting with his tunic. His flawless face and form, his purposely casual, languid grace, drew eyes toward him as he headed straight to Lothíriel and Erchirion. He grasped her hand firmly with the strength and warmth of touch that she associated with him or one of Elrond's sons, which never ceased to surprise her, always reminding her these enchanting beings were flesh and blood.

Bowing and kissing her hand, Legolas displayed an easy assurance that would make the most practiced courtiers of Dol Amroth look awkward by contrast. He is every bit the picture of the perfect prince tonight, Lothíriel thought, admiring how his mithril diadem became his faultless features.

"It is so close and noisy here. Such a crowd. I am pleased to find familiar faces," Legolas said, greeting Lothíriel and her brother with his seemingly artless smile. Lothíriel could not control an affectionate laugh at his well-practiced skill of charming everyone while appearing to be unaware he was doing so. She knew him well enough by now to know his exercise of this talent was anything but innocent. He has learned to cover his shyness with the effect of his beauty, she thought.

"I scarcely recognized you, wood Elf," Erchirion joked, "in your guise of Prince Legolas, son of Thranduil, legendary King of the Silvan Elves of Greenwood the Great. Yet the stately silks and mithril seem to suit you as well as your rustic greens and browns."

"As you have guessed, son of Imrahil, unlike you, I am not entirely at ease. However, tonight I do not suit myself, but seek to honor my comrade and King," Legolas replied with a pleased grin.
The musicians stopped for a second, beginning again in earnest with increased volume intended to be heard above the bustle. Legolas turned to Lothíriel and implored, "Please dance with me. So I can avoid conversation with so many strangers for while."

Legolas and Lothíriel were the first to take the floor. She was conscious of the stir they caused, but refused to look away from his face, not wanting to take notice of all the curious eyes upon them. Legolas's partnering skill turned a common dance to a hackneyed tune into a poignant duet between a man and a woman that spoke of both the fragility and persistence of love. *He is so easy to dance with*, Lothíriel mused. *Elves raise simple arts to the level of magic.*

"Everyone is watching us," Legolas said, his satisfaction apparent. His reassuring eyes lit up with mischief, although he was careful not to alter his placid expression.

"That is exactly what I want," she answered delighted. "Did you see all of those tiresome women fawning over Éomer?"

"I did. Yet, it surprises me that this should trouble you. You are by far the most beautiful woman here and you know there is no room in his heart for anyone but you. We should dance together for a bit longer. I dance well and am not unpleasant to look at either. Let us drive them all mad with envy," he said wickedly, tightening his grip around her waist and pulling her nearer.

"I think I like your plan," she responded.

After several dances, Imrahil became increasingly aware of Legolas and Lothíriel. He turned to Aragorn and Elladan, who stood near him and said. "Those two have danced with no one else for over an hour. What do they think they are doing? Surely they realize the attention that they draw to themselves."

Elladan laughed, "They are completely conscious. Lothíriel has plotted her strategy as thoroughly as a practiced general, with the enthusiastic support of Legolas."

"Perhaps, you should interrupt them, Elladan. Then Éomer can make his move," Aragorn chuckled.

"No, Estel. If I take her in my arms, I will not want to let her go." Elladan insisted ruefully. "In any case, it would be far more politic if you do so."

"After everyone has been watching her dancing with Legolas?" Aragorn asked in unfeigned horror. Imrahil laughed, shaking his head at their affectionate brotherly bantering.

"You are the newly crowned King. It does not matter if you trod all over her feet. Think of it as a small service to a friend. Éomer's an accomplished dancer, but he will show himself to even better advantage following you, Estel," Elladan said. Aragorn shrugged in genial defeat.

As the music ended, Aragorn handed Imrahil his drink and walked up to Lothíriel and Legolas. The three of them put their heads together talking and laughing briefly before the next dance started.

Lothíriel curtsied prettily, looking up into her King's handsome face. "This is an honor, your grace, that I will speak of to my children and grandchildren."

"Do not be impudent, Princess Lothíriel. I am well aware that dancing is not my strong suit," Aragorn answered, his eyes shining with mirth.

"I intended no such thing. You are our long-awaited King and my liege-lord," she answered. Not easily daunted, especially not by this kind man, she continued, "I think the Lady Arwen must like to dance." She smiled up at him and enjoyed what she saw--tall and strong, and, on this momentous
"Indeed, she does. How did you guess?" Aragorn asked.

"Because, you are only insecure when left to your own resources. When I take the lead, you follow me most agreeably," she answered, meeting his eyes with an impulsively flirtatious smile. Aragorn grinned back and shook his head, chuckling softly, before his face turned serious.

"I have wanted to ask you if there is something between you and Elladan," he said gently.

Lothíriel blushed strongly and stammered, "There was an accident. But we have solved the problem."

"An accident? A problem?" he asked, his eyebrows arching.

"The night of the celebration at Cormallen. We were dancing. I was open and unguarded, as was he. Then he reached into my mind and revealed to me desires and yearnings that he ought not to have expressed," she said. "I thought for a moment that Elves had no concept of privacy and that he believed he had the right to read what I was thinking. But, he apologized and said his touch was unintentional that he had assumed that I was mind blind," she finished, biting off the last two words distastefully.

Aragorn laughed, "Be cautious with Elladan. He has the all passions of Man, combined with Elven arrogance, and impulsiveness to match your own. And you revealed nothing to him when he touched you thusly?"

"He intruded just as I was thinking how marvelously attractive he was," she answered with self-deprecating bluntness.

The King laughed again, "Perhaps an accident on his part, or perhaps not."

"Well, in any case, I scolded him for being rude and he has been prudent since then, except for one forgivably minor incident," Lothíriel said mildly, wishing to lead him away from the subject of Elladan. "And, you, my lord, do you have the gift of reading the thoughts of others?"

"No. Except with Arwen and there the skill is on her side and greatly strengthened by our bond. However, I know if someone tries to read me. So do not think of trying," Aragorn chided warningly.

"I would never do that. I have known from childhood that such prying is unconscionable," Lothíriel answered archly.

"You might be able to touch Éomer so. I think that he would like it. However, if you wait until you are more intimate, the likelihood of success will be greater," he said with a wicked grin. Lothíriel blushed fiercely at that suggestion.

"And you call me impudent," she flashed.

Across the room, Éomer approached Elladan and Imrahil. "Finally, someone interrupted Legolas and Lothíriel," Éomer said smiling following her and Aragorn with his eyes. "She is lovely, is she not?"

"Clever too," Imrahil added. "It is your turn next, now that she has soundly routed all her rivals."

"She had no rivals," Éomer said flatly.
A mocking smile curved the corners of Elladan's lips as he added, "Those gentle ladies following you around do not know that."

"Gentle? They had me pinned in a corner like an animal in a trap," Éomer said good-naturedly. "While I was forced to observe Lothíriel dancing endlessly with our celebrated Elven prince."

"Now all you have to do is dance with Lothíriel and the ladies of Minas Tirith will trouble you no more. They will despair of competing for the heart of the young Rohirric King with a princess who challenges Legolas with her beauty and grace and was the first to claim a dance with the King of Gondor and Arnor tonight." Elladan explained.

"If you say so. I know little of such maneuverings. I do greatly enjoy watching her," he said. "She wears no shoes. Dancing barefooted with King Elessar at his coronation ball," Éomer said with heartfelt admiration. Imrahil nearly choked on his wine.

"Prince Imrahil, forgive me. I am afraid that was at my suggestion," Legolas said, without a hint of sincerity in his apology. "Your daughter takes her dancing seriously, unlike most ladies of Gondor. The shoes were an impediment."

"I doubt that Estel has noticed. My sister rarely wears shoes when dancing," Elladan added drolly. At that Éomer, who, not wanting to provoke Imrahil, had been trying heroically to control himself, threw his head back and laughed aloud.

Elrohir appeared to clap his hand upon Imrahil's shoulder. "King Elessar's court will doubtless be less formal than some of the stiffest Gondorians will welcome. We can only hope that the memory of their deliverance will be stronger than their disapproval," he said.

At that moment, the slamming down of a heavy tankard of ale shook the table behind them, interrupting their discourse, followed by a deep roar of laughter from the Dwarf Gimli in response to some remark made by Legolas, joined by peals of high-pitched laughter from Merry and Pippin. Sam and Frodo looking jolly and well, shouted, "Here! Here!" in response.

Imrahil chuckled and answered Elrohir. "The principal instigators of such laxity in protocol will soon be well occupied in other areas." As he spotted Faramir and Éowyn, both looking exceedingly flushed and animated—unconscionably late—moving hastily toward the dais, he stated, "However, it does not appear that we can count on my nephew and his Rohirric warrior maid to supply any significant balance of solemnity."

As the music ended and Éomer adroitly moved in and about the couples on the crowded floor, reaching Lothíriel and Aragorn before anyone else had the opportunity. The music began again and, without asking her to dance, after executing a short bow to Aragorn, Éomer put out his arm to encircle Lothíriel's slender waist. As they moved to the music Lothíriel looked up into his face and found she could not stop smiling.

"I have been watching you all evening," Éomer said.

"And I you," she answered. Her irrepressible delight in him shone in her eyes. "My happiness would be complete if only you did not have to leave for Rohan in less than eight days."

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The words of Faramir, Aragorn and Gandalf at the coronation itself from *The Return of the King, “The Steward and the King.”*
After The Ball

The scribes would describe the official part of the Coronation ball as informal compared to celebratory functions in the recent past of Minas Tirith. They could have written that the latter part of the evening was raucous, but that might have implied an implicit criticism of some of its most illustrious participants. After the arrival of Faramir and Éowyn, Lothíriel was no longer without a rival. However, she was perfectly happy, as she by then had secured Éomer's undivided attention.

Éowyn danced with Faramir countless times, as well as with Imrahil, Elladan, Elrohir, Legolas, Merry and Pippin (together), and every Tower Guard, City Guard, Swan Knight, Ranger and Rohirrim Rider who was self-possessed enough to ask. She even managed to drag Aragorn onto the floor, twice.

Meanwhile, one of Lothíriel's bare feet eventually was trod upon, when she and Éomer passed too closely to Éowyn and the king. Aragorn was appalled, but Éowyn had laughed, as had Éomer. Then Éomer ever gallant had picked Lothíriel up and carried her to a chair at the side of the dance floor. He persisted in making a fuss petting and tickling her purportedly injured foot, to the general amusement of the dwindling group near the dais, with the exception of Imrahil, who bore all of this stoically, assuming the resigned air of an indulgent parent who is unwilling to exert the effort required to make his children behave as he might wish.

Lothíriel was taking a well-earned recess, while Éomer danced with his infatigable sister, when Elladan approached her.

"Hello," she said. "What do you think of our Shieldmaiden?" she asked him. An open smile lit up her face, only to turn into a slight frown at noting Elladan's seemingly aloof posture that she perceived as arrogant. In truth, he struggled to control his anxiety. The delicacy of her features, the modulation of her voice, the velvety inflection of her Elvish, all wrenched at his heart in the most
"She is indomitable," he answered, referring to Éowyn. "Poets who have written of the incomparable beauty of the Firstborn with such conviction, clearly never saw the likes of your golden Rohirric brother and sister. Your cousin Faramir is indeed a brave man," he replied with what struck Lothíriel as affected detachment.

"Elladan, you seem to have an infinite capacity for talking nonsense while making it sound nearly like wisdom," she replied archly.

"Your cousin is the best of men and they have passed through great sorrow to the joy that they have found. I am happy for them," Elladan said affronted at the sharpness of her tone.

"I am sorry. I do not wish to always argue with you," Lothíriel sighed.

"Come," he said, helping her to her feet and guiding her by her elbow past a noisy group at the end of the dais, and out into the darkened courtyard, "I would like to show you something that is not as pretty, but which you may rarely if ever have the opportunity to see again."

"What?" Lothíriel asked.

"A drunken Wood-elf," he laughed.

"Oh, poor Legolas. It is that rascal Gimli's fault I am sure. That Dwarf has an immense capacity for ale," Lothíriel said. "And he always taunts Legolas to match him drink for drink."

"Yes, but do not waste your sympathy, for Gimli will have an appalling headache in the morning and Legolas will be as fresh as a spring flower," Elladan countered. Legolas's dulcet tones rang out:

*His sword was long, his lance was keen,
his shining helm afar was seen;
the countless stars of heaven's field
were mirrored in his silver shield.*

"What is that song?" Lothíriel asked, with a puzzled frown, "I have never heard those words."

Elrohir stood before them with his arms folded across his chest, his legs apart, and his head cocked to one side with an affable amused expression—all mannerisms that for Lothíriel distinguished him from his brother. He answered, "It is the lay of *The Fall of Gil-galad* that Bilbo Baggins translated from High Elvish. I would give all the riches of Elvenkind to see Thranduil's face if he were to hear him singing it."

Legolas leaned somewhat unsteadily on Elrohir and looked up toward his face, as though struggling to understand what he had just said, but giving up and smiling vacantly.

"No, Elrohir, you miss the point entirely. Thranduil would laugh. With the emphasis he puts on the words *sword* and *lance*, Legolas turns it into a bawdy song," Elladan said.

"He does not look well," Lothíriel said, genuinely concerned, pointedly ignoring Elladan's comments.

"Legolas, would you like for me to find someone to walk you to your rooms?" she asked, soothingly
touching his shoulder.

"Princess Lothíriel, thank you for the offer. Please do not trouble yourself. Stay and enjoy the party. My good friend, Elrohir, will look after me," Legolas said earnestly, before launching into another song.

After the ball is over
After the break of morn
After the dancers' leaving
After the stars are gone

Elladan turned to Lothíriel, "He has an infinite supply of such songs, each more naive and maudlin the last."

Many a heart is aching
If you could read them all
Many the hopes that have vanished
After the ball.

"One has to love our Sinda with the Silvan heart: he laughs in the face of doom and sings melancholic songs when he is happy," Elladan continued.

"He certainly is dear to me," Lothíriel said scowling at Elladan. Elladan's eyes widened and he opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing.

"My dear friend, Elrohir of Imladris, will you see me to my quarters?" Legolas asked. "I am more than a little tipsy. Good evening, everyone, my dearest friends, on this most memorable of nights." Lothíriel leaned in to give Legolas a sisterly kiss on the forehead, earning herself a sweet endearing smile. "Good night. Rest well," she said.

"Here," Elrohir said, grabbing Legolas's mithril diadem, which was dangerously close to slipping off, and tossing it to Elladan. "Take care of this. It is doubtless a priceless relic from who knows which ancient fallen city."

Elladan caught it handily, "Are you sure you can manage alone?"

Elrohir nodded positively. "Come along now. I have you," Elrohir said, speaking with the tender patience one might use with a beloved child. Legolas and Elrohir walked off together carefully arm-in-arm. Lothíriel and Elladan stood in the darkness watching them. Then she turned on Elladan.

" Twins--alike as two eggs, only one of you is kind and the other not, and I must find myself involved with the one that is mean as a snake," she said self deprecatingly.

"Shame on you, Elladan. You are not half as witty as you think you are. And Legolas is a lovely gentle drunk."

Elladan answered, "You are cruel to me," smiling regretfully.

"No, I am not. You are always pushing or pulling at me. Legolas and your brother do not behave with me as you do."

He responded lightly, "You understand nothing of Elves, exquisite one. That neither he nor my
brother asks anything of you is nothing extraordinary. That I do is." To his own great astonishment, he bent down and gently kissed her on the lips.

When she did not immediately pull away, he deepened the kiss. It was apparent to him that it was as exhilarating for her as it was for him, as he had often imagined it could be, but had dared not expect it would be. He opened his lips softly over hers and she did not resist, but touched his tongue delicately with hers, and permitted herself to relax against his broad chest.

Finally, as the kiss turned passionate, almost painfully desperate, she put her hands against his chest reluctantly pushing him back. Her sigh was nearly inaudible when their lips separated.

He said longingly, not entirely without hope, "That was not so terrible was it?" locking his eyes with hers, relentless and earnest. She does want me, he thought. Why am I obsessed with this Mortal who is love with another man? "Say it, please," he pleaded. "I need to hear the words. Just once."

"You want me to tell you that I took pleasure in your kiss. That I desire you," she said distraught, breathing shallowly, her words barely a hoarse whisper. "What kind of spell do you weave?"

"Say it," he said, touching her chin and lifting her face so she was compelled to meet his gaze; it was agony for him to comprehend her rash young splendor, the glow of her midnight hair and cheeks flushed with repressed emotion, her gray eyes shining with tears, level yet apprehensive.

"No. There is no point to it," she answered utterly miserable, looking up into his handsome, pale, elegant face. Then she put out her hand and lightly caressed his cheek.

"Do not be angry with me," she said forlornly.

He was overwhelmed with tenderness, "I am not angry with you. I am in love with you."

She leaned slightly toward him, and for a brief moment, he believed that she meant to kiss him, but she turned instead and walked back into the lighted hall. Elladan stood motionless on the cool marble terrace in the shadows of the balmy night under the starlit sky.

Behind him were the sounds of a quick Rohirric folk tune. Something about it struck him as hot and dangerous, but not without humor. He thought of Lothíriel and Éomer, of Faramir and Éowyn. These two most Elvish of their Númenórean peers would chose those of the younger children of the Second Born upon which to build their future. The days of the Elves are fading. This is the age of Men. I have that choice as well. Is that what draws me to her? This obsession with her is madness.

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It was getting late and the prominent citizens of Minas Tirith had already left. Of the fellowship, only Gimli remained. Aragorn did not see Elrohir, Elladan or Legolas, but was aware that Elrohir had intended to escort Legolas nearly insensible with drink back to his room. Éomer stood with Faramir and Éowyn on the far side of the wide hall.

After walking to main entrance with a departing Gondorian noble, Aragorn passed the door that led onto the terrace. Princess Lothíriel tore by him, clearly distressed, with no awareness of the near collision. Her face was flushed and her eyes wild. She stopped some ten feet away from him, still unaware of his proximity, looking as though she might break down sobbing at any moment. Where did she come from?

He wondered briefly if he should approach her, so distraught did she appear. He decided against it.
He thought that he had extended himself sufficiently for one evening on behalf of the welfare of this flirtatious princess barely out of her teens. He mused that this sort of thing was more Arwen's line. How unfortunate she is not here to handle it with her inimitable compassion and humor. Then with a sense of annoyance tempered by amusement, he thought: Lothíriel has a father, a brother and a trusted cousin here. Any one of them is a far more appropriate candidate for such an intervention than I am. Why does this concern me? Why, indeed? Because I would be more a fool than I am if I were to think her agitated state is not directly related to Elladan. I cannot blame the princess. I of all others should be able to understand how an impressionable young Mortal can be fascinated by the one of Elrond's comely children. The singular allure of their subtle fusion of Elven and mortal attributes can be intoxicating. Yet she somehow seems less Mortal than Elven at times perhaps it is that mixture itself that draws them to one another. Damned Elladan. First diplomatic embarrassment of the reign of King Elessar is provoked by the seduction by his Elven foster brother of the promised bride of the King of Rohan and only daughter of the Prince of Dol Amroth. At that exact moment, Lothíriel turned abruptly, straightened her shoulders, hitched up her chin, and walked purposefully in direction of the doorway where Aragorn stood. Elladan must be on the terrace. She intends to return to whatever entanglement she so recently fled.

"Lothíriel, are you well? Is there someone you are looking for?" Aragorn said.

"No, sire. Thank you. I am fine," she stammered, not looking well at all. "I just thought I would get a little air." You did not get enough earlier?

"Would you like me to accompany you?"

"Perhaps, I would rather have a drink of water instead," she answered turning to walk back into the hall. "Please don't trouble yourself, my lord. I am fine."

"As you wish, princess," he said.

Then she turned to Aragorn and lightly touched his arm, "I appreciate your concern, my lord," she added with a telling look. It has been scarcely two hours since I told her to stay out of my head. Elladan may have met his match with this one.

Elladan heard the sound of someone in the doorway and spun around, hoping against hope that Lothíriel had returned, only to see Aragorn standing in the light. He walked up to Elladan and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"I would speak with you, Elladan. I am concerned for your sanity," Aragorn said lightly.

Elladan did not laugh. He immediately read the underlying concern in Aragorn's eyes. He imagined he saw something more—judgment, irritation—and was certain of the subject his foster brother wished to discuss.

In the half-light of the shadowed courtyard, Aragorn had difficulty seeing Elladan's face, but sensed his rigid control of strong emotions.

"I always appreciate your concern. You have my complete attention," Elladan answered expressionlessly.

"I just came across the Dol Amroth princess in a state obvious emotional distress…" Aragorn began.

Elladan interrupted him, abandoning his previous pretense of disinterest, "…and you assumed that
this state was almost certainly due to something I had done. Such curiosity relating to the private affairs of others is unlike you, Estel. More the sort of behavior I would associate with my grandmother or sister."

"You are wrong there, Aragorn chuckled. "Over the years, your personal affairs have often engaged my curiosity, but I have been satisfied to observe from a safe distance. The unsolicited reports that I have received from Galadriel or Arwen usually provided more details than I truly wanted to know."

"But now you are inclined to interfere," Elladan bristled, suddenly defensive. "One would think there were matters of state of more worthy of your attention."

"Have you considered that your pursuit of this young woman could develop into a matter of state?" Aragorn asked quietly.

"Do you think I would endanger your regime or that I want to idly amuse myself at her expense?"

Aragorn answered ironically, "To your credit, I do not. At least not intentionally. You may be reckless, but you have never been stupid or cruel. I do wonder if you need to be reminded that she is young and inexperienced. She admitted to me earlier that she is attracted to you. Moreover, she has had only her feckless brothers to advise her on matters of the heart, but loves and intends to wed Éomer, an important ally. I cannot but hold you responsible if anything damaging occurs between the two of you."

"Any interest she may have in me in no way diminishes what she feels for Éomer. I have told her that I respect completely the bond she has formed with him. She is not a child," Elladan replied archly.

"I refuse to accept that you cannot but realize that she has not the slightest idea of what you imply by that," Aragorn said tersely "and, compared to you, she is, indeed, a child." It was less the dangerous clench in Elladan's jaw, than the immeasurable sadness in his eyes that stayed his brother's voice.

"You of all people, Estel, dare to counsel me that I ought to avoid any risky or unsuitable entanglements of an emotional nature," Elladan snapped. Yet, he knew Aragorn was aware of his pain and confusion. When Aragorn enfolded him in a brotherly embrace, he did not resist.

"Among my dearest wishes is that you also may find joy in these days. But I fear you will not find it there, gwánumur."

"Estel, forgive my cruel stupid words," he said, his voice breaking. "It is as though I no longer know who or what I am these days, and I have little understanding what, if anything, this has to do with my compulsion toward this woman."

The ball was over. A few musicians played Rohirric tunes for the remaining handful of soldiers of Rohan and their newfound sweethearts who persisted in drinking and dancing. Lothíriel stopped for a moment and listened to their voices. Some spoke to one another in Rohirric or to their female companions in the Common Tongue heavily accented. Their voices rang out with strong intonation. The sound was curiously caressing to her ears, their broad vowels and harsh consonants pleasing. The whole ambiance was for her permeated with a resonance of male physicality; the mesmerizing maleness she imagined that these Rohirric warriors surcharged into the air reminded her of how she had felt the first time that Éomer kissed her.

Only a small corner of the grand hall was still lighted near the front, to one side of the dais. Tireless
and voluble Gimli drank on with three graying Rohirrim. Éowyn had collapsed upon a bench and
was happily leaning back against Faramir who balanced her against him with one arm encircling her
waist, while he whispered into her ear, lazily stroking her upper arm with his other hand. Aragorn
and Imrahil spoke softly with two Dúnedain of the Grey Company, who Lothíriel did not know.
Erchirion was nowhere to be found. Éomer ambled toward Lothíriel, looking pleased to see her,
completely sober, smiling with his relaxed charm that always wrung her heart.

"Where were you? Did you send Legolas home?" Éomer asked.

"Yes. Elrohir took him. For some reason Elladan dragged me out with him to see them off," she
answered.

"Any excuse for your company," Éomer said knowingly, touching her face softly. His eyes gently
questioned her.

"Something happened," he stated. He looked at her as though to read her face and failing, waited.

"He kissed me," she blushed furiously.

"And was it pleasant?" he asked evenly.

"Unexpected. Unwanted. But I cannot honestly say unpleasant," she answered her eyes wide,
meeting his unwaveringly, concealing nothing.

"Was it like this?" Éomer leaned forward and kissed her softly.

"No." He kissed her again more compellingly.

"Yes. Somewhat like that," she answered.

He took her in his arms and kissed her deeply, seductively, moving his hands on her back, pressing
her body against his. She felt none of the anxiety and intimidation she had experienced when Elladan
had kissed her. The heat and passion were there, with none of the desperation and danger. Then
Éomer held her away from him, looking into her eyes. "It was not as agreeable as that though, was
it?" he said grinning.

"Oh, no! Nothing like that," she answered, throwing her arms around his neck and laughing, at ease,
relieved. "Shameless man. You are so sure of yourself."

"No, I am not at all sure of myself, as you say. However, I now understand something of you. You
are an innocent but dangerous young woman," he said earnestly. "I should look after you more
seriously. I want to come to you tonight. Do you remember what you offered me?"

"Of course I remember. Will you take me home now and make love to me?" she whispered her voice
catching, serious, rapt with her yearning adoration of him, desperate he could still change his mind
by pleading politics, manners, or custom.

Éomer kissed her fiercely and then pulled away, laughing with joy, and said, "I will never say no to
you again."

"And how do we do this?" he asked, suddenly overcome with unbounded tenderness for her.

"Very discreetly," she answered with assurance. "We should leave now, but first we must say good
night to my father and Aragorn, and to Faramir and Éowyn."
They spoke to the others and left the hall alone, only to realize that four Rohirric soldiers were following them. "I had forgotten that I no longer go anywhere without a tail," Éomer said.

"What will we do about them?" Lothíriel asked, sounding suddenly nervous.

"Don't worry. When we reach the house, I will send them away. They will be sympathetic and discreet," he said smiling. "Ah, now you worry, after your apparent disdain for appearances might have convinced me that you would not mind if an entire éored were following us."

"Watch what you say, Mortal…" she said with a seductive laugh, in an uncanny reproduction of the tone, if not the words, of a certain Elf lord.

"A joke in poor taste indeed, Lothíriel. Do not overestimate my tolerance," he smiled dangerously.

"You started it," she said affronted, "You accused me of inappropriate forwardness, when all I have ever done is acknowledge that I desire you and I know that you like it."

"Of course, I like it. That was what drew me to you the first time that I approached you," he answered amused.

"Are you saying you knew then that I wanted you?"

"I thought you did and I was right, was I not?"

"You know you were. That is easy for you to say now. But, was I truly so transparent then?" she asked doubtfully.

"You looked half the perfect Gondorian lady—proper and prim—and half cool, other-worldly Elvish princess. Yet, I guessed that you were neither. I could sense the heat in you from across the room. That is why I wanted to tease you—that you dared pretend to be remote. Do you remember?"

"You know that I remember every tiny detail of that day, but I have told you countless times that you have it wrong. You created the heat," she protested, "I never truly desired a man in such a way until I saw you."

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They arrived at the door and Éomer walked back to his Rohirrim guard, who had followed at a respectful distance behind them, and spoke briefly with them. Lothíriel tried the door's latch. It was still open. They entered and the shuffle of muted footsteps greeted them. A small plump grey-haired lady appeared in the foyer.

"Éomer, this Mistress Irilde. She has been our housekeeper here in Minas Tirith for all of my life. Irilde, this my betrothed, King Éomer of Rohan." Éomer nodded to her respectfully, with a boyish smile. She collapsed into a deep curtsey. Éomer took the older woman's hand and helped to her feet.

"Sire, what a pleasure," Irilde gasped, flushing with excitement, "We have heard such rumors. I'm sure you of all people know how quickly gossip spreads in the household of a prince. So, is it official now?"

Éomer could only laugh at her proprietary familiarity. There is no typical Gondorian formality in this household. This is more like home.

"Not yet official, mistress. However, it is no secret. There are papers to sign that our counselors and their scribes will fuss over for some time, but Prince Imrahil has consented, and Lothíriel and I have
resolved that nothing will keep us apart," he said straightforwardly.

"Well, I am glad of it. There is no eligible man left in Gondor worthy of our princess. My, but the two of you make a handsome couple. When Imrahil was a young man and courting his bride he always said that he would only allow his children to marry for love," Irilde said. "He must have been happy to see the two of you together."

Éomer could barely control his features, remembering the hoops that Imrahil had forced them to jump through to gain his permission.

However, Irilde noticed nothing and continued briskly, "Lothíriel surely has told you of her passion for horses. That has ever been a bone of contention with her father. He always said, 'She demands too much horse for such a little girl. It will be the death of her.' I never thought of a king of the horse lords of Rohan for our princess. But, this is surely perfect."

Turning to Lothíriel she said, "Now Imrahil can rest and trust him to pick a proper horse for you."

"Thank you, Irilde," Lothíriel laughed and hugged the older lady. "I am glad that you approve. We have not talked of horses yet, but I do trust that Éomer is competent to help me chose one. Papa will be along shortly. You do not have to wait up for him. He will be tired and followed by his esquire and the usual guard."

"If I can't get you anything, then I will run along and leave you two alone. Now don't stay up too late. Good night, sire, and may all the Valar bless you both."

"Thank you, Mistress Irilde," Éomer replied with his charismatic smile. Irilde made a small attempt at a curtsey and ran off as abruptly as she had appeared.

Lothíriel grabbed Éomer's hand, "Up the stairs and to the right, quickly. Papa could walk in at any minute. Be careful. The marble is slippery." She took the stairs two at a time, hiking her skirt up to her knees, and dragging him behind her. She whisked him through the first door, closed it, and bolted it behind him.

"This is it," she said breathless. "Do not worry about Irilde. I could tell that she fancies you. She appears to have a soft heart for good-looking young kings. She will not hear or say anything."

"Whatever you say, my love. I am completely in your hands here," he said, quietly, gently, with a barely wicked smile.

An oil lamp flickered low near the window. Lothíriel stepped away from Éomer and turned up the flame in the lamp slightly. As his eyes adjusted to the dim yellow light in the spacious room, he noted that it was not lavishly outfitted. There was, however, a simple, well-appointed, elegance to the furnishings. A wardrobe of a dark exotic wood stood in one corner. In the opposite corner, there was a mirror on the wall above a narrow dressing table slightly cluttered with combs, hairpins, and a few small ornate boxes. Unadorned lightweight white curtains, stirring faintly, hung in front of great windows, which opened outward. Two comfortable chairs, stood on either side of a sizeable fireplace, cleaned of wood and ashes in preparation for the summer, which held a large vase containing fragrant waxy, white flowers. A desk in front of the window held a leather-bound diary, pens, an inkpot, and half a dozen books.

"Look, I have a private bath," Lothíriel pointed to a second door, "The best plumbing in Minas Tirith. Legolas says that he has only seen better in his father's house. Apparently, King Thranduil has piped hot water."
"Ancient Elven magic, no doubt," Éomer joked, arching an eyebrow at her impudently.

"No. It is a simple matter of piping and access to nearby hot springs…you are teasing me again!" she laughed, throwing her arms around his waist.

Of course, being young, male, and human, Éomer's eyes were drawn to the wide bed, covered in a plain, white summer spread. He caught her eye as she followed his gaze toward the bedstead. Her eyes widened and her lips parted appealingly, causing a sharp intake of breath on Éomer's part. He groaned, seized her, crushing her against him, instinctively smashing his lips against hers, harder than he had before, harder than he had intended. Too hard, too much, not the way to woo a maiden who wants to make love for the first time, he thought. Before he could lessen the pressure, she threw her arms around his neck with her predictable audacity and opened her sweet soft lips under his, her tongue moving creatively against his. Ai, you are inventive. You knew nothing of such things the first time I kissed you.

Outside, the great white stone city was finally quieting for the night, although the festivities would resume on the morrow and continue for some days. Despite the late hour, there were still sporadic sounds of festivity—voices, the occasional laugh, or a faint strain of music—drifting up on the slight breeze from the lower levels of the city. Then Éomer heard the sound, much closer, of a familiar male voice saying something in Elvish with the, now unmistakable to him, southern cadence of Dol Amroth, followed by a soft feminine giggle.

Lothíriel pulled away from Éomer abruptly, put her finger to her lips, and whispered, "Erchirion," pointing to the wall, indicating that she believed her brother to be in the adjacent room. She quietly pulled both windows closed and then spoke aloud, but softly, "He has a woman in his room. Papa will be furious with him if he finds him out."

"And what about us, my love?" Éomer said, pulling her back against his body with a sly grin.

"I would plead extenuating circumstances," smiling she lifted her face to be kissed. "If I wait much longer I could die for lack of your touch." She began to unfasten his outer coat. He noticed that her hands trembled, but was sure they were steadier than his own could be. She hung his coat in the wardrobe.

He thought she sounded suddenly shy, as she said, "Sit down and I will help you with your boots," her eyes fixed on the floor as pushed him into the chair by the desk, He mentally thanked her father and brothers for the economical dispatch with which she performed the task.

Then she looked up at him conspiratorially, "I have learned that men prefer a woman to the best esquire to help them with their boots and certainly over grunting and straining to do it for themselves. It is such a simple way to make a man happy. You know that I read your thought just now."

"You did? I thought I read yours earlier. What witchcraft do you practice?" he whispered, clearly intrigued. She tossed his boots aside and pulled his stockings off as well.

"It's one of those gifts or curses of either my Númenórean or Elvish blood. I will teach you later, if you want, to learn how to barrier your thoughts from me, but I hope you won't want to tonight, not tonight." He blushed bright red at her thought of the possible sensual applications of this mysterious skill of sensing another's thoughts.

"Never. I will never hide from you, my sorceress, if you don't hide from me," he said huskily. She leaned on his knees looking up into his eyes. "Never," she answered. This is right, perfectly right, he thought. He felt her melting, her need, her wanting, as he never had before, not through all those late nights of endless teasing kisses and half-bold, half-restrained caresses. Her lips sought his and
captured them. He fumbled to unfasten tiny silver buttons on the front of the impossibly fine, silver-grey silken gown and miraculously succeeded. She lifted her arms and he pulled the dress over her head. She now wore only a thin silk shift hanging from her shoulders by single tiny ribbons on each side.

His hands enclosed her breasts. He had felt them pressed against his chest before, but never had taken them in his hands. They were small, but full, high, soft. He could scarcely breath. Her hands grappled with the laces on his pants. He caught her wrists and standing lifted her and carried her to the bed. *I am experienced with women, but nothing has prepared me for this.* He felt a thrill course through her body, again in response to his thoughts.

*I counted on you to show me the way. No matter, love, together we will know what to do,* she responded.

"Ai, what it is to be held by you, to look at you," she whispered, tilting her head back further to look up at him, brushing the coarse tangled golden locks back from his cheekbones with both hands, to better see his face. "Please. Off with your clothes," she demanded and again dropped her hands to the laces of his pants, determined not to be interrupted this time, but failed in her resolution when her knuckles brushed against his erection and she abandoned the laces again, rubbing both small hands against the contour of it.

*At this rate, we will never get my clothes undone,* he thought, plummeting into a maelstrom of love and lust, carnal and ethereal, falling, crashing into the old young bright flame of her. "Wait," he begged and hoisted himself up from the bed and somehow stood, tearing his tunic off over his head and finally pushed down his pants and undergarments kicked them aside.

"Oh, my," she breathed, sitting up and looking closely as though afraid to miss a detail. Her eyes widened, almost comically, if it were not for her serious expression. She stretched out her arms toward him. "Come closer," was her command, and to his never-to-be-forgotten shock and surprise stuck out her tongue and licked his engorged member. *Naïve, but oh so gifted.* He gasped, trembled, nearly blinded with desire, as he stroked her silken hair. Then she chastely kissed the tip of it and encircled it with one hand. She looked up at him and smiled. "Are you…is this considered large?" she asked sweetly.

"Lothíriel!" Éomer stammered, red-faced, holding her face in his hands. Then, as he remembered that he had vowed to be honest with her in all things, he answered, thoroughly disconcerted, but determined, "Nay, not *that* large. I mean…it certainly is not small...well, many might say large. I guess it is appropriately proportioned to the rest of me." *What kind of a maiden would ask such a question?* She pulled him back onto the bed on top of her laughing.

"Oh, Éomer, forgive me. I did not mean to embarrass you. I merely wondered. You are perfectly beautiful in every way," she said, still giggling quietly, moving under him creating a wonderful friction. "This feels simply amazing," she said her voice suddenly low, wicked, perilous.

*Such cheeky wantonness was not what I expected, but what more of a fool can I have been to have thought you would be any less direct.*

He lifted himself above her balancing on one arm and, with the other hand, seized the hem of her shift, pulled it up and off her in one swift ungentle movement. *Unearthly beauty—no, human beauty—but with the exotic hint of Eleven blood. Exhilarating and magical. The warm scent of you so intoxicating.*

He looked down at her now completely unclothed body and a sharp breath escaped him. The sound clearly enchanted her. She touched his cheek, moving his face until their eyes met. In a small,
suddenly shy voice, she asked, "Do you like what you see?" At that moment, he sensed that to her his gaze seemed the most intimate gesture of all. "I love it," he said.

He balanced his weight upon both arms, lowered his body against hers, and began to gently move against her stomach without putting his weight on her. She let out a choked, almost begging moan, arching up against him. He rolled off her and onto his side and began to touch and taste her body, slowly moving downward from her breasts. As he drew near the center of her, she opened her thighs to him, groaned and grasped him firmly again with a silken hand as though to pull him into her. She reached out to touch his mind, *Now?*

*No, my love, not yet. I would show you a few more things first. It will be worth the wait I promise.*

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*After The Ball Is Over*, by Charles K Harris, U.S. hit song of 1890s. It seemed like the type of overemotional song that the character of Elladan in this story would dislike, but which, nevertheless, had curiously poignant lyrics in light of his conflicted emotions at the end of the ball.
Éomer's skin smells of sunshine. He tastes of the sea. His hair is silky to touch and yet coarse, heavy in my hands. It falls mussed in waves around his face, golden in the half-light of the lamp. I am fascinated with his mouth, as always--those lips, full and slightly parted. He exhales my name repeatedly--into my mouth, into my ears, upon my neck. His hand moves down my body and then he strokes, slowly, evenly, repetitively, against the increasingly slippery wetness between my legs. I can only whimper and clutch onto him. I am flying, falling, trembling, shivering. Oh, please do not stop.

He smiles slightly, leans forward, catches my lower lip between his teeth and gently pulls before releasing it. He says hoarsely "Now, my love, I think that you are ready."

"Please, Éomer, yes," I beg of him.

He raises himself on one arm. Now he is the one trembling; his eyes are open but unseeing. With his other hand, he guides himself into me. He thrusts and pulls back, slowly at first, then again and again, lovingly, controlled. At last, he pushes more forcefully, all the way into me. I am ready for pain, but there is none. Oh, Éomer, you know exactly what you are doing. He shudders hard, all fire and wind, utterly consuming. He murmurs something unintelligible in Rohirric, his voice deeper and harsher than it sounds in Elvish. Beautiful voice, beautiful language. Struggling for restraint, he stops and whispers in my ear, "Did that hurt, love?" No. Do not stop now. "Are you well?"

I am beyond rationality. Beyond feigning sweetest or compliance, I struggle to protest in a harsh gasp, "I will be, Éomer, if you will please move. " I shove my hips up against his, willing him to permit me to feel the weight of his body pressing against mine again.

He grins gallantly. He is the sorcerer now, at once teasing and magnanimous. He begins to move again, tenderly nearly reverently, then controlled, deep, even strokes. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I feel that he is as lost and disconnected from any reality outside of us as I am—more urgently pushing, thrusting, grinding, harder, faster. After a while, our world expands and explodes: altered and fragmented. Finally, together we slowly drift back from that fleeting and evanescent indefinable state of bliss to reality, whole again, but one.

"You liked that, love," he states, delighted and boyish, pleased with himself.

"Liked it?" I croak. What a strangely commonplace expression to use to describe the ecstasy he has wrought. He looks at me with soft eyes languid, but joyous. "Éomer," I moan.

"You surprised me. We came off together," he whispers back to me, his voice worshipful. "That
doesn't always happen," he insists. "Almost never the first time, I would think."

I cannot answer. I am still too far lost within him. He is strong or brave to be capable of speech so soon. "I love you, so much, so much," he breathes. "Love you," I finally manage shakily.

He eyes are merry, warm, "I know you do," he says smiling affectionately, exultant. "Remember, I can read your thoughts."

"What did you say in Rohirric just before you entered me?" I ask, alert again and curious.

His blush is deep enough to be visible to me in the lamplight. "I love it when you blush. What did you say?" I press.

"I said that it was the horseback riding," he answered, studying my face cautiously.

"What did you refer to?"

Reluctantly he answered, "Its common knowledge in Rohan that years of horseback riding often makes a girl's first time easier."

"I am relieved to hear that," I answer. "It did not hurt at all and there was no bleeding. I was afraid that you would think I was not a virgin."

"Oh, no, my love. It was completely obvious that you were."

"What!" I say jerking into a sitting position, slightly insulted. "What should I have done that I did not do?"

Now he is laughing, "Do not be ridiculous, Lothíriel. You were lovely, perfect. The best ever," he answers sincerely, pulling me down to him again and kissing me.

I am suddenly aroused again, "So, you think there is still more that you would teach me?"

"Yes. If it pleases you, my love, there is more…" He moves his hands to my breasts and begins to cover my face, my eyes, and my neck, with soft kisses.

"Yes, please."

***

Lothíriel stood in her dressing gown on the balcony outside of her window and looked down and across the city that she loved intensely for what she had found there. Minas Tirith glittered in the morning sun, dazzling stone walls and whitewashed houses, set against a backdrop of the blue sky, astonishing as a dream. She turned to go back into the room but stood arrested by the sight of Éomer in her bed, relaxed in sleep, incredibly handsome, yet such a boy, profoundly natural and pure. He stirred with a contented sigh and reached out feeling the empty space next to him in the bed.

"Lothíriel?" he said quietly.

She hurried back into the room, closing and latching the windows behind her. "I am here, my love," she answered climbing in back into the bed and moving into his arms, allowing him to pull her body against his. "Éomer, you have inspired me."

"In what way, my love?" he asked, sleepily amused.
"I would like to try to force you to feel as overwhelmed and helpless as you made me last night."

"That is only fair. I am your willing victim. Do your worst, fey princess."

***

There was a rattling sound at the window. Someone was trying to open it from the outside. Both Éomer and Lothíriel awakened and sat up in the bed, less alarmed than curious. Neither made a sound as they exchanged glances.

"Lothíriel, let me in. I am standing out here in my shirttails," said Erchirion. "Lothíriel, are you awake? Let me in."

"Patience. I am coming," she answered scrambling out of bed and looking around, on the floor, and under the bed for her robe.

"Here." Éomer found her robe on the other side of the bed and tossed it to her. Pulling it around herself and fastening it, she hurriedly opened the window, nearly knocking her brother over.

"Careful," Erchirion grumbled, stepping into the room. He looked over at Éomer, without surprise, but, with an evil grin, said, "Good morning, Éomer. You are looking smug today."

"Do me a favor, little sister," he pleaded, turning to Lothíriel. "Will you loan me a dress, please?"

Looking at Erchirion's long legs and bare feet, sticking out beneath the shirt that reached nearly to his knees, Éomer answered drolly, "Sorry, old man, I am sure she would like to help you out, but she has none that will fit you."

Lothíriel gave Éomer a grin and said to Erchirion, "Size could be a problem. I am quite tall and slim, compared to most women. You will have to give me more information, if I am to find something that will suit."

"Hold on," Éomer interrupted. "Some negotiations are in order here first. A dress in exchange for a clean shirt and stockings."

"Sorry, old man, you are much thicker than I am. I doubt that I have a shirt that will fit you," the slender young man taunted.

"Do you want the dress?" Éomer growled. "You may not have any meat on your bones, but you are broad enough in the shoulders; anything without swan decorations on it will do."

"It's a deal. But, it appears that you have an affinity for swans," Erchirion answered, gawking at the tattoo on Éomer's bare chest. Éomer actually blushed. Lothíriel sighed.

"Tell me who is the dress for, Erchirion, and I will do the best I can."

"Melliel, the daughter of Húrin of Minas Tirith," Erchirion answered shyly.

"Whew," Lothíriel whistled softly, "Your boldness makes Amrothos appear shy by comparison. What were you thinking?"
"I guess I was not thinking overly much, but it proved to be worth the risk," Erchirion said, his eyes twinkling merrily. "Her parents think she stayed over with you."

"I wonder what she thinks." Lothíriel mused aloud, flipping through dresses in the wardrobe. "This one should do well. If she does not like it, she will just have to climb out the window and look for herself."

"Thank you very much, sister. Come over and get a shirt, Éomer. The balconies are connected." He exited out the window. Then he popped his head back in and smiled kindly. "I am leaving these windows open. This room could use a little air," he said with a crinkling up his nose mischievously.

"Oh, no," Lothíriel groaned in embarrassment. Éomer laughed.

A soft knock on the door followed immediately. Lothíriel went to door and unlatching it, opened it a crack, and peeked out.

"Good morning, Irilde…Yes, I am awake…Thank you…Could you please order us tea and bread or rolls, Erchirion will have some with me… Oh, ask them to send extra of everything. We are famished and so thirsty…Yes, thank you…Yes, if someone could fill the bath that would be wonderful. Thank you, Irilde." She closed the door behind her and flipped the latch again, turning to lean her back against it and exhale deeply.

Éomer grinned, "You are so smooth."

"I can be when I have to be," she smiled happily. "I am glad that I do not have to be with you, love," she said, tears sprang to her eyes that glistered with a fierce, bright joy.

***

A little less than an hour later, both couples had bathed, dressed, and were lounging about Lothíriel's room, chatting amiably over tea and toast, when there was another knock on the door.

Lothíriel hopped up. Opening the door, she stuck her nose out to see Imrahil. "Papa," she squeaked surprised.

"I would like to come in," Imrahil said not waiting for a response, but instead deftly sliding by her into the large chamber. "Good morning, Éomer," he said levelly. "Erchirion, Melliel," he nodded.

"Papa, Melliel stayed over with me last night," Lothíriel said quickly.

"And Éomer, just happened to stop by to have breakfast in your bedroom," he said arching an eyebrow, his handsome face inscrutably fixed on that of his daughter. "Dissembling does not flatter you, Lothíriel. I have always appreciated your honesty, however, impertinent its expression," he smiled wryly.

"Imrahil, I am the one at fault here. I asked her if I could accompany her home last night, well knowing that she would not refuse me," Éomer said quietly, stepping forward and taking Lothíriel's hand.

"Thank you, Éomer," Imrahil said, with a teasing half-grin. "I am not here in the role of irate father. What I would like to discuss concerns all of you and has little to do with any views I may or not may have regarding how you choose to spend your evenings. Although, I would be a hypocrite to pretend
"Crawling in and out of windows, partially clad, within the full view of one and half levels of the city, rather than using the hallways of your own home, demonstrates a reckless lack of prudence," he continued, looking pointedly at Erchirion. "Melliel, you are an adult and what, if anything, you wish to reveal to your parents about where you spend your nights are not my concern. But I would appreciate it, since you are here now, that you hear my concerns." The young woman nodded.

"Yes, sire. Thank you," she answered maintaining a stance of quiet dignity.

"Do I need to remind you, Erchirion, that Húrin is ever mindful of the distinction of his house and not least among his concerns is the reputation of his daughter?"

"No, father," Erchirion stated, while, much like Éomer had, he assumed a protective stance by putting an arm around the young lady's waist.

"The whole lot of you remind me of livestock on a farm in the springtime after a long, cold winter," the Prince chuckled.

Erchirion and Melliel manifested ill-concealed displeasure, at the crude, seemingly offhand, remark from the usually so urbane prince. Éomer answered unperturbed, "Not a bad analogy, Imrahil. A few short weeks ago, everything was dark. Now, for the first time, we see a sunlit future. It might have been predictable that such a situation could provoke certain types of reactions."

Lothíriel could not restrain a giggle at Éomer's easy response to what to most Gondorians would have considered rudeness. She could see by the twinkle in Imrahil's eye that he had foreseen the effect on the individual parties involved.

"To finish my point, this 'sunlit future' depends upon alliances with and support of diverse elements throughout Gondor, Arnor, and its neighboring lands. Few of the leaders of those areas would approve of your liberality of decorum and disregard of custom. It would be unconscionable if the lack of acceptable deportment and good judgment of any in this household were in any way to reflect negatively upon the king and his innermost circle. Comport yourselves with that in mind. Erchirion, I would not want to be forced to send you and Lothíriel to Dol Amroth knowing that you want to be here," he lectured. "Any comments?"

"I will ask Melliel's parents for permission to court her, father," Erchirion volunteered.

"I will be here less than a week, but perhaps, we could at least announce our betrothal," Éomer said controlling with great effort a satisfied smirk.

"Consider it done," Imrahil replied. "Let me know if there are any details of Rohirric custom of which I should be aware. Also, Éomer, a small, but formidable guard of warriors of Rohan planted themselves in front of the house an hour or so ago. You might invite them in for a decent breakfast."

"One more thing, I would appreciate it if the rest of you would go down to the dining room, where the staff, apparently aware there might be need," he said ruefully, "have laid out a substantial breakfast. Lothíriel and I will join you shortly."

After the others filed out, Imrahil closed the door, "Lothíriel, we need to talk about something rather sensitive. You should be aware of your inability to control the transmission of certain powerful thoughts and emotions into the consciousness of others. I am sorry your mother is not here to help you and I am afraid my gifts are unequal to yours and those of your brothers. Perhaps, if Amrothos
were here…” Imrahil explained gently.

Lothíriel clapped her hand over her mouth appalled. "Oh, papa, you not saying that when Éomer and I were making love…”

"I am afraid so."

"I am so sorry, papa. How awful!"

"I barriered myself as strongly as I could and then had another couple of strong drinks and was able to go to sleep. However, there are others nearby—thank Eru, many fewer than there will be a month or so from now—including Legolas, Elladan, Elrohir, almost certainly, and I am not sure about Aragorn, who may have perceived a good deal more about your intimate relations than you would have wished,” he said.

"How can I ever face them?” she gasped.

"With some degree of embarrassment," he replied. "Undoubtedly, the sting will lessen with time."

"What can I do?"

"There is abstinence," he said deadpan. Seeing her face droop so sadly, he could not continue with his cruel joke and quickly added. "I can think only of Mithrandir. Would you like me to ask him if he will speak with you?"

"Thank you, papa. I think it would be less embarrassing for me if I approach him myself,” she said, swallowing hard.

"Then I will leave it to you…”
Traditionally Imrahil had avoided Minas Tirith as much as possible during the months of May through September, only agreeing to come when Denethor, as the Ruling Steward, had insisted that such a trip was of the utmost importance to Gondor.

On the few occasions when Lothíriel had been in Minas Tirith in the summer, the City had been unforgettably unpleasant. It had been hot, but if one opened the windows to allow air to circulate, noxious sulfuric fumes made it unpleasant and difficult to breathe. The horizon, frequently clouded with dust, smoke, and haze, reminded one inescapably of how close the City was to Mordor, to Orodruin. Now, however, everything had changed. The late morning sky on that May day was deep blue and clear. Fresh air circulated throughout the townhouse, a light wind lifting the curtains.

The coronation celebrations were far from finished. Singing, shouting and dancing citizens and visitors, amid showers of bright confetti and ribbons, already filled the City streets. The steadily increasing pace of merrymaking on the lower levels echoed throughout the Dol Amroth family’s house. Lothíriel forgot for a moment the problems she would have to solve throughout the course of the day. It was a beautiful day, warm without being muggy, and on the sixth level of the City there was that wonderful fresh breeze.

When Imrahil and Lothíriel entered the family dining room only two places remained: one beside Éomer and the other where Imrahil usually sat at the head of the table. Lothíriel slid into the chair next to Éomer. He immediately reached beneath the table to place his hand on her thigh. She covered his hand with her own and then turned to her father.

"Papa, I think I know what kind of dinner I would like for this evening. You said there would be about 50 guests, and that it should be ready after the assembly ends, did you not?" Lothíriel said almost as though she were talking to herself. "I believe I can organize everything now so that I can observe most of the proceedings today."

"Yes, dear," he answered. "You are the authority on these matters. I trust your judgment completely." Turning to Éomer, Imrahil continued cheerfully, "I hope you realize that you will be
taking away one of my greatest assets. I hope you employ her to your advantage. She has used her interest in politics and diplomacy with considerable flair as the mistress of this city house."

"I have been blessed with competence and intelligence in all of my children. Each of my sons qualified as a Swan Knight at an early age. When most girls were doing nothing useful beyond the occasional harp lesson, Lothíriel was maintaining an ancient crumbling fortress as a respectable seat of government and a comfortable home."

Éomer grinned.

"Oh, she is very nearly perfect," Erchirion smirked. "Father forgot to say that she sails rather well—unfortunately not much use for that in Edoras. Moreover, though she cannot lift a sword, she is not a half-bad archer. Her only true faults are complete lack of respect for her elders, a taste for liquor and fast horses, and, most recently, a softness for hard-living men."

"Papa, you exaggerate," Lothíriel said, smoothly ignoring her brother. "The castle in Dol Amroth may be old, but it always been well maintained." She turned and smiled at Éomer. "I am a quick learner though. I do not doubt I will be of use to you in Edoras."

Meanwhile, Lothíriel had pulled her chair back from the table. Standing up she said, "Please excuse me, I need to speak with Irlide and to Cook. Éomer, if you need to leave before I return, please come and find me. I will be in the kitchen. Erchirion will gladly show you the way."

After Lothíriel left the room, Melliel turned to Erchirion and scolded, "I have spent time with your sister in Minas Tirith, off and on for years, since we both were children, and I have never seen her drink more than a glass of light wine."

Erchirion laughed, clearly pleased with himself, "You, however, Melliel, were not present at the festivities in Cormallen. The dignity of Dol Amroth was limping there."

Imrahil laughed as well and, addressing himself to Melliel, added, "Young lady, if you intend to spend much time around my children, you will quickly learn to disregard fully half of what Erchirion says and that the prevarications of Amrothos are far worse. They are all, however, good-natured in bad times as well as good."

***

A couple of hours later, Éomer and Imrahil entered the great hall of the Merethrond together, clearly at ease in one another's company, chatting in an animated and companionable manner. The small contingent composed of Rohirrim and Swan Knights who had followed them into the hall scattered to greet comrades and friends. Imrahil looked younger and more relaxed than he had during the entire post-war period. Éomer appeared to be in an extraordinarily ebullient mood, even for that exuberant young man.

Spotting Elrohir and Legolas standing together near the doorway; Éomer came up to them with a wide smile, laying a heavily muscled arm around Elrohir's shoulders and then reaching out to grab Legolas by the forearm. An acceptance of the Rohirrim custom of touching in greeting and the liberal distribution of demonstrative hugs, although initially strange to both of the twins, came easily to them now. It reminded Elrohir greatly of the endless cheek kissing common among those hailing from the Belfalas peninsula.

Elrohir had noted that Legolas was given to reassuring touching. But, Elrohir thought that his
grandfather Celeborn was as well; Sindar or adopted Silvan practice, he wondered. The sober Northern Dúnedain were not given to indiscriminate hugs and kisses. Galadriel, well she was an entity unto herself, unpredictable. She pleased herself. Faramir also frequently sought out close physical contact, despite his otherwise somewhat reticent nature. Elrohir speculated that his mother and uncle certainly must have instilled this habit in him, as it did not seem to fit with anything he had heard of Denethor. Elrohir and Legolas accepted Éomer's expressions of warmth gladly.

As Faramir entered the hall, he approached the three from across the room. Elladan, who had entered the hall a few moments earlier, had also been walking toward Elrohir and Legolas when Éomer had approached them.

Éomer threw back his head and laughed with approval at something Legolas said. Heads turned in the direction of the young king at the sound, attracted by his assurance and charm.

"Good afternoon, Elladan," Éomer said as the Elf lord drew near. The young monarch had turned somber at the sight of him, but grasped Elladan's lower arm and hand with no less affection than he had shown Legolas and Elrohir. Elladan returned his physical greeting with matching good grace, showing no outward change in his serene exterior.

"Suliad, Éomer," Elladan replied, as composed and expressionless as the stone carvings of past kings and heroes that lined the walls of the Merethrond. Éomer hesitated for a moment and, nodding to the small group, turned to walk toward the dais.

Legolas gripped Elladan strongly by the forearm and pulled him closer. He looked at the elder twin's face sympathetically. It was extraordinarily pale, with deep lavender circles under his eyes. Elladan held his full lips in a rigid line.

"My friend, you look as though you had a bad night indeed," Legolas said compassionately.

"Thank you. I am quite well, Legolas," Elladan responded coolly with conscious determination, gently pulling himself free of the Elf's grip and walking to the front of the hall.

Elrohir leaned toward Legolas to whisper, "Don't mind him. He is not talking today. I tried to speak with him earlier and he rebuffed me much less courteously."

"It must have been appalling for him. I would venture he got no sleep whatsoever," Legolas said kindheartedly.

"He truly has only himself to blame," Elrohir replied impatiently.

"You are callous, my friend. I could not have imagined a year ago, the devastating pull Mortals can exert upon one's heart. It is like trying to withstand the charms of an infant. Once they have drawn you into their intimate trap of warmth and swirling emotions, it is well nigh impossible to resist them," Legolas answered.

"I have far less experience than you have with children. Your Greenwood has a reproductive rate that neither Imladris nor Lothlorien share. You must not forget, however, that Elladan has had many years of close relations with Mortals and should be more accustomed to the rewards and pitfalls," Elrohir said.

"Ai, but the princess, like her father and brothers, is hardly an ordinary Mortal. I can scarcely tell the difference between Imrahil's family and you and your siblings. You share well-defined physical
"Then it is no wonder that Imrahil is called 'the Fair.'" Elrohir chuckled. "Such grace coupled with the sense of humor and magnetic charm of Imrahil's entire family, Faramir included, do exercise a pull on one, as you describe it," Elrohir answered.

Faramir reached them at that moment and said cheerfully, "Elrohir, should I be flattered or insulted? Legolas, good day."

"Not insulted. We were actually discussing my brother and his vulnerability with regard to the charms of a certain member of your family. He is morose and uncomfortable today," Elrohir said.

"Lothíriel?" Faramir asked, shaking his head. "I thought I noticed something between them. Is he infatuated with her?"

"That would be one way of describing it. Poor fellow suffered badly last night," Legolas offered knowingly, arching his eyebrows, looking to Faramir for confirmation that he understood him.

"Perhaps someone should speak with Lothíriel."

"Oh," Faramir said uneasily, a bit shyly at first. "Awkward situation. Yes. I intended to speak with her after last night's, umm, experience, but apparently the urgency is greater than I had thought. I am sorry."

Elrohir chuckled dryly, "You have no reason to apologize, my friend. As for Elladan, I was just telling Legolas that he has only himself to blame. I take it Lothíriel's gift, if one might call it that, is not that common among the Edain?"

"Uncommon in general, yes, but not within our family. Someone ought to have thought to instruct Lothíriel more fully in its potential consequences," Faramir said quietly. "I hold myself responsible in part for that failure."

"I pity both Elladan and Lothíriel--not much, but a little," Elrohir said ruefully.

"After last night, I think I envy Éomer far more than I pity anyone," Legolas said blandly.

"Crude, unmannerly Wood-elf," Elrohir said smiling. "You must forgive him his youthful impudence, Faramir. He means no harm or disrespect."

Faramir laughed lightly, his eyes merry. "I thank you both for approaching me. You did the right thing. For the sake of the self-respect of my family, as well as that of my cousin," he joked. "Ai, there she is now with Éowyn and Húrin's daughter, coming in through the side door near the dais. Perhaps I can catch her for a few minutes. It is going to be a long day."

Lothíriel, however, had just spotted Elladan near the dais and decided that she must speak with him immediately. "I will find you in a little while," she muttered to her companions.

When she stood before him, Elladan turned away from her without speaking. She touched him on the shoulder to get his attention. He softly shrugged her hand away.

"Elladan, please, I need to speak with you. Just for a moment."

"What do you need now, princess?" he said haughtily.
"I wanted to apologize," she said.

"Apologize? Whatever for? Surely not for walking out on me last night? That was nothing novel. Why would I possibly have expected anything more from you?"

"No, Elladan. I am sorry. I meant about later…"

"Can you possibly wish to discuss your tasteless exhibitionism? Was your intent to wound or titillate, Lothíriel?"

She flinched as though from a slap across the face. "You cannot possibly have thought I did that deliberately."

"Indeed. I seem to recall you gave me quite the supercilious lecture not a month ago regarding the proper and courteous use of sanwe-latya.¹²¹ Now you would have me believe you could be so insensitive unintentionally," Elladan said scornfully.

"You are a swine," she snapped. "If I were a man I would…."

"I doubt that, Lothíriel. There are few in this room that could," he answered with maddening arrogance.

"Éomer might be one of them," she said spitefully. "If he thought that you said that I would do such a thing …. How can you think I would be so vulgar or that I want to hurt you?" she sputtered, before bursting into tears.

"Stop it," Elladan said, putting his arm around her and hustling her into the hallway. "Calm yourself. I am sorry that I spoke to you that way. You are the most infuriating woman I have ever encountered. Kindly tell Éomer to keep his pants on until you speak with someone about this," he said, his voice softening to a slight extent.

Faramir walked up to them, shaking his head at Elladan's last words. "Please excuse us, Elladan," he said firmly, but not unkindly.

"There, there, stop crying, Lothíriel," Faramir said tenderheartedly, pulling her in his arms. "You come from a long line of warrior princes, your father far from the least of them, you can handle this. I wish I could have spared you this unpleasantness, but what is done is done. We only a have a few minutes."

"You felt it too, Faramir?" she asked sadly.

"It was not so bad. I was quite preoccupied myself at the time," he laughed.

"Will I need some kind of lessons? Father, said perhaps Mithrandir can help me," she asked.

Faramir could not control a mild laugh. "Was Imrahil joking?"

"How can I ever know for sure with Papa? I took him seriously. If he was, it was a mean joke," Lothíriel grumbled.

"You need no lessons and surely Mithrandir has other preoccupations. Lothíriel, you must admit the
thought of that discussion is humorous. Smile," he said with a naughty grin. "What you need to know is surprisingly simple and, actually, detracts nothing from the encounter. I think enhances it."

"Oh. So tell me, please," she sniffed.

"If you promise not to cry again." Faramir tilted her chin up a little to look into her eyes and said, "Also, do not fret about Elladan. He must be nearly 3,000 years of age. He can handle a little injured vanity and discomfort."

"I promise," Lothíriel said.

"It is simply a process of conscious visualization of separateness. Imagine clearly that you and your lover are completely alone together at that moment, removed from all else, as though on an island or in a cocoon. Untouchable, distant in time and space from everything and everyone else around you," Faramir explained softly.

"That is all?"

"It is enough."

"Who taught you that?"

"It was not Boromir, I assure you!" he laughed. "Sanwe-latya was not among his many gifts. His were much more tangible. He would have asserted more useful. It was your mother. I was an awkward and shy youth, when she first broached the subject, but I trusted her. She was a perceptive and kind woman. I am sorry that you never knew her."

"Faramir, it is no wonder that I love you so. You are the most sympathetic caring cousin anyone could ever have," Lothíriel said.

"You are remarkably easy to love yourself, Lothíriel. You should be aware of that and govern your interactions with others accordingly," he answered gently.

"Are you saying that I have been unkind to Elladan?" she asked.

"I do not know if that is true," he answered honestly. "Just be aware that sometimes one may attract attention to oneself without conscious effort."

"I will try. I trust you, Faramir. Thank you again," she said. "I am afraid I have kept you too long. We should go back into the hall before someone comes searching for you, Lord Steward of Gondor."

[1] Legolas's comparative youthfulness among Elvenkind in this story is based upon what I find to be convincing arguments in that regard in the articles "Legolas of Mirkwood, Prince Among Equals" by Ellen Brundige and Michael Martinez's "Speaking of Legolas."

[2] sanwe-latya – transmission of thoughts, exact translation from Quenya is "thought-opening."
Much later that afternoon, Lothíriel slipped out of the assembly to oversee preparations for the banquet to be held that evening at the nearby Dol Amroth family townhouse. By the time she left the Great Hall, numerous commendations, honors, and promotions already had been distributed among the throng of Grey Company, Ithilien Rangers, Swan Knights, Rohirrim Riders, City Guard, and Tower Guard, to the accompaniment of repeated generous cheers and applause. The rowdy Rohirrim, high-spirited Swan Knights, and tight-knit Ithilien Rangers were nearly as enthusiastic in response to honors accorded complete strangers as they were to accolades given their own most beloved companions.

Although overly long and repetitious by nature, the assembly had been emotionally compelling. It was hard for her to leave, but Lothíriel had work to do. She stopped at the middle doorway to look back toward the front of the hall.

Faramir spoke again on a point of order concerning the continuation of the meeting. At that moment, he looked scarcely a day older than her youngest brother and cast in that same mold of entrancing Elvish beauty. There was no hesitation in his voice or mien and, if one knew nothing of his history, one would assume that he had spent his life in preparation to serve as Steward to the heir of Elendil, King of Gondor. Her father and Aragorn appeared relaxed and well rested, while Êomer, although he sat still and attentive, seemed to exude energy and restlessness.

She turned to open the door, when it swung open before her. She found herself inches away from Elladan's cool grey eyes. His cheeks flushed, as he quickly looked beyond her. "My apologies, princess," he said in a smooth low voice, moving aside to let her pass and bowing in the exaggerated manner of the most obsequious of Gondorian lords.

Lothíriel graced him with an elegant nod and polite smile, while softly whispering, "Damn you and your arrogance, Elladan." She quickly slid by him, not lifting her eyes to see the effect of her words.

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In the early evening, Êomer sauntered into the well-equipped kitchen, grinning from ear to ear. It buzzed with purposeful commotion, a scene of well-orchestrated chaos. Lighter and airier perhaps, and much smaller, it nonetheless reminded him in many ways of the kitchen of the Golden Hall of Edoras before a feast. He immediately spotted her. Lothíriel darted back and forth between one post and another, an oversized, starched white apron covering her elegant gown.
After arranging an exotic variety of meat-stuffed green peppers on large platters, she clapped her hands when the last of them was complete and squealed with pleasure.

"They are perfect. I told you they would be," she said to a tall, dark-haired, full-figured woman.

Catching sight of Éomer, she rushed across the room to grab his arm and drag him into the center. "Éomer, this is Cook. She arrived from the castle in Dol Amroth this week to help us. No cook in Minas Tirith equals her."

"This is King Éomer of Rohan, Cook. I told you about him," she said conspiratorially. "Is everything ready for the sauce? I will do it now." She shot him an affectionate smile. "Just one more thing, Éomer, and then I can leave."

She poured the makings for a white sauce, including creamy cheese and crushed nuts, along with other ingredients, into a large but shallow pan over a low flame. Her face flushed from the heat. A fine tendril of damp hair escaped from her kerchief and plastered itself to her cheek.

Cook dropped a short curtsey and smiled up at Éomer. "There is no need for her to finish that, sire, but our princess always insists on claiming the final glory for herself." Éomer waited for the objection that he assumed would follow.

"That is absolutely untrue. I tell everyone how wonderful you are. I just told Éomer, did I not?" Lothíriel said with an injured huff. "May I have the cinnamon, please?"

"Careful, princess," Cook answered. "Just a touch."

"Your definition of 'just a touch' and mine differ," Lothíriel said. "I want to be able to taste it."

"You don't want to overpower the flavor of the nuts," Cook insisted.

"Will you please step back away from the stove? I barely have room to stir. Who discovered this recipe anyway?" Lothíriel said, with a playful moue.

"Whatever you say, your ladyship," Cook replied, eyes merry, winking at Éomer.

"There," Lothíriel said, with self-satisfied approval, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. "Éomer, did anything interesting happen after I left?" Before he could open his mouth, Lothíriel quickly turned away.

"Cook, let me make up just one set to see how they will look and then I will let you finish. I should hurry upstairs if people are beginning to arrive." She poured the thick, creamy sauce over a platter of stuffed peppers and scattered glowing, ruby-red pomegranate berries over the top.


"Fit for two kings, I hope," Lothíriel laughed. "Have you ever had pomegranates?" she said smiling up at Éomer flirtatiously and placing a single berry in his mouth. "These came into the port yesterday from the deep south."

She held her open hand in front of his mouth saying, "Do not swallow the seed."

Éomer kissed the palm of hand, touching it surreptitiously with his tongue as he deposited the seed there. "No, I have not," he answered, still grinning, thoroughly entertained by her antics. "They certainly are pretty."
"You still did not tell me yet if I missed anything," she said.

"You have not given me an opening," Éomer answered solemnly. "Unfortunately, you missed the part you would have most wanted to witness."

"Well, are you going to tell me?" she chided, untying her apron and leaning closer almost touching him.

"Aragorn confirmed Faramir as Steward, of course, but he also named him Prince of Ithilien and ceded him lands in the hills of Emyn Arnen. So, he is now a Prince of Gondor, co-equal to your father in rank and degree of sovereignty, and Lord of Emyn Arnen as well," he said.

"Yes. Yes," she squealed, grabbing Éomer's upper arms. Éomer gave a huge laugh, pretending to flinch and cover his ears. She threw her arms around his waist and squeezed him. At the sounds of her shrieks, the entire complex operation in the kitchen slowed to a near stop as everyone turned to watch the two with interest.

"Tell them. Tell them," she begged. "Listen, everyone," she said, "King Éomer has news for us."

Éomer repeated his announcement and the entire kitchen staff burst into whistles and cheers. At that moment, Erchirion poked his head around the door, breaking into laughter at the scene. He appeared to Éomer to be only slightly less wound up than Lothíriel.

"I presume you told them," Erchirion said, addressing Éomer. "Nearly everyone in this room has known Faramir and Boromir since they were babies. Faramir is much loved and admired by this entire household, as you can guess from the reaction to your report."

"Lothíriel," Erchirion continued, turning to his sister. "Papa requests that you and Éomer graciously present yourselves upstairs as soon as possible. He and Aragorn have toasts to propose. This has turned into quite a celebratory event. I hope that you prepared a feast equal to the occasion."

"I made an excellent dinner," Lothíriel said, sticking her tongue out at her brother, but unable to stop smiling or sound in the least offended. "Thank you, everyone," she added as she swept out the door, pulling the kerchief off her hair, throwing it and her apron in a heap on a nearby cabinet. Her dark smooth hair fell loose. Éomer felt a rush of heat for her.

Enchantress.

However, Lothíriel would not be distracted from her joy for her cousin. "Well, Éomer, does that make Faramir a suitable match for your little sister?" Lothíriel asked, clinging to his arm, still beaming with irrepressible pleasure.

"Lothíriel, you well know my high opinion of your cousin, and, more importantly, that of my sister. In the letter that you delivered to me at Cormallen, Éowyn informed me in the strongest terms that Faramir was an admirable match, even if he were to have nothing after the war but a common soldier's pension," Éomer laughed.

"She was right," Lothíriel said firmly, "But I am so happy that Aragorn appreciates his worth as well."

"Aragorn is a wise man, Lothíriel," Éomer said, suddenly serious. "Faramir is uniquely capable and loyal. He is well loved, supported by many who may not yet share his unwavering loyalty to your new king. Generosity comes naturally to Aragorn, but he also understands that to deal with Faramir..."
in less than the most magnanimous manner would be to his peril."

"That is absolutely clear to me, now that you mention it. But that is no reason for me not to happy for Faramir's sake, for my own sake," Lothíriel said.

"Of course not, my love. I just wanted to be sure you understand," Éomer said. "This is a happy case where politics and personal impulses meet."

"Why do I feel there is another layer of meaning to this conversation?" she said wryly.

"Because of your experience with such matters, princess. One cannot permit one's personal feelings to ride roughshod over political necessities," Éomer said laughing.

"Fine. I deserved that. You refer to my indiscrete little drama at the beginning of the assembly today," she answered. "There are details you should know in regard to that, but we must speak of it later. I do love you so, Éomer. I am fortunate that political expediency suits me well where you are concerned."

"And I am more than fortunate, I am blessed," Éomer answered softly. "Can I stay here with you again tonight?"

"I would not permit you to leave!" she said, clinging to his arm with both hands.

"What are you whispering about back there? Come along, you two." Erchirion called back to them as they neared the dining room.

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The formal dining room glittered with dozens of sparkling candles reflecting against elegant glassware. Due to the heat, the large sconces along the walls remained unlit, leaving the room in a soft light, which only enhanced its charm. King Elessar sat in the middle of the main table, with a place reserved on his left for Éomer, while Faramir, as the guest of honor at tonight's feast, sat on his right. Éowyn sat next to her brother's empty seat, earnestly engaged in conversation with Prince Imrahil.

Lothíriel had originally intended to sit between Éomer and her father and place Éowyn next to Faramir, but after returning from the Merethrond and her uncomfortable encounters with Elladan, she decided a shift was in order. It was simpler in her haste to trade places with the Éowyn than reshuffle the seating arrangements of the Elves and Periannath strung along the other side of the table facing them. She had arranged for somewhat cumbersome elevated chairs for the Halflings and did not want to shove those around at the last minute. She definitely did not want to sit looking into Elladan's cold, accusing glare all evening.

She observed that Elladan apparently intended to behave in an appropriately courteous manner. He had turned his considerable magnetism to the task of insuring that Prince Imrahil and Éowyn enjoyed a pleasant dinner. Additionally, Merry sat directly in front of Éowyn now, which Lothíriel hoped would make up for any disappointment she might have felt at being seated so far from Faramir. For herself, Lothíriel was delighted to sit between Mithrandir and her cousin. With wisdom on one side and kindness on the other, I should be able to avoid friction tonight, she mused.

Frodo and Sam sat across from her, which pleased her since she spent far less time in their company than with Pippin and Merry. She had separated Legolas from the twins for a change and placed him
Oh, dear, Lothíriel thought, perhaps I should have seated Gimli by the twins. I do not want any drinking contests tonight, at least not until we are rid of the most tiresomely conservative of this crowd. I suspect I will not have to worry about such things in Edoras. I have heard that it is less formal and more open. As much as I love this City, I will not miss Minas Tirith polite society. Dol Amroth I will miss. Its courtliness does not extend to such pretentious stuffiness.

Lothíriel slid into her chair, reassured that she was pleased with her handiwork, just as Aragorn rose to his feet, glass in hand. Throughout the hall the most protocol-conscious of the Gondorian nobility vied to be the first to rise to their feet, unwilling to hold their seats while the king stood. Aragorn motioned everyone to sit down refusing to speak until all had done so.

Lothíriel raised her glass with her left hand so she could grasp Faramir's hand with the other. She turned to look at her cousin's youthful handsome face. With his checks flushed, he looked slightly self-conscious but happy. He squeezed her hand and looked down at her with a small grin.

She was overwhelmed with tenderness for Faramir, thinking of how many times she sat at this same table watching him while he endured impassively the implied or express disapproval of his father. Boromir, his jaw clenched defensively at some critical remark or gesture from Denethor, would try to catch Faramir's eye to reassure him. Faramir would avoid eye contact as though he feared the acceptance of any sympathy from his brother, however guarded, would provoke his father further.

After numerous toasts from Aragorn, her father, and Éomer, Lothíriel discretely signaled for the service of dinner to begin. The *Periannath* were fascinated at the array of dishes: roasted fat capons and piglets; meat and fish in puff pastry; steamed vegetables; fresh greens dressed with oil and vinegar; a rice dish laced with herbs, onions, and mushrooms; fruit and custard tarts; and familiar and exotic fresh fruits cunningly arranged on platters with a variety of cheeses.

Frodo and Sam inquired as to the ingredients and manner of preparation of every item; information that Lothíriel was more than happy to share. Frodo declared that Lothíriel's stuffed pepper dish was the highlight of the banquet, pleasing to the eye and tongue. Sam insisted on knowing the origin and nature of cultivation of its ruby-red berries.

Lothíriel finally leaned over to her cousin and whispered, "Faramir, I am so happy for you today. I just want to grab you and kiss you." She did exactly that and Faramir smiling indulgently, kissed her upon the forehead.

"The two of you resemble one another remarkably," Frodo said, with a gentle smile. "More like brother and sister than cousins."

"Thank you, Frodo. I have been told that hundreds of times, but I never tire of hearing it," Lothíriel replied happily.

"Lothíriel is easily pleased," Faramir added teasingly. "I am the one who should be flattered. I am often asked to broker an introduction to my beautiful cousin. Although less frequently of late, as there are few these days who dare to compete with Éomer for her affection."

Lothíriel controlled a flinch at his comment and glanced at Legolas, surreptitiously trying to catch his eye. Legolas assiduously avoided visual contact, but Lothíriel thought she saw a mischievous twitch playing around the corners of his mouth.
"Few perhaps, but not all," Legolas volunteered mildly. Mithrandir stifled a chuckle.

Lothíriel noticed that Sam and Frodo at first looked puzzled, but then as one glanced down the table at Elladan who spoke earnestly with Imrahil and Êowyn. Lothíriel fleetingly thought of how satisfying it would be to grab Legolas by his beautiful neck and choke him just a little, but she did not give him the satisfaction of even a sideways glance.

Then Gimli let out a loud expressive snort. "We'd all have to be blind not to know who that might be. Only an Elf would be so overconfident and cheeky."

That cracked her careful control. "I refuse to tolerate any nonsense from the two of you tonight," Lothíriel said in a low hiss, glaring at Legolas and Gimli, which gained her no reverential treatment, but, instead, a burst of rowdy laughter from their section of the table. Faramir shot her a sheepish, apologetic look, which she returned with one containing affection and exasperation in equal parts.

Not easily daunted, Lothíriel added, "There will be no drinking games either, at least not until the last stiff-necked Minas Tirith bureaucrat has departed for the night."

Aragorn turned in their direction and, leaning across Faramir, asked, "Is there a problem, princess?"

"Do not arch that handsome eyebrow at me, King Elessar. It is Legolas and Gimli who are determined to cause trouble," Lothíriel said, trying to sound forbidding, but softening into an admiring smile as she met his eyes.

"Gandalf, do you not agree that she will cope rather well in the Golden Hall?" Aragorn asked matter-of-factly.

Mithrandir replied smoothly, "I think Princess Lothíriel's forthrightness will be appreciated there."

"Princess, would you consider making a trip to Lothlórien via Rohan on my behalf?" Aragorn asked. "It would involve going to Rohan with Êomer, Êowyn, and a mixed military contingent, staying a short while, then onto Lothlórien, and returning here by midsummer. I would like a Gondorian lady in the contingent and you, of course, immediately come to mind. Elladan and Elrohir would be along for the entire trip. The first two legs of the journey will be anything but leisurely."

"Are you serious? I can keep up with anyone on a horse. As far as the company goes, I promise I will be absolutely as correct and politic as can be. I would do anything to be able to see Lothlórien. Oh, please send me," Lothíriel pleaded.

"I will speak with your father and Êomer and if they have no objections, we can discuss it further," Aragorn said warmly, yet his eyes questioned her.

"Thank you. Thank you," she gushed, ignoring the implied question with the predictable rashness of youth.

Faramir absently stroked the top of her hand, which rested on the table between them. The steward met his king's glance briefly but meaningfully.

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It had been a long day and most of the company had slept little the night before. It looked to be an early evening. Meanwhile, all of the doors on the first floor were left open to allow the ingress of air
from the portico and to ease the movement of people in and out of the main dining room. Minstrels and musicians played on the portico at Lothíriel’s request, also with the intent of drawing people out of the house and into the open air.

Lothíriel leaned against a balustrade with her back to the city lights talking with Éowyn, Éomer, and Faramir, when Imrahil came to fetch Faramir to talk with Aragorn at the far end of the portico. Lothíriel could not take her eyes off her cousin as he walked toward Aragorn. In a few minutes, she saw that Elladan and Elrohir had joined the king’s circle.

She was bursting to speak of what Aragorn had said to her about the possibility of accompanying them to Rohan. She watched Aragorn closely to see if he spoke at any length with Éomer and Imrahil. Now that she was alone with Éomer and Éowyn, she could no longer contain herself.

"I really want to tell you something, but I do not know if I should or not," Lothíriel said.

"Ai, Lothíriel, are you asking us for permission or discretion?" Éowyn asked laughing. "How can we possibly give you either when we have no idea what it is?"

"Well, then perhaps, for once, I should keep my own counsel," Lothíriel answered uncertainly.

"Out with it, love," Éomer said.

"It involves a horse," Lothíriel began. "I do not have a horse."

Éowyn laughed, "Nearly everything in life involves a horse."

"You do not have a horse?" Éomer asked sadly. "How did you come to Minas Tirith with your father?"

"I had a great horse—great in every sense of the word—in size, intelligence, and valor. My brother Amrothos's horse went lame the day before the Battle of Pelennor and I wanted him to have the best. So, I gave him my *Blíðefreond*[11] The Swan Knights prefer light greys. He was a dappled grey. My brother returned, but, alas, he did not," Lothíriel said, her voice breaking.

"You gave your horse a Rohirric name?" Éowyn asked intrigued.

Lothíriel answered, with no small amount of pride, "He was of pure Rohirric stock, my *Blíðefreond*. I called him ‘cheerful friend.’ He was not one of those large cold-hearted horses but warm-hearted, mischievous. True, he was better with some people than others. He loved me and was fond of Amrothos."

"Ai, he was no horse for a lady. I remember little of the events on the Pelennor. However, I do remember that horse and your brother. He was not cheerful when I saw him, but true to the end," Éomer said respectfully.

"I never had the heart to ask my brother how he fell," Lothíriel said. "Will you tell me what you saw?"

"If you wish," Éomer said gently kissing her hand. "I was alone and sorely pressed, when a knight rushed to my side. I did not know him then, but it was Amrothos. His horse was a magnificent dappled grey, clad in resplendent gear, worthy of a prince’s mount. We held off our attackers together until your brother was unhorsed and I again was nearly overcome. I saw that he had lost his
helmet and his lance, but he leapt immediately to his feet."

"I will never forget the sight of him. His black hair was pulled back in tight Elven braids. When he stood, he appeared pale and stunned, but drew his sword, as though by reflex. I was pushed farther away from him, as he stood unmoving for what seemed a long time. It struck me how tall and broad of shoulder he was, but that his face was astonishingly young and fair. I was certain he was lost. A man unhorsed does not last long in a battle like that one."

"Meanwhile your stallion wheeled from side to side, rearing up and crashing his legs down again and again, fighting off all who dared approach your brother. Your brave horse became the target of every foul lance and arrow. By the time your horse fell, your brother had recovered his wits and fought like a fell demon until his comrades spotted that he was down and surrounded him."

"It was at that moment that I first saw the black ships. Everything passed quickly then. Shortly thereafter, I spotted the standard of Elendil. It was hours later before I was before learned that your brother lived and that he was Imrahil's son," Éomer finished softly, with a deep sigh. She leaned against his chest as he placed his arms around her shoulders.

"Thank you, Éomer," Lothíriel said. "Amrothos never told me what happened and I did not want to ask. I did not want him to think I expected an explanation. He simply said, 'I am sorry. I lost him.'"

"I doubt he remembers much," Éomer answered. "I would not remember as much as I did, if it were not for his face and his youth." He laughed softly. "Imrahil and his children do catch one's eye."

"What could you possibly want with a trained warhorse?" Éowyn asked in a skeptical but kindly voice. "Whatever made you choose a horse like that?"

Lothíriel answered, "Youth, arrogance, or perhaps, unbeknownst to me, it was Blídefreond's destiny to save my brother's life. Also, he was such a joyful horse. He frightened others, but he was mellow with me, most of the time. He had a sense of humor."

"Lothíriel, my love, what a find you are. Many would say that only a Rohír would claim that a horse had a sense of humor," Éomer said, reaching his hand up to caress the fine soft hairs on the back of her neck.

"You are wrong, brother. You should hear Elrond's sons talk about horses," Éowyn teased. "It is another example of that same Elvishness that so entrances you. You don't even recognize it anymore."

"I will find you a horse tomorrow. A funny one, if you prefer, but perhaps a bit smaller, maybe a well-bred mare."

Lothíriel laughed through her tears at the boyish mocking face he made as he looked over her shoulder and rolled his eyes at Éowyn.

"Stallions are much more exciting, although at times a bit dangerous," she said, running her thumb lightly across his lower lip. Éomer waited smiling, apparently curious to see how far she would take her game.

"Truthfully, I would be happy with a pretty mare or gelding, my horse lord. I am no longer so rebellious that the choice of a horse becomes a highly charged political statement for me. But I do love a horse that recognizes a good joke," she answered only half teasing.
"No discussion about which horse we have among those that arrived yesterday who may or may not be comical enough to suit Lothíriel. That could go on for hours," Éowyn said impatiently. "Now I must know: What is your urgent need for your own horse when you have done without for more than two months?"

Lothíriel saw Faramir first as he drew near to them and noted how Éowyn's face brightened at the sight of him.

"What, more talk of horses?" Faramir said smiling at Éowyn.

"Éomer was telling Lothíriel how he saw her horse save her brother's life," Éowyn said.

"A noble, intelligent animal," Faramir said sadly. But his voice became more cheerful as he asked, "Did she also tell you how her father refused to buy him and she used her own coin? That was not a pretty story. Did she tell you what a clown he was and how only she and Amrothos could handle him?"

"Yes, she told us he was funny, but not that she deceived her father to acquire him. And that she rode him from Dol Amroth to Minas Tirith," Éowyn said.

"How was that ride, Lothíriel?" Faramir asked mildly, his eyes sparkling with mirth. Éowyn's gaze was fixed admiringly on his face.

"Exhausting," Lothíriel admitted, with a light, self-deprecating laugh. "Amrothos took turns with me, but, as you can well imagine, not without exacting a price. I received no help in grooming him, although there were Swan Knight esquires who helped me with his heavy tack. The whole affair provided amusement for the troops, Papa not least of all. Not entirely a bad thing, considering the grim circumstances of the trip."

"You seem to frequently find yourself the center of attention, Lothíriel," Éowyn said dryly, but not unkindly.

"The youngest and girl, with three noisy older brothers, and no mother," Faramir said, "it is not surprising she developed methods of compensating. Somehow I cannot imagine that you slipped around the Meduseld unnoticed, Éowyn."

Éomer laughed aloud, "Faramir, you are wrong. Éowyn was a quiet, meek little thing. She barely spoke at all and kept her opinions to herself. It is only since she met you that she has become so aggressive." His sister slapped him hard on the arm, looking up at Faramir warmly.

"Éomer, these women distracted me. I came to tell you that Aragorn wants to speak with you, when you have a moment, about some details of your travel back to Rohan," Faramir said.

"Then I will find you later," Éomer said to Lothíriel. He walked across the room to where Aragorn and Imrahil stood.

When Éomer reached Aragorn, Lothíriel noted with relief that her father greeted Éomer briefly before leaving the other two men alone together. She finally permitted herself to consider what reservations Aragorn might have regarding sending her to Rohan and then onto Lothlórien. She had not the slightest doubt that he was concerned about her relationship, or the lack of one, with Elladan.
When Éomer approached Aragorn, he was leaning against the wall of the terrace, his long legs stretched out before him, lighting his pipe.

"Good, Éomer. I have something I want to discuss with you," he said between puffs, checking the bowl of his pipe to see if the light had taken.

"Could it have something to do with Lothíriel?" Éomer asked with a grin. "She has been dropping broad hints that she had news she was anxious to share that would involve securing a horse for herself."

Aragorn laughed, "That sounds like your betrothed. I mentioned to her earlier that I was thinking of asking her to accompany the party that will go with you and your sister to Rohan and continue on to Lothlórien."

"I am sure that she is more than pleased with that suggestion," Éomer said. "If there is anything written about Lothlórien or Imladris that exists in the libraries of Minas Tirith or Dol Amroth that she has not read, I think that only Mithrandir or Faramir would know where to find it."

"I realize that she is as well informed as anyone. Not just about Elvendom, but the history and affairs of Gondor. That could be useful. However, my thinking is that her presence would show the support of the Lords of Gondor. Her presence is not indispensable, but it would have its uses, more for the sake of Gondor, than for my bride or her family," Aragorn said.

He took a deep breath and continued, "I want to hear your opinions--political, of course; but, actually, I am more interested in any personal concerns you might have relating to the proposal."

"I would like her to come to Rohan in August, but sooner is better, although it would not be for long," Éomer said. He cautiously added, "I presume that the personal matters you speak of have nothing to do with Rohan, but with her continuing on to Lothlórien with the brothers Elrondion."

"Yes," Aragorn said.

"She told me that Elladan tried to make love to her last night," Éomer said.

Aragorn groaned. "I knew something had passed between them, but I did not realize it had gone that far."

"It could not go far on the terrace in front of the Great Hall," Éomer said with a dry chuckle. "She was far from disinterested, but she did turn him away, although not before he had claimed a kiss."

"You seem remarkably unperturbed about it," Aragorn said.

"Why be agitated about it? The fact that Lothíriel allows me to read her thoughts makes me far less anxious that I otherwise might be. I know she loves me and wants to be my queen," Éomer said.

As he studied the calm, serious face of the young king, Aragorn wondered if he should be reassured or troubled by Éomer's composed responses. He thought of his own passionate jealousy as a young man. He recalled a time when he had felt threatened by any rival for Arwen's attention. However, he mused, as he considered his own memories, that he had been much younger than Éomer at that time, in both years and experience. He wondered if Lothíriel was Éomer's first serious love. Based upon his own knowledge of social customs in Rohan, Aragorn thought that, whether she was or not, it was
nearly certain that Éomer had a number of romantic dalliances in his past.

"I suppose the ability to link directly with her thoughts could certainly reduce the possibility of misunderstandings," Aragorn said skeptically. "But what of Elladan? How do you feel about his pursuit of her?"

Éomer threw back his head and laughed aloud, "I wish he would find someone else's girl to chase after."

Suddenly serious, he continued, "I'd like to think that I would behave better, but in his position, perhaps I would do the same. The difficulty for me is not Elladan, but Lothíriel. When I asked her father for her hand, I told him that I would not bind her save by her love alone. I mean that. I refuse to limit her opportunities for my own peace of mind or convenience. As you can imagine, I will not soon forget how close I came to losing my sister to despair when she believed that she faced a life constricted by the whims of others."

"You wish then for her to make this trip?" Aragorn asked, still uncertain.

Éomer laughed. "If I ask her not to go for my sake, she will agree. But I fear that to deny her the chance to see Lothlórien would be far more dangerous to our future happiness than the amorous attentions of all the Elves in Arda and Valinor combined."

[1] Bliðe + freond = cheerful friend
Lothíriel leaned back against the short terrace wall of the Dol Amroth townhouse behind her and stifled a yawn. It had been a long and emotionally exhausting day. She had far too little sleep the previous night. Sitting most of the day in the crowded, slow-paced assembly at the Citadel and then overseeing the preparations for a large dinner party sapped whatever remaining energy she might otherwise have had.

The coronation festivities throughout the City itself continued, although at a somewhat slower pace. Shortly after dinner, as soon as the sky had darkened sufficiently, a fireworks exhibition had drawn her guests to the wall of the terrace facing the expanse of sky over the River. While enjoying the exploding white lights greatly, Merry and Pippin commented that they did not come close to equaling the magical shows that Gandalf the Grey had entertained the Shire with from time to time.

To those who could interrupt their compulsive voicing of "ohs" and "ahs" long enough to listen, Mithrandir himself explained that the brilliant colors of his legendary pyrotechnic displays were not the result of magic but a simple combination of various metallic salts added to the explosive materials. When asked how he created the fanciful shapes and figures the Periannath were so fond of describing, he merely smiled slyly and shrugged. "Professional secret," he said, winking at Frodo and Sam.

The urbane inhabitants of Minas Tirith, much like the simpler folk of the Shire, had a great fondness for fireworks. However, as several commented within Lothíriel's hearing, it had been many years since the City of Kings had seen a display nearly as magnificent. Yet, they insisted, it had been long years, indeed, since there had been such a reason to celebrate.

Lothíriel wanted to say that even in the darkest of days, despite the threat of Sauron and exposure to Haradrim raids or outright attack, the people of Dol Amroth had continued all of their traditional festivals. She decided it would be an ill-chosen remark in a crowd containing so many natives of Minas Tirith. How could she fully comprehend the effects of living, with no hope of respite, so close to Mordor and to the relentless sights and smells of the smoke rising from Orodruin? She had always had the choice of returning to the Sea, or staying away from the City entirely.

When the show was over and her guests drifted back to whatever they had been doing before. She found herself again in the company of Éowyn and Faramir.

"So, Lothíriel," Éowyn asked, "What is this trip you contemplate?"

"Éowyn, I am still uncertain if it will actually happen. My liege lord is apparently interviewing everyone to quiet his remaining doubts as to my suitability," she said with a small unrepentant laugh.

"Then you will come with us to Edoras? Will you continue on to Dwimordene and, from there, return to the White City with Aragorn's espoused bride? What an adventure! I envy you," Éowyn said. "Of course, Éomer will support the idea and I suspect your father is unaware of its potential
"Yes. I said that I thought Éomer and Lothíriel should decide. I also told Aragorn that I believed Éomer would want her to go," Faramir said.

"Thank you, cousin. I am grateful, especially since I realize that you may have your own reservations. Just remember that I did not ask for the complications that apparently are common knowledge among the lot of you," Lothíriel said with resignation.

"Relax, Lothíriel, surely you know by now that there is not, nor ever will be, a surfeit of privacy in your life. We all have had the most intimate details of our lives discussed. Is not that true, my love?" Éowyn said.

"Yes, it is," Faramir said. Éowyn sympathetically laced her hand through the crook of Faramir's elbow and looked up into his face.

"Do not look so serious, my love. I already told the two of you that Éomer would not have wanted Lothíriel if she had been a bland, lackluster lump of a maid. When she comes to Rohan, she will have ample opportunity to discover some of his embarrassing little secrets," Éowyn stated bluntly.

Lothíriel was pondering whether she should be relieved or worried at that thought when Legolas approached them. She could not help but smile at the welcome sight of him. He took her hand with a short, graceful Elven bow.

"Faramir. Éowyn," he said in greeting. "Lothíriel, they are playing one of our songs. Will you come dance with me for a while? Éomer appears to be occupied and few are dancing tonight."

He nodded in the direction of Aragorn and Éomer who were still talking. Lothíriel noticed that only three couples were dancing at the opposite end of the terrace. She recognized one of the tunes that she and Legolas had danced to at the Coronation Ball.

"I suppose you will have an irrefutable response if I tell you I am too tired," Lothíriel complained without conviction.

Legolas smiled as he led her away. "You are young and Mortal. The time will come far too soon when you will have grown old and be forced to rest."

"Do not be so sure of yourself. I may be granted the lifespan of the most long-lived of the Númenoreans and then some. You are the one who enjoys pointing out that Elven blood runs strong in me," she laughed.

"I have learned in the short time that I have known you not to let anything you do surprise me," he said. Legolas put his hand on Lothíriel's shoulder and lightly squeezed, encircling her waist with his other arm, as they joined the dancing couples.

"You must be pleased at the plan for you to travel to Edoras and Lothlórien," he said, his lips close to her ear. "I envy you although I am happy to stay here for now. There is much to be done to restore and renew the City."

"The plans are not entirely certain as of yet," she answered.

"Ai, but they are. I just overheard Éomer insisting to Aragorn that he would not have you deprived of such an opportunity," Legolas said with a warm, wide smile, "And Aragorn agreed that you should go."
"You adorable scoundrel! That was why you wanted to dance. You could not wait to tell me. You, at least, are happy for me." she said delighted.

"I am very happy for you," he answered.

"Thank you. Now that you have told me, I must insist that I truly am too tired to dance. Come down to the other end of the terrace with me, near Aragorn and Éomer—not to interrupt them, just close enough so he can see me and not forget I exist. We can look at the stars. See how dark the sky is without any smoke or fumes and how bright the stars. I want to listen to you sing of Elbereth the Starkindler," Lothíriel said.

She took Legolas by the hand and led him to where they could look up at the sky, framed on one side by the towering magnificence of the Mount of Mindolluin and the lights of the descending levels of the City on the other. The evening star had risen and shone most brilliantly among the myriad of others shimmering in the clear dark sky. The sight was as welcome to her as the cloudless blue sky had been earlier in the day.

"Which one would you like to hear?" Legolas asked, also admiring the heavens. "I recall the night before our engagement at the Morannon. I heard Elrohir and Elladan singing the one that begins: 'A Elbereth Gilthoniel, silivren penna miriel o menel aglar elenath!' We were exhausted, facing almost certain defeat, perhaps the end of all things, and their voices brought me hope."

"Yes. I can imagine its effect. It is by far the most beautiful of the ones that I know well. It always makes me think of the Midwinter's Eve festivals of my childhood on the beach in Dol Amroth," Lothíriel said.

"Somehow it strains my imagination to picture you as a pensive child gazing up at the stars. Are you certain you were not running in circles, squealing, and provoking other naughty children to chase you," he responded.

"Perhaps. Or even being swatted on the backside by my father and told to 'settle down' or I would be sent home with my nurse. But, do not change the subject. I would like to hear a song from your childhood. I have never heard any in the Silvan tongue. Or, if you know one of the Galadhrim... Think of it as helping me prepare for my trip," Lothíriel said.

"You are demanding." Legolas said.

"I admit. I am spoiled. The minstrels of Dol Amroth are without rival in all of Gondor," Lothíriel said. "But you sing better than the best of them. I do not want to squander this opportunity by hearing only songs that I know."

"Let me sing one of the Galadhrim. Our language is the nearly same, but their music is different, more magical in mood," he said.

The resonance and color of Legolas's tenor touched Lothíriel deeply. He completed three short verses and stopped.

"That was not right," he said. "My voice is not well-suited for the Galadhon style." He attempted the last verse in a slightly higher register and a clearer reedier voice.

\[O Elbereth Gilthoniel!\]
\[We still remember, we who dwell\]
\[In this far land beneath the trees,\]
Thy starlight on the Western Seas.

Legolas ended with the slightest frown and comical wrinking of his nose. Lothíriel laughed and grabbed his arm, thinking he was not only clever but funny.

"That was beautiful. But you made it look so painful," she said.

"Then you will have to close your eyes next time I try. But, I will not do it again soon. I think I gave myself a headache," he replied, massaging the bridge of his nose.

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At the other end of the portico, Elladan and Elrohir stood together. Elrohir saw a stormy scowl suffuse his brother's face. He could not help but release a hearty sigh at the sight. He had hoped his brother's mood had improved with dinner and few glasses of wine. Elrohir followed Elladan's line of vision to find it fixed upon Legolas and Lothíriel.

"What is it now?" Elrohir asked.

"Humph. Look at her. If she thinks it will be easy to ensnare Legolas, she is wrong. No full-blooded Elf, not even a young one, will be as susceptible to her charms as I was," Elladan said.

His brother's self-absorption and nasty mood increasingly irritated Elrohir. He thought to remind him that Lothíriel had not sought his attention, but Elladan's anguished expression stopped him. It tempered his annoyance with concern. He had not seen his brother outwardly display as many flashes of emotion in nearly two yen as he had witnessed in him over the last few days.

"Oh, that is lovely. He sings to her of the stars. Perhaps, I was wrong and he intends to seduce her. Presumptuous Elf. She needs more than a handsome profile and a pretty voice," Elladan said. Elrohir had enough and could no longer control his aggravation.

"What has come over you? How can you say that our good friend has only a handsome face and a pleasing voice to recommend him? After he rode fearlessly with us into the Paths of the Dead and guarded Estel's back for months when we could not! I have lost patience with you, brother. I presume they seek only to watch the stars and that speaking of the trip to Lórien leads him to sing her a song of the Galadhrim. You project your own unconsidered motives onto him," Elrohir said.

"I am sure you are right. That was stupid comment I made about Legolas. You know that I admire and love him," Elladan said, rubbing his temples wearily.

"Shhh. Listen. Did you hear that last verse? That was an impressive imitation of the Galadhon style," Elrohir said.

"I hope it gave him a headache," Elladan said. He drew a long sigh, looked sideways at his brother, as though expecting further rebuke. None was forthcoming. He added, "I need another drink," and headed toward the doorway.

"Make it a large one," Elrohir called after him.

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As Éomer stood with Aragorn, he was acutely aware of the presence nearby of Legolas and
Lothíriel. He and Aragorn conversed desultorily of the number who would be in the party leaving for Rohan, possible routes, and necessary supplies. Éomer knew that he would meet with Elfhelm tomorrow, make serious plans, and then consult with Aragorn and Faramir again. But tonight they were simply two comrades speaking of these practical matters not in order to resolve them, but because these were in the forefront of their minds and they were too tired and relaxed to talk of anything substantial. Aragorn drew slowly on his pipe and Éomer took a drink from the tankard of ale he held.

He heard Legolas say, "Now, you try it." The Elf's speaking voice, unlike his singing voice was soft and low.

"I do not think I remember the words," Lothíriel said. Legolas sang the first line of the verse he had just sung, in a language that Éomer had not understood, this time in his own voice. Lothíriel repeated it after him in a surprisingly deep alto and nearly perfect imitation of Legolas.

"Good," the Elf said. "You have a good ear."

"Do not tease me, Laiqalasse." Lothíriel said. The sound of her laughter was clear, untroubled.

"Did you hear that?" Éomer said. "What is that nickname she called him? High Elven? Something leaf?"

"Laiqalasse, the name of a lord of the city of Gondolin. It translates roughly the same as Legolas in the Common Tongue: green leaf," Aragorn answered. "Your betrothed is a bit of a scholar."

Apparently. Imrahil's children are all well schooled and well read. I was fascinated with the story of Gondolin as a lad, but I do not remember a Laiqalasse," Éomer said. "Glorfindel was my hero."

"Laiqalasse is not one of major figures in most of the recountings. You may soon meet Glorfindel of Gondolin, now of Imladris. I am certain he will accompany my father and Arwen to the City," said Aragorn.

"Whew! Glorfindel the balrog slayer. I doubt I will have the courage to speak a word to him," Éomer said.

"Oh, I think you will. He has an open, friendly manner," Aragorn said. "I think the two of you will like one another." Lothíriel and Legolas approached them.

"Who will he like?" Lothíriel asked.

"Glorfindel," Éomer said, still bemused at the idea of having a cozy chat with this legendary figure. "You will meet him first."

"Legolas told me that he overheard the two of you speaking of the trip to Rohan and Lothlórien. Thank you, my king. I am so happy that you will permit me to go," Lothíriel said. "Legolas taught me a greeting to Elbereth in the Silvan dialect of Lothlórien."

"That is excellent. Next I will have to teach you to say "hello" in Rohirric," Éomer said.

"Wes ðu hal, hlaford min," Lothíriel said, sticking her tongue out at him.
"Wel ðu segst, hlæfdige min," Éomer said, laughing at her. "We can work on your accent later."

"Frecne beorn!" she said. Both Éomer and Aragorn laughed.

"I think you meant to say, 'Ic þe þancas do, cyning min,'" Éomer said aloud, his eyes soft with affection.

"Exactly," she said and dropped into a deep curtsey, "Ic þe þancas do, cyning min. But I think we should stop this language lesson before I lose my temper and you end up sleeping alone tonight."

"You see, Aragorn, we have nothing to worry about concerning Lothíriel on this diplomatic mission. She is always circumspect and a virtual prodigy at languages," Éomer said, still laughing.

"Yes," Aragorn said. "She will probably be speaking fluent Rohirric while you are still trying to figure how to decipher the obscure references of the nicknames she gives people."

"Legolas, do you like your new nickname?" she asked.

"I like it because you gave to me, but I do not think my father intended me to be called by the name of a lord of the Noldor," Legolas said laughing.

"Then, if I ever meet your father, Laiqalasse, I will not use my name for you around him. I will only call you Legolas Thranduilion, Prince of Eryn Lasgalen and of the Silvan Elves of Ithilien," she said.

"Perhaps she is a diplomat," Aragorn said.

Shortly after dawn, Éomer sat in the front of the open window of Lothíriel's chamber and watched her sleeping. Relaxed in slumber she looked like a child. Her skin was perfect, like that of infants and young children. Her lips were closed and her breathing inaudible. He thought that if one found someone like Lothíriel, one did not delay or temporize. The result of such a course could be unpredictable and the risk of losing her unthinkable.

Her look of innocence and utter peace only added to the illusion of ethereality. Perhaps her father had been right when he insisted that she had not reached maturity for woman of Númenórean blood diluted only by the Elven. But, he thought that it mattered little to him now. He would not, even if he could, change anything that had passed between them. He knew, no matter the cost, he was right to bind himself to her and would endure her necessarily uneven development into a woman.

Yet, he had an intuition of an inevitability of their union that was soothing. He knew he did not have the dubious gift of foresight that Faramir and Lothíriel claimed. Nevertheless, as he would observe in the decades to come, it was from that moment of watching her sleep in morning sunshine that his certainty in the rightness of his chosen course became for him unassailable.

He did not think he was entirely out of his depth, but there had been surprises. When he had first met Imrahil and his sons, he had thought that they were of the same type as the Gondorian nobles from the area of Minas Tirith. But he had been wrong. They did not flaunt it, but their courtly manners and outward elegance of comportment hid a singular disregard for convention and traditional Gondorian standards that pleased him. The openness with which they had accepted him within their circle of trust surprised him.

The rarity and singularity of his southern princess was not lost on him. He had thought she would stand out in Rohan at first, but would quickly fit into life there. He knew his countrymen would accept her, actually had already accepted her. Lately had realized that she stood out here in Gondor...
as well, among what he had once considered her peers. The noble Gondorian maidens of her
generation seemed alike to him--dark or light, pretty or plain, there was a sameness about them.

He mused what an exotic Faramir's mother must have seemed, who he had been told resembled
Lothíriel greatly. He speculated that Denethor, although he was reputed to have loved her greatly,
may have felt that she was strange and incomprehensible to him. He would not make the same
mistake. Lothíriel had opened her heart and mind to him and he had allowed her to see within his as
well. He would keep that window open.

Lothíriel stirred and opened her eyes. "You are dressed," she said, sounding disappointed.

"There are things I must do, before I take you to choose a horse," he said. "I will come back for you
in less than two hours. Of course, later, if you are tired after spending hours in the sun and dust. I
may have to bring you back here in the afternoon to rest for awhile."

"Promises, promises," she said smiling. "What if I do not want to wait that long? May I have one kiss
at least?"

As he leaned over her to give her a perfunctory kiss in parting, she caught her hands in his hair,
drawing him down upon her, causing him to lose his balance, and eliciting the smile she sought. She
kissed him long enough and warmly enough to let him know that it would be difficult, if not
impossible, to leave as he had intended. He pulled away, lifting his head and studying her, while he
lightly stroked her cheek, aware of the smoothness of her skin and the delicate contours of her face.
She would not allow him to raise his head far, holding him as she did by a handful of his hair. She
lowered her other hand to the laces on the front of his trousers.

"I really should go," he said, covering her lips with his once more. She slid her hand into the front of
his loosened trousers and he knew that he was defeated. He could no longer remember why he had
felt such urgency to get an early start.

Nearly two hours later, Éomer held Lothíriel in his arms, his boots and clothes in jumbled heap on
floor beside the bed, but he was not entirely at peace.

"What do you think of Legolas?" he asked.

He sensed she understood the question behind his question and her answer confirmed this.

"If I had not met you, I might have fallen in love with him," she said.

"So, you find him physically attractive?" he asked. She laughed with such openness it immediately
reassured him.

"One would have to be a corpse not to find him attractive. But I admire him for his integrity,
strength, as well as his beauty, much as I admire my cousin Faramir. My love for him is similar, like
that for an older brother, who is wiser, gentler, more tolerant, and far quieter than my own. Thank
Eru that I met you; for it would not have been a good thing if I had become infatuated with him.
Worse even than Elladan . . ." she said.

"Tell me about Elladan, my love," he asked.

"Well, there is truly nothing to tell. I could have loved him for he is not completely an Elf, not in the
same way as Legolas, at least. And he does not seem to have that ancient and disturbing sealonging
of Legolas. However, I chose you. There is nothing more to it now," she said. "We are not even
speaking. Perhaps someday we can be friends again."
"Yet, you have desired him, perhaps you do still," he stated.

"And have you never desired a woman? Would you promise me you never will again?" she asked. He could not control a laugh.

"There have been a few, to be honest more than a few. And I cannot promise you I would never notice a woman in that way again. But I chose you and, unlike you, I had a basis for comparison," he said.

"Do not penalize me for coming to you as my first love," she said with a pout.

"I do not. I just want you to be sure. Do you remember what day today is?" he asked.

"Of course, I remember. My father will announce our betrothal at the king's reception tonight," she said. "Tell me now if you are uncertain."

"No. I am certain. I have been from the moment we first spoke of it. I only ask one thing of you that you will always be honest with me," Éomer said.

"I promised you that I will always tell you the truth and I do!" Lothíriel said. She grabbed his face between her hands and demanded, "Look into my eyes, doubtful one. You can read my heart," she insisted. Éomer laughed again.

"I read you clearly at this moment, but I am thinking of the future. I fear taking away your youth, the chances that you might have had to fall in love, out of love, to confound lust for love, and to do all the foolish things I did that you have not done," he said.

"Now you are frightening me," Lothíriel said.

"No. If we are honest with one another, we can resolve anything," Éomer said. "What do you see when you read my thoughts?"

"That you do truly love me, as I love you. Also, that you think it is getting late, but you want to make love again anyway," she said.

"Is it too late to look at horses today?" Lothíriel asked.

"Not at all. It is too late for me to go alone and then come back here to get you. I wanted to look them over first," Éomer said, he could not suppress the grin that he felt pulling at the corners of his mouth. "I had hoped to influence your choice."

Lothíriel dressed quickly in a loose white blouse and a short split-skirt, colored the same bright blue as the jackets of the Swan Knights, which barely covered the tops of her sturdy but beautifully-made riding boots. She pulled her dark hair into one thick tail, fastened it at the back of her neck, and then reached into her skirt pocket to pull out a pair of riding gloves. Éomer looked her up and down approvingly.

"Ready then?" he asked.

On the way out of the house, Lothíriel dashed into the family dining room to grab a few of the perfect small apples arranged artistically in a large bowl on the table there, and thrust them into the ample pockets of her riding skirt. Within a few minutes they were walking briskly back and forth and down, from one level to the next, followed by Éomer's small guard. The walls and houses of the
White City glittered in the sunlight, as they had every day since they had returned from Cormallen.

When they reached stables on the first level, when Éomer strode purposefully to the far end, pulling Lothíriel after him by the hand.

"Look. He sees you," Lothíriel cried out. A groom held Firefoot, Éomer's large red stallion, who began to wicker and move restlessly. The groom looked even happier than the horse at the sight of his master.

"You're late, my lord," the young Rohír said, bowing his sandy head, his nearly beardless face suffused with a cheeky smile, as he unabashedly assessed the pretty black-haired lady who accompanied his king.

"Thank you, Déor," Éomer answered. "He looks well." Lothíriel reached into one of the deep pockets of her skirt and pulled out a russet. Holding it flat on her hand, she slowly extended it to the giant horse. He daintily took it from her hand.

"I think he likes me," she said. "May I touch him?" She glanced quickly from his groom to Éomer for approval.

"Here, on the neck. He is a smart horse. What is there for him not to like about a beautiful woman bearing fine imported apples?" Éomer said laughing. He continued patting the horse and whispering Rohirric words in his ear. Then he added in Sindarin, "There, there, Firefoot, this is my lady love and your future queen, treat her with respect." Éomer noticed his youthful groom's grin broaden appreciatively.

"He is splendid and so well-mannered," Lothíriel said.

"For the moment he is," Éomer said. "He is on his best behavior. He is anxious for me to take him out. You can ride your own horse back. Will you ride down to the fields with me?" Éomer asked.

"Will he dislike the extra weight?" she asked.

"He is strong and used to me in full armor. Anyway, you are light as a feather," Éomer said.

"I am not as light as I look. I may be slim, but am tall for a woman, even taller than Éowyn," she said.

"Actually, I was thinking more of propriety than weight," Éomer said.

"Forget propriety. Our betrothal will be announced tonight," she answered. "Then you can kiss me on the walls of the Citadel in front of the whole City. Not that there are many remaining who have not already seen us kiss." Éomer noticed with amusement that her face clouded a little as looked around at the curious Rohirrim who had not taken their eyes off of her since she had entered the stables with him.

"What will your men think of such intimacy, cyning min?" she whispered with a flirtatious smile.

"They will know I have claimed you as my bride soon enough, if I can convince you to take a mare," he answered.

"Is the gift of a horse a sign?" Lothíriel asked intrigued.

"Generally, the gift of a horse, a gelding that is, would be seen as a sign of friendship. However, if I give a gorgeous, foreign, high-ranking princess a stallion or mare it will be to my people as open a
declaration of the plighting of our troth as any announcement in the court of King Elessar will be to yours," Éomer said.

He grabbed her by the waist with both hands and said, "Ready. Push up." She placed her hands on his shoulders. With the aid of their combined strength, her grace, and her knowledge of horses, he swept her upward smoothly onto to Firefoot's back and swung himself up effortlessly behind her.

"But my Bliðefreond was a stallion," she said.

"Contraband, I am sure," Éomer said with a pretense of sternness.

"No wonder father was so annoyed with me and he was so frightfully expensive. Does that make me a horse thief?" Lothíriel asked, appearing delighted at the idea.

"Nay. The last few years were hard times for our horse traders. If a few mares or stallions slipped through to Belfalas now and again, we turned a blind eye. Dol Amroth has bought heavily of only our finest horses and paid the highest prices over countless years," Éomer said. "It was the disappearance of nearly all our blacks to the enemy that troubled us."

Éomer guided Firefoot cautiously down the last bit of the slippery stone roadway out of the City. When they reached the bottom, he let the stallion burst forward. He tightened his arm around Lothíriel's waist and she snuggled provocatively against him.

"Careful. Do not disturb my horse. He is already aware there is a hold filled with mares below," Éomer said. She laughed lightly and Firefoot, who had already begun to slow his pace, sensing they neared their destination, flicked his head up as though approving of the sound.

"You were right. He truly does like you. I would have been disappointed if I had to give him up for you. But I would have..." Éomer said, kissing her neck below her ear and pressing his chest more firmly against her back.

"Éomer," she said with strong emotion, "Under no circumstances would I have ever permitted you to do any such thing. You owe him your life many times over. But that is the dearest declaration of your love that you have ever given me."

Éomer answered, "Aragorn is right, you will fit extremely well in Rohan."

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By the time Éomer and Lothíriel finally arrived at the section of the Pelennor Fields where the horses which had newly arrived from Rohan were stationed, the entire area had taken on the appearance of a full-scale horse fair. Large paddocks had been erected containing stallions, mares, and geldings. The paddock containing the majority of the geldings was the site of brisk trade. The sale of the few that could be spared would aid the staggering economy of Rohan.

Paddocks with the mares and stallions were quieter by contrast, but still scenes of sustained activity. Riders of Rohan who had lost horses at either of the Battles of Pelennor Fields or the Morannon were negotiating with the horse traders for a ride home. Various Gondorians, horse fanciers all, were simply enjoying the opportunity to survey the finest horseflesh of Arda in such number and variety. As Éomer and Lothíriel dismounted a short distance from the fenced paddock which contained most of the mares, one of the soldiers who had accompanied them ran up to Éomer and offered to take Firefoot. Éomer gladly accepted the offer.

To her surprise, Lothíriel immediately spotted Aragorn and her father, with Éowyn and Faramir. Éowyn ran up to her and took her arm, all smiles.
"Lothíriel, you are late," Imrahil said, also wearing a broad smile.

"I did not know we had an appointment to meet you," Lothíriel said, reaching up to kiss her father.

"Faramir told us this morning that Éowyn was excited to come and watch you choose a horse. So, we decided this was an occasion that none of us wanted to miss," Aragorn said.

"There they are," Éomer said. "Do you see one that interests you?"

Lothíriel climbed up on the fence searching a crowd of horses which had bunched nearer to the other side of the paddock. She noticed that everyone except Éomer was watching her as she looked at the horses. He appeared to be intently looking for a particular horse as well.

"Look, look. Do you see her? That one," Lothíriel shouted pointing in the direction of the main mass of horses. Faramir and Imrahil laughed.

Éowyn climbed up on the fence next to her. "Which one?" she demanded.

Éomer stuck his head between the two women. "Is it the elegant grey with the black mane and tail?" he asked knowingly.

"Yes. She's beautiful," Lothíriel said with she what feared must have been a totally besotted sigh.

"Shall we see if she is as interested in you?" Éomer asked, laughing as he climbed the fence and dropped onto the other side. Lothíriel climbed over as well and prepared to jump, but Éomer reached up for her, whirled her around, and set her on her feet, "Just trying to help you get her attention," he said.

Éowyn turned to Faramir and the others, "She wants the long-legged, small-boned Elvish-looking one. I watched that one yesterday when I came down here. She is hardier than she looks, I would guess. Quite the fine lady that mare. Fit for a queen of the Riddermark. Lothíriel has chosen well."

"Wish me luck," Lothíriel called behind her. She followed Éomer toward the center of the paddock hoping she appeared less anxious than she felt. The tight clump of horses broke apart and scattered, a few approached Lothíriel and Éomer. The object of Lothíriel's attention stayed in her original position. But she lifted her head higher, her ears cocked back with interest.

A little red mare, with a white star came up and nudged Lothíriel gently. She stroked horse's neck. "Oh, you are pretty too, aren't you?" Lothíriel said, laughing gaily.

The tall grey pricked up her ears even more, shuffled a bit in small dancer-like movements and finally headed straight toward them. Lothíriel met the mare's fine eyes as she neared them and reached into her pocket. The horse stopped directly in front of them, but a few feet away, and whickered softly.

The lovely mare's attention was focused completely on Lothíriel, as she slowly took out an apple. Lothíriel held out her hand and the mare took it gently and then stood still, as though granting the princess permission to touch her. For several minutes Lothíriel patted and stroked her, speaking softly and encouragingly, permitting the mare to become familiar with her touch and the sound of her voice. She noticed the mare did not beg or try to find another apple. Lothíriel produced another and that time she took it more eagerly and whickered affectionately.

"Would you like to ride her now?" Éomer said softly as though he did not want to interrupt the two of them.
"Oh, yes! Give me a leg up," she answered. Éomer laughed.

"Wait, wild Elf lady. Let me get you a bridle at least," he said. He shouted something in Rohirric that she did not understand. Lothíriel turned to see that a growing crowd had gathered to watch them. A young Rohír, a groom or horse trainer, ran up to them carrying a bridle and moved to hand it to Éomer. Lothíriel intercepted it and took it from the young man.

"Thank you very much," she said in the Common Tongue and was rewarded with a wide smile and a deep bow.

"I am honored to serve you, milady," he answered.

Lothíriel stroked the mare, then held the bridle where the mare could see it, and easily slipped it onto her and fastened it. Her action was answered by cheers and applause. She felt her face redden in embarrassment. She had never expected to be applauded for putting a bridle on a horse.

She looked to see her father, Éowyn, Aragorn, and Faramir. Éowyn was clapping along with the Rohirrim and the other three were laughing. Aragorn grinned and gestured to Lothíriel, indicating he wanted to see her mount the horse. She turned back to Éomer, who was beaming at her proudly. He pulled her fully into his arms and kissed her soundly. "Oh, how I love you," she said, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him back enthusiastically. She heard the sound of even less restrained shouts and whistles behind her.

"Cheers for putting a bridle on a horse and then louder cheers for kissing their king. Your people spoil me, my love," she whispered. Lothíriel saw the luminosity of passion in Éomer's eyes and it sent waves of softening warmth throughout her entire body. But he did not try to kiss her again.

"Ready," he said huskily and, at her nod, boosted her onto her mare.

Later that night, Prince Imrahil announced the betrothal of the Princess of Dol Amroth to the handsome young king of Rohan with great solemnity and ceremony before a dazzling assembly of the most noble and powerful of Gondor and its allies. Lothíriel and Éomer were happy and pleased, but to both it seemed anticlimactic in comparison to the unabashedly joyful whistles and cheers of approval of the Riders of Rohan at the horse fair under the open skies and clouds of dust of the Pelennor Fields.

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Laiqalasse = Legolas, an Elf of Gondolin in the Book of Lost Tales 2.

1. Wes ðu hal, hlaford min = Hail (be well), my lord.
2. Wel ðu segst, hlæfdige min = Well said (you say/speak well), my lady.
3. Frecne beorn = Audacious man.
4. Ic þe þancas do, cyning min = Thank you, my king.
The next four days in Minas Tirith passed like a hurried afternoon. Lothíriel left the City for the Pelennor Fields every morning to become as well acquainted as she could with her new mare before the upcoming trip. Éomer often accompanied her and watched with approval as she and the horse went through their paces. She knew that Éomer was ready to provide advice, but that he was happy and surprised when it was not needed.

Lothíriel was amused to observe that Éowyn was beginning to consider herself an expert on the history and customs of Númenor. She was also pleased to overhear Éowyn carefully explain to Éomer that her earlier assumption that Lothíriel's ease with horses was a result of her Elvishness had not been entirely accurate. Éowyn stated with her usual conviction that the men of the West who adhered most closely to their Númenórean roots rivaled the Rohirrim in their love, respect, and knowledge of horses.

As the days drew closer to the time when Lothíriel was to leave the White City, she was suddenly stricken with mild guilt and remorse at leaving her father and Erchirion to fend for themselves in Minas Tirith without her as mistress of the house. She initiated long, detailed, and frequent discussions with Irilde and Cook. Finally, Cook, the more volatile of the two, had threatened to take the next boat back to Dol Amroth if Lothíriel would not leave them in peace and attend to herself.

Meanwhile, Lothíriel packed and unpacked her personal effects several times. She was tortured between taking what she thought she might need to make a suitably positive impression on both the people of Rohan and the Lothlórien community of ancient mysterious Elves and appearing to be overly concerned with finery.

Most of all she did not want to present herself for the first time before the Rohirrim as a privileged princess of the richest province of Gondor. She was acutely aware that Dol Amroth had survived largely unscathed, when the people and lands of Rohan had sacrificed so much to the cause of victory and freedom in the great Ring War. On the other hand, she wanted them to see her as not simply a suitable, but a brilliant match for their much-loved king. However, she found the idea offensive of dragging a wainload of frippery along behind her into a land that needed grain-state visit or not.

On one of the last evenings in Minas Tirith, an intimate group gathered in King Elessar's private sitting room. Elrohir spoke up. "Why so pensive, Lothíriel? You look as though you had to bear the
entire weight of Arda on your shoulders alone."

Half afraid of being compared to a young girl brooding over what gown to choose for her first ball, Lothíriel blurted out her preoccupation. To her relief and astonishment the largely male crowd took her concerns seriously. Aragorn complimented her on her good judgment in desiring to travel light. Prince Imrahil reassured her that it was a fitting and legitimate concern of a prince to consider such matters as appearance and the impression one would make.

Éowyn, who was as usual opinionated and specific, stated bluntly, "Your youth and beauty will go far to recommend you with all of Eorlingas and the way you sit a horse will serve that purpose as well. But, if you truly want to catch their eye, wear your Dol Amroth blue riding habit when you enter Edoras for the first time."

To her great surprise, Elladan spoke up as well, although his tone was cool and impersonal. "Gems are lighter to carry than gowns. You should take those dangling earrings of adamant that you wore to the coronation ball. They make you look most queenly. Our company will be well armed, your trinkets will be safe with us."

"The ones as big as Simarils?" Faramir said, sounding to Lothíriel both astonished and, she thought, perhaps slightly disapproving at the idea of such an ostentatious display.

Lothíriel mused that the Stewards of Gondor were far less comfortable with courtly trappings than the princes of Dol Amroth. Both Boromir and Faramir wore rich garments, as their father had, but in keeping with the tradition of the House of Húrin, in shades of black, grey and dark brown.

She bitterly recalled inadvertently eavesdropping, perhaps only a year or so earlier, on a dispute between her Uncle Denethor and her cousin. Faramir had supported an opinion voiced by his brothers regarding Gondor's coastal defenses that contradicted that of his father. Denethor had dismissively referred to them as "light-minded peacocks."

With that memory still rankling in her mind, she permitted herself to make eye contact with Faramir. Her handsome cousin, returned her gaze with a soft, slightly self-conscious smile. She could not resist sending him a response. Do not worry. I know that you have nothing of your father's arrogance and narrow-mindedness. But you do look most comely in simple black.

"It is easy to see that Gondor has gone without a king for nearly one thousand years," Éowyn said in response to Faramir's Silmaril remark. "Full granaries are vital, but a king's subjects enjoy a certain amount of pageantry and show as well, or we would have stripped the roof of the Meduseld of its gold long hence."

"The gems are not nearly as large or heavy as they look or I could not bear to wear them. It is the craftsmanship in the cutting and setting of the stones that makes them look so fine," Lothíriel said. "In any case, they are not mine. It is entirely up to Papa's discretion whether I can take them on such a long trip."

"They are, for all intents and purposes, yours now, my dear," Imrahil said. "But Éomer is the one who will have to approve their use, since they are currently entailed as part of your dowry."

"How can that be? They are heirlooms of Dol Amroth, said to date back to Númenor itself," Lothíriel asked.

Éomer blushed bright red. "When I asked for them, I did not realize their value was so great. Only
that they became you," he said, looking embarrassed. "Your dowry was, indeed, extravagant, but I wanted to you to have at least a few of the trinkets, as Elladan called them, to which you have been accustomed. Your father drew up a list of a few other such items at my request. His advisers and your brothers approved of it."

"Éomer, that was a generous sentiment, but I told you that I wanted or needed nothing for myself that Rohan could not offer," Lothíriel said.

"But I wanted you to have more," Éomer said. "I would not penalize you for your love of me or my countrymen."

"Enough! Save that romantic nonsense for later when you are alone," Éowyn said. "No one begrudges you your fancy gems, Lothíriel. I am content that I will be eating fresh fruit and vegetables at the end of every winter while you are still eating turnips."

"Do not sound so stoic and superior, Éowyn. I happen to know that the House of Húrin is far from impoverished. Aside from everything that reverts back to the king and to Gondor, there is a king's ransom in jewels that Faramir is sole heir to," Lothíriel said.

Slapping his knee, Aragorn threw back his head in a great laugh. "Neither of you ladies is in any danger of being ill-fed or poorly clothed. And we are all duly impressed with your ardor for love and duty and how little you want or need for yourselves."

Elrohir added, "But, to return to the problem of pomp and circumstance, in Lothlórien at least it matters not what you wear. You will enter those lands accompanied by my brother and me, and with the favor of Estel. That is all that you will require."

Aragorn raised his eyebrows at Elrohir. He said, "That is not reassuring, brother. Women always want to know that they look well. Arwen is the wisest and most judicious of women, but even she has a weakness for pretty gowns."

Turning to Lothíriel, he continued, "But I think that when she sees what a lovely young woman you are, she will no doubt beg you to let her dress you for any festive occasions that may arise in Lórien. She is the same as you in height and only a little fuller in figure."

"Just a little," Legolas said. He grinned and made an incongruously tasteless gesture with his hands in front of his chest, as though he were adjusting sizeable bosoms. Everyone burst into laughter, her father and Faramir included, much to Lothíriel's chagrin.

"Pay no mind to that Elven jester, my love. You have a perfectly lovely figure," Éomer said sweetly, with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Will I need to tolerate such nonsense in Lothlórien as I am forced to endure here?" Lothíriel inquired, trying to sound annoyed, but failing utterly.

Elrohir answered quickly with mock horror, "Absolutely not, dear princess. At least not until you have become well acquainted with everyone and they realize how well you take a joke and that you never hold a grudge."

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Since traveling to Cormallen and returning with her father to Minas Tirith, Lothíriel had been
preoccupied with matters surrounding the court, the coronation, her social obligations as a noblewoman of Gondor, and the maintenance of her father's city house. She had spent little time in the Houses of Healing, and so she insisted on joining Éowyn there frequently for the last few days before leaving Minas Tirith. They organized transportation for the recuperating soldiers of Rohan and prepared packages of herbs and medical supplies that might be needed.

With one day remaining before the date set for the departure of the Rohirrim, seeing that all appeared in readiness, Aragorn suggested that Éowyn, Lothíriel, and Éomer ride with him, along with Faramir and Legolas, to Ithilien.

The delightful weather had held. Although the sun was hot, a brisk breeze made the short trip pleasant. Riding toward the hills of Ithilien, Lothíriel had a poignant sense of all that she was leaving and was acutely aware of how much the city of Minas Tirith had come to mean to her. That blustery March day when they had arrived from Dol Amroth with much foreboding, the immediate menace of doom, and but a thin thread of hope, seemed years behind them.

Éowyn was quiet as they left the City. Éomer's expression was thoughtful as well. Finally, he turned to Aragorn and spoke.

"It is difficult for me to leave this land and the friends that I have made here. Since the day you rose before me out of the green grass of the downs I have loved you.[1] I know our love and friendship will endure, yet, I wish I had more time. There are so many things that I could learn from you. You have had long years to consider kingship and yet it has been thrust upon me without preparation or expectation."

Lothíriel listened, overcome with her own affection and admiration for her king. She looked at Aragorn and was struck again by his strength and magnetism. It was amazingly easy to forget for long moments just who he was and what he had accomplished. Despite the number of times it struck her, it always surprised her.

Aragorn replied, "Éomer, you know you will always have my love as well, for you have become to me as the younger brother I never had. Between us there can be no talk of giving or taking, nor of reward, although I owe you greatly. I will promise you that you will never be alone."

Éowyn looked out at the green hills of Emyn Arnen, drawing closer to Éomer as they rode. "As much as I would stay here and begin my new life," she said, her face softening as she looked back at Faramir, "I leave gladly to survey our land with you, my dear brother. Together we will assess what needs to be healed and make plans to set it in order."

"I do not underestimate the help that you will be to me, Éowyn," Éomer said. "Nor do I take lightly the capacity and energy that my bride will bring either. But we are all exceedingly young and my skill is that of a leader of warriors, not of a people at peace."

"Ai, Éomer," Éowyn said, her voice ringing with impatience and determination. "Do you think that our people love you because of an accident of birth, as the heir of the line of Éorl alone? Having you as his successor eased Théoden's passing. You never gave up hope. Your qualities were known to the Eorlings long before we wrested our kingdom from the grip of the enemy."

"Éowyn, my love, do not be so severe. Your brother would be far less wise if he did not have such concerns. I am worried as well at my ability to carry out my responsibilities and I will have Aragorn at my side every day," Faramir said. "Remember, I certainly was not groomed to be Steward of Gondor. Quite the contrary..."
"If you have confidence in my abilities, Éomer," Aragorn chuckled, "you would do well to remember that my first concrete training in the governance of men was in Rohan, under your grandfather Thengel. And I never reached the level of responsibility that you held at the age of a mere six and twenty years."

"I did not expect such a storm of protest," Éomer said, with a self-deprecating laugh. "You may all be sure that if I do fail it will not be for lack of will and effort."

"You will never be without the love and support of your friends. We will all accompany you to Rohan later in the summer when you come to return Théoden to rest with his people," Aragorn said. "If you still have concerns, we will put our heads together then."

Lothíriel had listened long enough in silence and piped up, feeling at least as impatient as Éowyn. "I can see it in your faces that the lot of you will be praised and renowned through the ages. Does no one else see that? And you, Éomer, I have seen in my dreams that you will be a great king and beloved beyond all others of your line."

"Well, that settles that discussion neatly," Éowyn said, rolling her eyes skeptically.

"My gentle lady," Legolas said to Éowyn, with a mischievous smile. "Do not dismiss such foresight too lightly. Lothíriel's gift, like that of your future husband, is strong."

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"I have something to show you. This way. Around this turn and up this hill," Faramir said, enthusiasm and hope in his voice. "We are almost there." They entered what appeared to be a large clearing among a cluster of old growth trees, but on closer examination they saw it was the ruined foundation of what once must have been a large stone manor house. It sat on the crest of a hill, facing Minas Tirith without obstruction.

Legolas leapt from his steed and was the first to approach the crumbling stones. He picked up a branch and poked among the vines and scrubby green growth that hid most of the floor. Uncovering a set of stairs, he ran down and stopped in the middle of the structure.

"The stone work of this foundation is in remarkable condition. If you should decide to build here it could save you months of hard labor. We should have brought Gimli," Legolas called out to the rest.

"What do you think?" Faramir asked, dismounting quickly and holding up his arms to lift Éowyn to the ground. He watched her carefully as she approached the remains of the structure.

If she does not say she likes it, I will feel like slapping her, Lothíriel thought, overwhelmed by the beauty of the site, its unknowable history, and its view of Minas Tirith.

"It is beautiful. Magnificent," Éowyn said, throwing her arms around Faramir's neck.

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"Did you ever fall asleep?" Lothíriel said, sitting up in bed, rubbing her eyes, and looking at Éomer, who stood tall and strong in front of the open balcony doors, clad only in a large towel slung low around his hips. With his broad shoulders, powerful muscles, and shaggy golden hair lit from behind, he was an attractive image to wake up to indeed. Are you a man or a Valar, beautiful one?
"I slept," he answered. Lothíriel was aware that he was clearly deep in thought and not in a mood to be teased about his looks.

"The sun lightened your hair even more again yesterday on our long ride," she said, groaning to herself at what an unimaginative attempt at distracting him that was under the circumstances. However, she was relieved when her effort was rewarded with an impish grin. Éomer may have slept badly due to worry or anxiety, but he was never one to wallow in doubt or self-pity.

"And your pretty nose is sunburned," he said. Laughing, she jumped out of bed and ran to peek in the mirror. He caused her to squeal and laugh louder still, when he used the opportunity to slap her playfully on the rump.

"Liar! It is not," she said. He pulled her into his arms for a hug and a light kiss on her nose.

"No. It is not. But I got you out of bed, didn't I? Why does the sun have no affect on your skin?" he asked.

"I have no idea. You will have to ask the Elf," she said. "I am sure that Legolas can give you some high-flown theory about Elves having a lesser connection to the physical reality of Arda than we do and how I have Elvish blood."

"We do not have much time. Your high Elvishness should take a bath before we leave, because, like the rest of us Mortals, you will have little opportunity for bathing, aside from icy streams and pails of water, for quite some time. There is fresh hot water ready now. And, remember, we have a few thousand men waiting for us," Éomer said.

"I am fast," Lothíriel said.

"That was one of the things I first noticed about you," he teased. "You are hasty at everything. Some might say recklessly so..."

"Do you want me to brush your sun-bleached hair or braid it for you? It is beautiful, all clean and shiny, but wild," Lothíriel said.

"Ai, no. Leave it. I should not look like one of your elegant Swan Knights today. My men have seen enough of me all combed and starched, following you around clad in your brother's fancy shirts. They will want the old familiar figure of a rough barbarian horse lord to lead them home," Éomer responded.

"I hate it when you call yourself a barbarian."

"Take your bath, milady."

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Long lines of Riders of Rohan on their splendid horses had formed before the gates of Minas Tirith. Lothíriel mounted her mare at the front of the Rohirric warriors, along Éowyn, Elladan, and Elrohir. She observed that there was no lack of color or display here. Cleaned and burnished armour glinted under the mid-morning sun. Green, red, and gold predominated in the trappings of the noble Rohirric steeds and the bright ribbons plaited in their manes. The brilliant green flags and banners of Rohan, each bearing a valiant white horse and a golden-rayed sun, flapped smartly in the light wind.
When Éomer emerged through the gates, all the eyes of the Riders turned to view their golden-haired warrior king. He stood in full armour, his gleaming helmet with its long, white horsetail tucked under his arm. He was half a head taller than his Marshall Elfhelm and the two lieutenants who accompanied them. Aragorn, at his side, was slighter taller than Éomer, but not as broad. Éomer turned and reached out a hand to clasp Aragorn's forearm in a warrior's embrace, when Gondor's king broke free of it and pulled him into a large, warm bear hug.

The Riders of Rohan cheered and whistled madly. Lothíriel was greatly moved, as ever, at the reaction of his men to her beloved. She saw him as they did in that moment: he had emerged from deadly peril unscathed; he was young, charismatic, and he was their king, and, as such, the lord of a proud, fell people.[2]

Éomer turned to face his troops. Lothíriel saw no trace on his face of the vulnerability he had revealed in private over the past couple of days. Instead she saw only purpose and self-confidence. He raised his fist in the air and shouted in Rohirric, "Hail, Eorlingas!"

A thunderous response, as though in one voice, came back to him: "Hail, King of the Mark!"

Éomer strode to his mount, at the front of the lines of troops, with his companions. When they were seated, he turned halfway around in the saddle and raised his arm high motioning them forward, and shouted, "Forth Eorlingas!"

A mighty roar swept down the ranks of the Riders of Rohan, from those closest to the gate until it had rippled like a wave to the end of the line. It was joined by the cheers of the citizens of Minas Tirith who had gathered to honor these valiant men who had come to their aid in their darkest hour.

Éowyn leaned to whisper in Lothíriel's ear, "He is really very good at this, is he not?"

"Oh, indeed, he is," Lothíriel answered.

The great line of mounted warriors set off by the Northway, slowly it first and then more quickly, as the music of the Riders' strong voices joined with the sounds of their great sonorous battle harps. All the road was lined with people to do them honor and praise them, from the Gate of the City to the walls of the Pelennor.[3]

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[1] This phrase, along with bits and pieces of the dialogue of Éomer, Éowyn, and Aragorn in this section, are taken directly from *Return of the King*, "The Steward and the King."


[3] Last sentence of this chapter lifted in its entirety from *Return of the King*, "The Steward and the King."
King Éomer's party from Minas Tirith had made good time riding toward Edoras. As they drew closer, they passed through lush tall grasslands surrounded on all sides by snow-topped mountains. The weather was less summer-like and more resembled late spring than it had farther south. Éomer had described Edoras to Lothíriel as being less than a real city and more a fortress, the seat of government for a rural population widely scattered in small homesteads and villages on these windswept plains.

Most of the land they had passed through was far too dry to support heavily wooded areas, apart from those that skirted every river and the infrequent lake. While they had encountered burned-out settlements and ruined farmlands, they had also passed new construction and occasional fields that had been recently plowed and planted. Éomer and Éowyn had resolutely maintained a cautious optimism, rejoicing at every sign of reconstruction and renewal.

In the face of the brother and sister's determined stoicism, Lothíriel had not realized the extent of their concern until, earlier that week, they encountered two days of not hard, but steady rain. Being more accustomed to riding in the early morning and late evening fog and seasonal storms blown in from the sea, combined with her residual Elvish resistance to cold, Lothíriel was the least miserable of the three of them. But her two companions, despite suffering from the damp chill, nonetheless had been overjoyed at the rain, which they predicted would assist in the possible survival of the crops planted weeks late in most cases.

That morning, however, the sun was splendid. The bright green of springtime colored the grasses of the wide-open plains that flowed through the snow-crowned peaks of the White Mountains. When they reached the crest of the hill they had been climbing, Lothíriel shouted excitedly to Éomer, "There it is!" She easily recognized the Meduseld, the Golden Hall of the Kings of the Riddermark, from its descriptions in story and song. The fabled hall of Edoras, wrought of timber and stone, was a more magnificent structure than she had expected. It was lower, but longer, wider, far more massive than she had imagined. It dwarfed the buildings and houses that spread out before it.

Its gold-leafed roof sparked and glittered in the late-morning sunshine beneath the few cottony white clouds that drifted across the brilliant blue sky. She pulled her mare to the side of the smooth beaten road that led into the city, which had widened sufficiently at that point to carry eight horsemen abreast.

Éomer, who had been riding at the front of their column, turned his horse and rode back to stand next to her. His loosely curled, golden hair, mussed by the wind, flowed long onto his shoulders. His face was flushed and boyishly attractive, yet proud and noble to her eyes. His smile was as broad and his bright blue eyes were as merry as she had ever seen them.

"Yes. There it is, my love!" he said jubilantly.
"Oh, Éomer," was all she could say.

The Meduseld was positioned at the top of an incline, not unlike the one upon which they stood looking down at the city, although not nearly as high and rockier. Thatch-covered buildings extended before it. The tallest, which were two and three stories in height, faced the main road that led into the town and continued directly up onto the rise where the Meduseld sat. Slightly behind and to one side of the Meduseld was the only other building of a significant size. It was also made of wood, set upon strong stone foundations.

"Éomer, what is it that large structure near the Meduseld?" Lothíriel asked.

"The stables," Éomer answered, with a big smile. "You will like them I think. They are well kept. The stables in Minas Tirith are a disgrace, dark, crowded and airless. Aragorn is talking of improving them soon." Lothíriel could not restrain a laugh as she imagined that it was Éomer's relentless complaining that had wrung that concession from the newly crowned king of Gondor.

"We need a few minutes, my lord. I need to prepare myself to meet your people," Lothíriel said. Éomer dismounted and lifted his arms up to her. Éowyn pulled her horse up to them and he helped his sister down as well.

"And what are these preparations?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with humor.

Éowyn said, "Let us unbraid your hair and let it hang loose. Our people have rarely seen such hair." Her hands were already busy undoing the large braid that fell down Lothíriel's back. "You will look like an Elven princess. That should gain you some respect until they know you better at least," Éowyn added, her laughing eyes giving lie to the scolding tone she used.

"You are quite competent as a lady's maid, Éowyn. But what of you? How do I make you look respectable? Shall I brush your hair?" Lothíriel asked.

"Yes. It is a bit tangled from the ride. But they know me well enough," Éowyn laughed, "The best and the worst of me I fear."

The two women fiddled a bit more with their costumes and their hair, while Lothíriel noted that Éomer and the Riders closest to them watched with considerable interest. Éomer shooed the men back a little when Éowyn decided that Lothíriel should wear the brilliant blue jacket that matched her riding skirt, but that she would be more comfortable in the early summer heat, if she shed her blouse before donning it. Finally, Lothíriel fastened on the much-discussed, lavish adamant earrings and insisted that Éowyn borrow a pair of Dol Amroth pearls.

The ladies remounted and Éowyn leaned conspiratorially toward Lothíriel and asked in a voice loud enough to be heard by the men around them, "And is my brother suitable to be seen as the consort of a princess of Dol Amroth."

"Aye," Lothíriel said, "He will have to make do as he is. Although he already is far more handsome than any man has a need or right to be." Having earned the laugh from the Riders that she had hoped for and a wary look from Éomer, Lothíriel straightened her back and shoulders, flung back her shining raven black hair, raised her chin with determination, and they started down the hill.

As they drew closer to the town, they could see that the streets were lined with crowds of people. A festival atmosphere prevailed. As soon as their party was spotted, repeated shouts in Rohirric of "Hail Éomer King!" broke out from the assembled populace.

Along the road into the town, there seemed to be countless swarms of flaxen-haired children, girls
and boys together, running to and fro, dangerously close to the hoofs of war horses of great stature, squealing with high-pitched gleeful laughter and demonstrating a sassy distain for protocol. As Éomer passed, clusters of them would stop for a few seconds and assume expressions momentarily stern and militant and, in imitation of the fierce Riders they idolized, raise their fists to shout, "Hail Éomer King!" in startlingly deep voices. They then immediately returned to their irrepressible merry making.

Lothíriel could not restrain her laughter at the sight of them, which only encouraged some of the bolder lads to run along side her mare and yell directly at her. She was disappointed that she understood little of what they said. Éowyn was laughing too, but was not above shouting an occasional scolding response to some of the rowdiest of the children.

One boy, perhaps thirteen years of age, engaged Lothíriel in the Common Tongue.

"Pretty darkling princess! Pretty darkling princess!" he shouted until she looked down at him. "Are you Éomer King's newly betrothed?"

"Yes," she answered, laughing. "And who are you?"

"Déor, son of Éothain a Rider of the éored of the Eastfold, milady. But our family will be living in Edoras now to be near our king. Does the Elf Legolas of the Woodland Realm ride with you?" the boy asked.

"I am sorry, Déor, but Legolas stayed in Mundburg. But you will see him here again in late summer I am sure. How do you know the woodland prince?" she asked, charmed with the well-spoken handsome young lad.

"I stood near him at Helm's Deep. I plan to excel in archery as well as sword craft," he said, his bright blue eyes filled with pride.

"You could not have chosen a finer or more valorous model of that skill. Perhaps if you work hard, when you are older and I have a son you can teach him archery," Lothíriel said. She felt her eyes fill. The thought of such a youth being placed anywhere near Legolas at Helm's Deep starkly brought home to her how truly desperate those days had been.

"Déor," Éowyn said. "Your father rides near the back of the line. Go and greet him."

"Thank you, Lady Éowyn," he answered respectfully and then, before running off, he looked at Lothíriel again with a dazzling smile, and said, "And thank you, beautiful princess."

"He survived." Éowyn said, sighing with emotion. "We lost far too many fine young men like him." Lothíriel sighed as well, thinking again of what this land had suffered, but also that its people were hardy. At this boy's age, she and her brothers had only just been allowed to sail a tiny boat alone in a near and sheltered cove, while he had already fought along side of a great Elven warrior prince in one of the most desperate battles of the recent war.

At that point, as they neared the staircase that led up to the gilded doors of the Meduseld, Lothíriel finally turned her attention from the enchanting, roguish children to observe close at hand the magnetism with which her beloved held his people. She could not resist drawing closer to his steed and saying, "Éomer, they are all wild for you."

She could see from Éomer's face, which was flushed with a breath-taking glow, how overcome he was with gladness to be home at last. He turned to her and said, "I only hope that you are still wild for me, my love. It has been too long since we have had the opportunity for more than a few stolen
moments alone together."

Just as Lothíriel had met his eyes and was ready to respond, she saw that another had taken his attention from her. Éomer had slowed his horse to a near stop and looked down at a young woman who stood in front of the crowd that pressed together along the street, in front of a row of houses and shops.

"Hilda," he said. His voice was filled with consternation and surprise.

"Wes du hal, Éomer cyning min," the young woman answered in a firm voice. Her eyes were filled with tears and her face reflected a mixture of relief, happiness, and regret. Thick reddish golden curls fell to and beyond her shoulders, framing a remarkably pretty face. She was taller than average, with rosy cheeks and bright green eyes. A rounded mound that protruded gently below her waist, showed her to be noticeably with child.

"I will find you later, Hilda," Éomer answered, turning to look back at her as the procession passed forward.

Lothíriel was disturbed by Éomer's, to her unreadable, reaction. She asked, "Who was that?"

Éomer answered, "Her name is Hilda."

They reached the steps that led up to the Meduseld. Éomer turned to help Lothíriel from her horse, while Elrohir helped Éowyn dismount. Éomer was immediately pulled into strong embraces by each of a small group of hoary-haired dismount. Éomer thought, by the looks of them, to have been counselors or advisers of Théoden. They all climbed the stairs to stand on both sides of Éomer, who intended to greet the crowd before them.

It was nearly impossible to hear, but Éowyn said, with her mouth very close to Lothíriel's ear, "Oh, dear."

Éomer began to address the crowd in a clear, sure voice, which carried far in the open air. The approving roar from the crowd, which greeted each remark he made, caused him to pause repeatedly.

Lothíriel stood face forward, next to Éomer, with a forced smile on her face and muttered to Éowyn who stood by her side.

"Oh, dear, what?" she asked.

"Hilda." Éowyn answered.

"I have heard that name at least three times now," Lothíriel snapped. "Who, by all the Valar, is Hilda?"

"Never mind. Do not worry about her now. We will talk about it later," Éowyn said.

"Éowyn," Lothíriel asked, feeling increasingly confused and desperate, "Who is she?"

"Shhh," Éowyn whispered. "I am trying to think. I am trying to count."

"Count what?" Lothíriel whispered back at her.

"Months. Well, she is obviously pregnant," said Éowyn. "I have never paid that much attention to such things. How far along did she look to you?"
"Maybe four, no more five months," Lothíriel answered. "Conceivably she could be carrying twins, or a large baby, in which case she could be as little as three months along. I do not know, Éowyn. Why does it matter? Who is the father?" Suddenly she knew there was, indeed, a problem. "Éowyn, is it Éomer's child?"

Éowyn said, "I do not know. I was not there! Éomer? Théodred? I really have no idea. It could be Grima Wormtongue's for all that I know of Hilda's, or my cousin's, or my brother's affairs during that last period."

"Ai, Elbereth! You clearly know a lot more than I do, sister," Lothíriel said. Her awareness was sharply drawn back to Éomer when he reached and grabbed her hand, pulling her closer to him. He was saying something, completely incomprehensible to her, which included her name. The crowd broke into cheers, whistles, and clapping.

"She had them both?" Lothíriel asked amazed.

"I told you I do not know," Éowyn said. "I know she wanted them both. Not at the same time. It is a long story. We can talk about it later."

"He certainly looked upset when he saw her," Lothíriel whispered in the direction of Éowyn.

Éowyn shrugged, with a slight raise of her eyebrows. Then, with her usual self possession, Éowyn smiled radiantly, inclining her head with a shallow courtly bow in the direction of Lothíriel, and began clapping enthusiastically along with the masses of people gathered below them in front of the steps.

Éomer began to speak again, this time in the Common Tongue, apparently repeating what he had just said. "This is my betrothed, Lothíriel, a Princess of Gondor, the daughter of Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth of Belfalas. I pledged myself to her in Mundburg, before the King of Gondor and Arnor, all of the lords and captains of West, and allies of the Riddermark. I ask for your approval as well to marry her and to make her your queen." Éomer placed Lothíriel's hand firmly in crook of his elbow and covered it with his own, pinning her arm tightly between his hard bicep and his chest. Another wave of cheers and shouts shook the crowd.

"Smile," he whispered fiercely, "Wave to the people." Lothíriel smiled, bowed with her free hand over her heart in the Elvish manner. She then began to wave to the crowd spread out before them and looked up into Éomer's face again with an utterly convincing simulation of a besotted, adoring smile.

"Who, you big blustering fool, is Hilda?" she whispered through clenched teeth.

"Please keep smiling, princess. We will talk about it later," he whispered back imploringly.

Lothíriel continued waving and whispered, "Éowyn, you told me that your brother had no history that I need fear."

Without turning her head in Lothíriel's direction, Éowyn answered, "I remember exactly what I told you. I only told you that he would not play games with a woman of high Gondorian nobility, who had not yet reached her majority, if he did not have the honorable pursuit of her heart in mind."

"I thought you told me he had always been discreet," Lothíriel said.

"Perhaps I did," Éowyn said, with a weighty sigh. "I do not remember. I thought he was."

Éomer turned to face the two women, with a blistering forced smile. "Will you both please stop this
now. You are upsetting me," he whispered.

Lothíriel knelt to accept a huge bunch of flowers from two tiny girls with thick blond braids, using the opportunity to wrench herself free of Éomer's iron grip.

"Thank you. Thank you. You are both so beautiful and the flowers are lovely too," she said. She hugged and kissed each delighted pinked-cheeked tot. The multitude loved this demonstration of warmth and affection from the elegant princess of Gondor. Lothíriel stood and waved to everyone again, her face beginning to ache from the frozen smile she held there.

"You are upset! What about me?" she whispered to Éomer without looking at him. He suddenly turned and grabbed her into a crushing embrace and kissed her full on the mouth. She reflexively threw her arms around his neck, flowers and all, forgetting, at the touch of his lips to hers, how distressed she had been. The applause and cheers roared around them. When he finally allowed her pull away from him slightly, he whispered into her ear.

"I love you so. Please do not push me away," he said in a truly wretched whisper.

"As though that were even possible for me," she whispered back to him, feeling her smile spread to her eyes this time and the muscles in her face relaxing. "We will talk about it later, Éomer. Smile. Talk to your people now. They want a speech from their new king."

[1] *Wes ðu hal, Éomer cyning min* = Hail (or be well), Éomer my king.
The king and his party finally entered the Meduseld itself. At first the interior seemed dark to Lothíriel compared to the strong sunlight outside. Unglazed windows sat high under the eaves. In the roof a giant louver, with moveable slats, stood open exposing a rectangle of azure sky, releasing smoke, and admitting additional light. The high roof of the main hall, a single massive room, was supported by pillars decorated with carvings. The smells of cooking, bustle of activity, and a flickering show of light and sound completely dispelled any potential lingering gloom for her. Its vibrant ambiance recalled to her the glow and energy of her own youthful warrior king.

Through indirect light she studied the details of the towering supports, gilded with gold and vivid colors. To her great relief, the floor was not covered with rushes, but swept clean and scrubbed. She gladly dismissed her occasional waking nightmares of finding vermin and pests hiding beneath her feet in her new more rustic home.

Woven cloth banners hung down from the rafters, swaying gently in the rising heat, depicting spectacular scenes of Rohirric heroes, battles, feats of horsemanship, and horses—everywhere horses. At the south end of the hall facing the main door stood a dais upon which rested the king’s towering golden throne. Although the space showed none of the age, nor anything approaching the legendary, nearly magical, connection to the great days of Númenor, of the castle of Dol Amroth, she felt a power and nobility reflected in this hall.

"What do you think, my love?" Éomer asked, slipping his arm around her waist, his lips close to her ear.

"I do not know what I imagined, but it is somehow different. It is truly marvelous. I am so happy to be here," Lothíriel answered. The question of Hilda, was, for the moment, relegated to a list of practical problems to unravel in time. Thoughts of anything but the fulfillment of their shared dreams for the future of this land and these true-hearted, bold people vanished from her mind.

"A great feast is being prepared. But there is time to change and rest a short while. Éowyn will show you to your room," Éomer said. He took her hands and pulled them up to his chest, drawing her against him. "Be at ease, my love. There is no problem here I cannot resolve."

Éowyn led Lothíriel up a staircase on one side of the great hall, which led to a second storey where one suite of rooms followed another around the interior periphery of the building. The doors stood open to most of them. Glancing in as she quickly passed by, seeing them all aired, spotless, and
readied for occupation, pleased Éowyn greatly. When she left Edoras three months earlier most were shuttered, dusty, long unused. Shivering at the memory of her own despair in those dark days and lack of care for the simple niceties of daily life, she released a sigh of relief.

"Here we are. I thought you could use this one," she said turning to Lothíriel.

The room adjoined the royal suite. Éowyn thought of the countless bitter days and nights of attending to any small comfort she might bring to Théoden. The once proud king languished there into his dotage, while she survived by force of will alone, ever alert yet still unable to impede the sinister machinations of Grima Wormtongue. She remembered foul Wormtongue's vile words. They had frozen her heart and made her look about herself, sometimes with revulsion, always with doubt, "What is the house of Éorl but a thatched barn where brigands drink in the reek, and their brats roll on the floor among their dogs?" Today I saw my people lining the road into our city cheering, glad and joyous of face, at the arrival of my brave, handsome brother.

Entering Lothíriel's assigned chamber, she recalled preparing it for Aragorn. Had I truly thought to slip in here that night under the cover of darkness? No matter. That was another world, another life. In the end he occupied it with Legolas and Gimli, insisting that the enormous bed was big enough for two. She hauled in a trundle for the third. The Three Walkers courteously refused her offer that night to occupy separate quarters and warm beds while others equally exhausted and battle-worn slept on the cold, hard floor of the hall below. Or had I been so obvious? So transparently desperate?

"Éowyn, it looks most comfortable. Larger than my room in Minas Tirith. And where is your room?" Lothíriel asked.

"Down the hall, just before the turn. Only a few doors. I will show you."

Éowyn reflected that Lothíriel had not likely been so far from home before, and never without her father and at least one of her brothers. Perhaps that explained why she stood there, arms hanging limp at her sides, looking so uncharacteristically forlorn. I must explain to her that customs are simpler, easier to decipher here—without the myriad of rules of manners and protocol that gloss behavior in Gondor.

"And Éomer?" Lothíriel reddened, looking more uncomfortable.

"I cannot believe you are blushing," Éowyn said. She started to laugh, until she saw that Lothíriel looked as though she might burst into tears. "He is right next to you. Look. There is even a connecting door." She pulled the princess into the room and pointed to a door on the wall.

Lothíriel was crying in earnest now. Éowyn pulled her into her arms, patting her on the back. "There. There. I am so stupid. I thought you were embarrassed. Had suddenly developed a sense of privacy. Not much chance of that, hmm?" she asked.

She took Lothíriel's cheeks between both hands, meeting her eyes, while making a silly face, trying to make the younger woman smile. "Now tell me what is wrong? Is it that stupid girl?"

"How would you feel?" Lothíriel said, hitching her chin up, stubbornly inconsolable.

"Faramir would never be so dim-witted as involve himself with a cow like her."

"Éowyn! That is unfair to Éomer. No son of a Steward of Gondor would suffer lack of suitable womanly companionship. Especially not one with an older brother like Boromir ever mindful of his
"Certainly Éomer was less cosseted. She seemed a nice enough girl, but for her chasing after first my brother and then my cousin. Yet not someone my uncle would ever have been happy to see either of them wed. Éomer knew that," Éowyn said.

"Must you always be so thickheaded? Tell me what I am to do. What does Éomer expect of me now?" Lothíriel's voice climbed a scale of shrillness and intensity that Éowyn feared would be heard in the hall below. Forcing her voice low and level, dropping almost to whisper, Éowyn said, "He made himself perfectly clear today, on the steps, in the noonday sun, in front of half of Rohan. Do whatever it is you always do. Surely you can see he is completely smitten with you." She received a wet-sounding sniff as an answer. Then Lothíriel buried her face against Éowyn's chest, holding her tightly around her waist.

"You would not break off your contract over something he did before he ever laid eyes on you?"

"Of, course not! You think I do not love him well? It is not so much this Hilda that concerns me. But, Éowyn, there is a child. You know Éomer. He would never turn his back on a child!"

"So. He made a mess; let him clean up the wreckage. He will do the right thing. If I were you though, I would not let him anywhere near my bed tonight. But, then, you and I have a different manner. You are more forgiving," Éowyn said, rolling her eyes broadly, causing Lothíriel to laugh at last.

"I love you too, sister. I only wish Amrothos were here, or better still Faramir."

"Oh, do not wish for that! Now that would be a nightmare. You and I can handle this one far better. Men would only muck it up, cloud the issues."

"I suppose--no, I know--you are right. Yet only a day ago everything seemed perfect and now…"

Éowyn interrupted her, as though unable to listen. "Nonsense. Speaking of perfection, what of your peerless Elf-lord?"

"You know nothing of that, Éowyn."

"Indeed? I know what I see. You watch him and he watches you. And Éomer is not blind."

"I have made my choice. Do you think the Valar will seek to punish me because I am not pure enough of heart?" Lothíriel asked.

"I only know myself. No heart is wholly pure. I think of things today that I thought far behind me. Last I stood in this room, I wanted more than anything to gain Aragorn's love. He touched my hand and I trembled, scorched to the core. I often wonder what a kiss—or more—from him might be like?"

"Humph. Can any woman look on him and not wonder that?"

"You are incorrigible."
"No, only truthful. Life is never simple. And what of you, virtuous shieldmaiden? Are not Faramir’s kisses warm enough?"

"Aye. They are an admirable recompense, indeed. Your cousin is most ardent and skillful. But, have you ever thought of Legolas? With his fierce wild-Elf beauty, so thinly concealed by that calm veneer," Éowyn asked, with a long sigh and a sinful smile.

"Ai, yes, there is none more comely than Lasse…and you, wicked wench, dare to call me incorrigible." Both young women laughed and embraced, joyful again for the moment.

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Éomer, Lothíriel, and Éowyn, refreshed and changed into courtlier garb, entered the great hall and walked toward the dais. The noise level increased as more people crowded in behind them. Éomer nodded right and left, as he took Lothíriel by the hand and led her further into the long room. In front of the dais, a long table, raised above the level of long rows of others, was covered with a fine white cloth and a richly embroidered runner. They took their seats at the center of the table, with Elladan next to Éomer and Elrohir by Éowyn.

As soon as the king and his party were seated, the rest of the assembled guests scrambled to find places. The lack of the pretentiousness added to Lothíriel's sense of the welcoming simplicity of Éomer's court. So this is Rohan, she thought. I like it already, but I knew I would since those first days in the Houses of Healing among the Riders of Rohan.

Éomer seemed to her untroubled as well, although she did notice his eyes occasionally drifted to the rows of tables below them. She wondered if he sought someone—that Hilda woman perhaps.

Pages leaned in among them to fill the goblets set at every place. Éomer leaned closer to whisper, "If you prefer wine, I am sure we can find some."

"Don't be silly. I intend to eat and drink whatever is placed before me. I face a hard enough task in dispelling people's notion that their king has chosen a fussy princess of Gondor as his bride instead of one of their own. See. Elladan and Elrohir drink ale."

"Yes, for all their Elven graces, I sometimes think that they are rangers at heart."

A minstrel took up his pipes and struck up a rousing, triumphal tune as servers placed a platter with a roasted suckling pig on the table in front of them. Others hurried to and fro among the tables below with ample servings of sliced meat. The fare was hearty and simple in comparison to the number and delicacy of dishes presented at feasts of similar consequence in Dol Amroth or Minas Tirith, but no less pleasing to Lothíriel.

Éomer watched Lothíriel. She appeared diverted and absorbed by the sights and sounds of the boisterous crowd. I have always known this is what I uniquely had to offer her—this Hall, these people, this kingdom. I hold her heart by offering her not just my love, but the chance to build and serve an Arda restored, purpose and the satisfaction of duty fulfilled.

Elladan inclined his head toward Éomer's ear. "Estel often talked of his years in your land, among your people, of their spirit of honor, their dashing, rash bravery, the warrior heritage. That vitality is palpable here."

"Honor and rashness can be uneasy companions at times," Éomer answered, following his own
thoughts. And the Rohirrim are plain-spoken to a fault. I have none of his silky smoothness of
tongue.

"I have not heard you called rash or reckless, Éomer son of Éomund. And Estel argues any
attribution of such qualities to your sire were overstated at best, and, at worst, conscious slander by
Grima Wormtongue intended to undermine you."

What does this Elf-lord want of me? Confidences? Confessions? "Then you do not think it rash that I
betroth myself to one such as her?" Éomer asked. Is that direct enough for you?

"Nay. Yet it does bespeak a courage befitting a warrior king." Elladan ducked his head, as though to
hide a teasing smile.

What is this now, Elf-lord? A concession or a challenge? "Perhaps..." Éomer answered aloud.
"Rohan needs far more than a pliable maid as their queen, however highly born she might be. I am
fortunate that my heart's desire and political necessity are well served in her case."

"Éomer!" Lothíriel nearly shouted, startling him from his focus on the Elf-lord he pondered as a rival.
A rollicking Rohirric air, grown popular in the South since the coming of the Rohirrim, brought
Riders and their sweethearts to their feet. "Dance with me, meleth-nin. I do so love this tune."

Éomer took her hand, led her round the end of the long table, into the open area on the floor below.
He caught a glimpse of Elladan's face and the flash of his bittersweet, tender smile trained upon
Lothíriel. Elven detachment: he loves her, yet can smile at the sight of her gaiety in the arms of
another. She does not observe that he studies her from afar.

Lothíriel, content within the warm grasp of Éomer's strong arms, perceived nothing of her lover's
pensiveness that followed his exchange with Elladan. One large, graceful hand encompassed her
own and his arm firmly circled her waist, as he swept her around into one dizzying spin after another
to the thrum of the wild Rohirric beat. Her horse lord, her handsome young king, moved with a
natural flair and innate musicality.

She wondered, why does Elladan watch me so closely? Since they left Minas Tirith, whenever she
found herself aware of the elder of the Peredhel brothers, she tried to quickly look away and push
him out of her mind. She did so again and fixed her thoughts upon Éomer, the exotic strangeness of
his court, and its brave, merry occupants.

Éowyn said to let Éomer work out the details. That is what I will do. The last thing I need is to think
of Elladan. She forced her mind to fasten on Rohan like that of a dedicated student on a complicated
but fascinating tome. Acutely aware this visit would be short, she determined she would learn all she
could before she left.

The afternoon sun gave way to twilight. Servants lit large torches on the walls as the natural light
faded. The altered play of light and shadow, each flare of gold and glint of color, enhanced
Lothíriel's awareness of the great hall. The scent of the log fire, the lingering fragrance of roasted
meat, the faint smell of leather, men, and horseflesh assaulted her senses agreeably. The carvings on
the columns--each figure, man or horse, every floret and leaf--testified to the skill and valor of Mortal
Men and their resolve.

The age and lofty grace of her ancestral keep on the sea at Dol Amroth always brought to her mind
the mighty mariners of Numenor in its prime and their links to Elvenkind. The soaring marble, cold
stone, and statuary of the Citadel of Minas Tirith recalled the kings of Gondor both in their
ascendancy and decline. This hall reflected the love and labor of its hardy Rohirric builders, descendants of the Edain who never passed to the West upon whom this New Age of Men must be built.

As night fell, the festive atmosphere diminished not at all, but metamorphosed into a jollier, bawdier party. The temperature of the long high-ceiling chamber, comfortable while she was seated, caused Lothíriel's cheeks to burn after the exertion of the Rohirric dances.

She glanced from Elladan, across the hall, to Éomer at her side. *I fear all is fraught with symbolism for me this night,* she thought, *even these two examples of intoxicating masculinity embody the ancient mystery of the Elven and the vigor of the New Man.*

A blond, burly Rohirric bard approached her and Éomer, holding his polished, dark wooden harp. With a sharp martial bow, he announced, "An air to honor the Lady of Dol Amroth and our Elf-friends as well, fell and steadfast comrades-at-arms."

"I learned this one down South from a minstrel of the Bay of Belfalas. He claims 'tis of the fair Elf folk who lingered long in those lands. Chose a partner, lovely princess," he said, indicating Elladan and Elrohir with a sweep of his hand.

Lothíriel heard Éomer suppress an amused snort. Elladan's face froze, impenetrable, while Elrohir smiled at her, with the slightest wink and barely perceptible roll of his eyes in direction of his brother, conveying to her that he would solve the dilemma of her choice.

She walked in Elrohir's direction. He met her half-way. "*Hannon le, mellon nin,*" she said.

When the bard began to pluck the strings of his instrument, the thrilling of his harp, despite its being far larger and deeper in tone than those of her people, translated one of the sweet, ancient songs of her homeland with a perfection of melody and mood equal to any minstrel of Dol Amroth.

"This song is always played at our Midsummer's fetes," she said, looking up into Elrohir's eyes, smiling in relief at the sight of his affable grin. His eyes reflected nearly an Age of Arda but none of the unruly ache of his brother's.

"And at those in Lórien as well," Elrohir responded.

"You are always a comfort to me, Elrohir," she said.

"And, why would you need comforting tonight, young one?"

"Look," she said, nodding her head in the direction of Éomer. Her shining horse knight, her own soldier king, walked up to *that* woman. Hilda shook burnished red-blond curls in negation as he spoke to her. Éomer's brow creased; his stance remained rigid. His lips moved again. The woman's face reddened. Then she nodded slowly in affirmation. His visage doubtful, he took her by the elbow, and guided her toward the door.

"Tying up loose ends, is he?" Elrohir asked.

"I suppose one could call it that."

Lothíriel tried to concentrate on the music. Dancing with Elrohir was far from a chore. It normally brought her great pleasure. He combined the Elvish grace of Legolas with the energy of Éomer. She
was aware that Elrohir, mindful of her restless agitation, did what he could to distract her. She danced with Riders of Rohan, old friends and new. Northern Dúnedain drew her into conversation and dance, she suspected at the instigation of Elrohir. She learned that those handsome, dark-clad, stern-faced men, were not nearly as dour and serious as she had feared. But her mind was relentlessly drawn to Éomer and Hilda, to what he might learn, and what it could mean for her and for their future.

A minstrel began a bawdy song that in Gondor would have been viewed as supremely disrespectful. It told first of the glorious deeds of Éomer King, moving quickly to praise of his horsemanship, and finally his formidable sexual attributes and prowess. Elrohir translated it for her, laughing all the while, as he explained that here it signified only the highest regard. By that point, her growing anxiety overwhelmed any possible sign of appreciation on her part of the absurdity or humor of the lyrics. Riders raised their tankards and joined in the oft-repeated refrain: under the sky's broad expanse, between the Great River and the Sea, no mother's son who bore a shield, was more worthy of their kingdom.

Finally, she could no longer bear the heat of the hall and the throbbing music. She also dreaded someone would ask her the whereabouts of their lauded lord. Éowyn passed nearby and Lothíriel grabbed her by the arm. "Come walk with me, Éowyn. I need some air." They passed out through one of the secondary doors onto the porch in front of the Meduseld.

"There he is," Éowyn said pointing to a solitary figure, standing by the front wall, his back to them. "I'll leave you to speak with him."

Éomer, lost in thought, stared off into the distance, over the rooftops, across the grassy plains, and toward the mountains beyond. The stars in the dark sky above him blazed strangely bright. Lothíriel approached him and placed her hand upon his arm. He covered her hand with his, looking down into her face.

"I was coming to look for you soon," he said.

"Your men sing a song of you, my lord."

"Since when do you call me your lord?" he asked, smiling at last.

"Since I learned of your impressive size and sexual renown. When first I saw you unclothed, I asked you if your member might be considered large. You told me it was typical for a man of your tall stature and long limbs. Apparently, you lied."

"Ai!" Éomer laughed. "I well remember that you shocked me. Are they so deep in their cups already as to sing that outlandish old song? This is no Dol Amroth, princess. Are you still willing to be queen of these rough horsemen?" he asked, his voice husky, his eyes tender. He cupped her chin in his hand, lightly kissing her forehead, nose, and mouth.

"I never reconsidered, not for a moment. For their king is tall, strong, and comely…"

"That foolish song again?" He smiled and kissed her longingly. "I love you so. Now I must tell you what I learned. I still do not know how it all will end. Yet my heart tells me that we can weather it, if you will but stand by me."

Then Lothíriel listened while Éomer spoke in a quiet, clear voice, gazing out beyond the snow-topped mountains to where white stars sprinkled the inky sky. Éomer opened his mind to Lothíriel,
so she heard not only his words, but sensed his emotions as well. He told a tale of himself as a brash young rider first seeking the favor of a pretty girl--Hilda. He shared kisses and his first tentative, intimate touches of a woman's body with her. He even fancied a future for them together at times. Yet he soon occupied itself more with duty than courtship, saw her less and finally not at all.

He heard of an affair with his cousin, Théodred, heir to the throne of Rohan. Yet he suffered little grief from that knowledge; in fact, he wished them well, though he held fond memories of her still. He later learned that Théodred, who gave even less time to romantic dalliances than he, had broken with her. The dangers to their land and people grew graver as the shadow of the enemy lengthened. By then, he served as Third Marshal of the Riddermark, the youngest ever. His charge, the defense of the East-fold, and his responsibility for his éored tested him and occupied all his time. He did not see her for years.

After the stand at Helm's Deep, before the Riders departed for Gondor, Éomer encountered Hilda by chance among the evacuees. They spent an evening speaking of their shared anguish at the bitter loss of Théodred, her former lover, his dearest friend and foster brother. She confessed to Éomer that she and Théodred had made love again just two months earlier. They dried one another's tears, talked of less troubled days, and took brief comfort that night in one another's arms.

Éomer turned to Lothíriel, shook his head with an air of self-reproach, and said, "I thought of her no more until I saw her standing along the side of the road upon our entrance into Edoras. I immediately wondered if the child she carried might be Théodred's, or even my own."

"I spoke with her tonight. At first, cold and defensive, she would scarcely give me a hearing. She said 'You were my first love and Théodred my most cherished'," he explained, his voice cracking. "As though I thought to judge her."

"No doubt she was afraid. Fearful that you thought of heirs or succession."

"I think not. It is not done that way here. Uncrowned though I may be as yet, this throne is mine. Yes, Théoden spoke, but my people accepted me on what they see as my own merits. No. If she resents me, it is for her own reasons."

"I am sorry," Lothíriel said. She struggled to hold her silence, but the words flew out of her mouth unbidden. "And the child? Is it yours? Or Théodred's?"

"Hilda said that when she last saw Théodred, she realized they would never be together, so she wed a man who had asked her many times. He fell on the road to the Hornburg. She claims she is not far along enough for Théodred to be the father, and will give birth too soon for the child to be mine."

"That is good. Is it not?" Lothíriel said.

"It is never good that a child should have no father and I do not know if I believe her. She asked me to leave her in peace, that two sets of grandparents look forward to his birth," Éomer said, laughing bleakly.

_So, now it is a he. "And?"

"I promised her I will not trouble her, but that the child would want for nothing," he said, looking at Lothíriel questioningly. "I told her if she has second thoughts she should speak to me. Also, that we would foster him if ever she wanted that."
“You might have asked me first,” Lothíriel said, suddenly feeling dispirited. *Yet he would not be the man I love if he had offered less.*

"Would it have made a difference?"

"No. It would have made no difference at all." *If I had come to you with child. Now that would make a difference.*
The King's Bedchamber

Éomer took Lothíriel by the arm. "Come, let us go back inside, or do you choose to sulk the rest of the night away under the stars and catch a chill," he said. His words were scolding, but his voice fell tender and contrite upon her ear, his breath soft upon her neck. She could not resist the urge to smile, as he propelled her toward and through the large door, yet vague anxiety still haunted her.

"You confuse me with another," she said, trying to make a joke, but then, gripped by a sudden fear of being misunderstood, she quickly added, "…perhaps your stubborn sister. You often warn me that I press strongly on your forbearance. Are you beginning to wonder if mine may have its limits as well?"

"Perhaps," Éomer said, appearing thoughtfully to agree, but he immediately, contradicted himself. "No. I never entirely understand what motivates you, but neither have I tried to keep anything from you. This whole situation today surprised me as much as you."

"I doubt that," she said. She felt tired. She wondered if the whole easy trust and camaraderie that they had shared had vanished in an instant earlier that day in the sunshine on the steps of the Meduseld.

"Lothíriel." He shrugged and sighed. His usual straightforward smile did not light his eyes. "This is not how I hoped your first experience in my home would be."

"What? I know. I am sorry," she said. Éomer's face softened into a wistful smile, as he chuckled softly at her words.

"No. I do not want you to apologize for being distressed, but I certainly hope you will bear with me through these complications. With you I feel I can do anything; without you I am lost."

By the time they returned to the head table, the noise in the hall had dropped to a lower level. Music and conversation drifted across the open space rather than crowding it as it had earlier. Some members of the household or guests who would sleep in the main room of the great hall shifted off toward corners to claim a favored spot. Many of the torches had burned out and not been relit, leaving a heavy, smoky scent in the hazy air and the light dimmer. Others flickered and sputtered before completely extinguishing themselves.

Elladan, Elrohir, and two handsome rangers of the Grey Company engaged Éowyn in lively
conversation. Éomer did not take his tall chair in the center of the table, but scooted onto the end of a bench until he was next to Elrohir. He pulled Lothíriel along side of him, sliding his strong arms around her, holding her close to him. The gesture seemed to her a physical manifestation of his determination not to let her go.

Without making eye contact or even turning in their direction Elrohir pushed a tray holding clean tankards and a pitcher of ale toward them. Éomer murmured his thanks, not releasing his hold on Lothíriel. He filled one tankard, using his free hand, and then raised his eyebrows questioningly at Lothíriel, as he poured only a little into the other.

"What?" she asked him.

"You feel cold to me." She saw concern and anxiety in his expression.

"I am never cold. You know that." Yet she was puzzled that she did indeed feel chilled, an unfamiliar but not completely unknown sensation.

"But you are cold now. You are shivering. You may have stayed outside too long without a wrap of any sort."

"Éomer, it's nearly summer," she responded. Why am I arguing about this?

"In the south of Gondor, but not here yet. There is still a chill in the evening air. Or perhaps you are ill."

"I have never been ill, nor have my brothers, and my father rarely," Lothíriel answered, annoyed with herself at her own snappish tone.

"How very Elvish of you, Lothíriel," Elrohir interjected, with a light laugh but looking questioningly at her as he leaned toward her studying her face carefully. "Perhaps you are distressed. It is not uncommon for an Elf to feel chilled when something is troubling them. Perhaps it is the same for you with your Elven blood."

Elladan surprised Lothíriel by speaking. "It may be that she is simply tired from her trip." She bristled with irritation at what she had to admit, to herself at least, could be interpreted as an entirely innocuous remark. His use of the third person in speaking of her in her presence drove her wild. His bland tone of voice could just as easily indicate utter boredom with any discussion of which she was the subject as interest in her well-being.

She looked at his haughty, handsome face. No alteration in his expression met her gaze except the slight flutter of dark, thick lashes against the perfect skin of his cheeks, flushed from too much ale and illuminated so entrancingly by the golden light of the fire and muted torches. Blinking to avoid eye contact? Curse you, Elladan. Keep your own counsel.

"I am well." The clipped, irritated sound of her own voice infuriated her. "I just want to retire. It has been a long day. Good night, Éowyn. Good night, Elrohir. Rest well."

She struggled to stand, inhibited by the firm grip of Éomer's arm around her waist, and swung one leg over the bench where she sat trapped between Éomer and Elrohir. The lack of the encumbrance of a heavy, full skirt, but only a lightweight gown of Elvish cut, made the maneuver possible but deprived it of elegance or any marginal measure of grace. He always makes me act and sound a fool.

"Good night, Elladan." That awful tone of voice again.

"I'll come with you," Éomer said. "Good night, everyone. We will see you in the morning." She
could not see his face, but wondered if he had dared to give one of his characteristic, good-natured winks or grins behind her back at her all too obvious ill temper.

As they moved away from the table, Éomer wound an arm around her waist pulling her against him. Then he bent suddenly, grabbing her with his other arm behind her knees, and lifted her aloft. She no longer laughed or squealed when he pulled such stunts, but the familiar action pleased and comforted her. *You are still my beautiful horse lord and I am always safe with you.* Lothíriel's head now pointed in the direction of the table. Éowyn and Elrohir smiled, nodding at her with a bemused amiability, mildly annoying to her. Elladan's eyes met hers directly for the first time that evening, his expression indecipherable and his face cool as the moon. *Ancient Elven eyes. Maddeningly superior and alien.*

Éomer's arms felt strong and secure around her. He smelled of sunlight. His heart beat steady against her chest. She threw her arms loosely about his neck, curling her fingers in his weighty, golden hair, and arched back a bit to look up into his eyes. Even in the waning torchlight their color sparked a brilliant blue, not the Elven-Númenórean silver grey, to which she was so accustomed--a much richer, darker blue than even the sea or any midsummer sky. More in a fit of pique than desire or affection, although affection bloomed strongly within her at that moment, she kissed him on the mouth, aware of Elladan's eyes upon them. Finally, Éomer broke off the kiss.

"Your kisses don't fool me. You are in one of those fey moods of yours. Should I regret that I am not armed?" he said, teasingly, yet sighing deeply. He caught her in another open-mouthed kiss. His lips were silken soft, yet firm and full. She remembered their dark rose color, which caused them to stand out even against his sun-browned face. She shivered at the picture in her mind and sought, aware of all the eyes upon them, to slow down her increasing response to him. *Noldor silver eyes, snapping with arrogant disdain. That will kill yearning—except perhaps for their owner.* When they reached the bottom of the staircase Éomer released the kiss, lowering her toward the floor. "Get down now. You are not a child. You can climb the stairs on your own."

Lothíriel looked into his open face and grimaced internally at the lack of privacy that her rush to share her thoughts with him so early in their relationship had brought her. She caught a bright flash of amusement and annoyance from him.

"Do not forget that you brought my dark mood upon yourself," she said.

"Ai, that I did, but unknowingly, if you recall." She sensed no remaining ill feeling or even petulance in his answer. "I have not the skill to shut out your thoughts, Lothíriel. You can close your mind to me, you know." *Perhaps a hint of sadness, now?* she wondered.

"That would only make it worse," she answered. "And I promised you I would not."

As they climbed up the stairs he moved closer and pushed gently up against her buttocks with one hand. She slapped the offending hand away.

"Éomer!"

"No one cares what we do here. This is not Minas Tirith, love. Anyway, I am the king here, am I not?" His voice suffused with mirth; he sounded ready to laugh aloud. She bristled.

"I care. This may not be Minas Tirith, but you are the king and should comport yourself with some dignity."

"Fine then. I will follow your ever dignified example," he said, releasing the chuckle he had so obviously been holding back.
The doors to King's Chamber and the bedroom next to it stood open. Éomer waved in the general direction of both and said, "Shall we use your room or would you prefer to initiate the illustrious bedstead of the King of the Mark?"

His eyes sparkled with ill-concealed mischief. Clearly these rooms held none of the ghosts for him that Éowyn had found here. He gently nudged her in the direction of the royal bedchamber.

She glanced inside, curious but still hesitant. A spacious chamber stretched out before them. Against one wall stood an oversized bed, laid with overlapping coverlets quilted in satin and velvet in jewel tones of green, red, and blue, embroidered in threads of gold. The bed had been turned down on one side to reveal snowy sheets, and four large pillows arranged against a massive headboard of polished dark wood. Thick rugs of various colors covered most of a gleaming wooden floor. In front of a large fireplace lay a rug made of lambskin. Unlit makings for a fire had been arranged carefully on the grate.

The scent of newly applied floor wax and freshly cut wood permeated the room. On the far side of the chamber a half-open door revealed the darkened corner of another room beyond this one. Several lamps, lit but turned down low, hung suspended from the ceiling on polished brass chains. The overall effect was one both regal and rustically welcoming.

"I should think that it has long since been initiated."

"Hmm. I suppose you are right," he said, grabbing her lower lip with his teeth as he so liked to do and knew well always affected her strongly. He was, she thought, trying hard to dispel the pervasive lack of ease and dissatisfaction that had overcome her since she became aware of his former lover and her unborn fatherless child. Despite all that I have seen and known in this past year--war, destruction, violence, bloodshed, and the fear of the end of all I have known--I still looked for a perfect, happy ending like those in silly tales for romantic girls. I cannot lay the burden of the shattering of my foolish, self-indulgent whims upon my brave lover.

"Shouldn't we wait to sleep there until we are wed?"

"That sounds nothing like my impetuous sweetheart," he said, stroking her cheek with a warm hand. His lips formed an exaggerated pout, but she sensed no criticism, only lightly controlled humor in his remarks, and, underlying all of that, the deliberate stoking of passion. He pulled her close, pressing his hardness against her. Desire flooded her, leaving her slightly dizzy and short of breath. Oh, Éomer.

"Were you thinking of starting without me?" she asked, amused and breathing heavily. She pulled herself away from him just enough so she could reach down to stroke him through his breeches. She could not resist the smile that she felt pulling at the corners of her mouth and reached up to run her tongue delicately across his lips.

"Let's try the big one. The bed, I mean," she said, laughing at herself. He had already begun backing her into the large chamber, refusing to let go of her, grasping her now with both hands on her behind. He kicked the door shut behind them. It closed with a sharp echoing crack, causing them both to startle and laugh.

It did not take long for him find the correct laces and ribbons to undo her simple gown and pull it over her head along with the shift she wore under it. She had accomplished little in the same amount of time, having only managed to loosen the ties at his waist and the front of his tunic. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his tunic, while she wiggled her legs under the sheets. Toeing off his well-worn boots and losing his breeches took him but a moment longer. He crawled into the bed positioning himself over her, supporting himself on his elbows, spreading his fingers over her face,
pushing her hair back away from her forehead, and then claiming her mouth again, alternating between nipping at her lips and exploring her with his tongue. She breathed in short rapid gasps, inhaling the familiar scent of him. Unable to think, only to feel, unable to speak, she wrenched her mouth away with an overwhelming compulsion to vocalize what she felt. "My love, my love, you are so beautiful."

"Shhh, shhh," he answered and moved his clever mouth down to her breast. He teased her nipple with his lips, his tongue, and softly with his teeth. Then in a quick, surprising movement, he thrust his hand between her legs. Involuntarily arching her back over the mattress, she continued to run her hands over the warm smooth skin of his powerful back and upper arms, moaning into his mouth.

"So slippery. So wet," he said. Just as unexpectedly he raised himself upon one arm, guided himself to her, plunging all the way into her with a single push.

"Oh, yes, yes," she said--both a plea and a demand--gripping him tightly with her legs. She delighted in being at his mercy, lying beneath him, feeling the heavy weight of him, her legs wrapped around him, meeting his every movement, and yet allowing him control. She reached up and grabbed his shoulder-length hair near his scalp, adoring the way the heavy, tangled, loose curls caught her fingers.

He moved slowly at first, controlling his urge to move harder and faster to bring them both to a higher level of bliss. Lost in his languorous rhythm, she managed enough consciousness to thank the Valar for his skill, while realizing that she should also thank his past experience for the same. At last his need and desire overcame him. His strokes shortened, sped up. She heard herself express a sharp little cry as she came and tightened her grip on his hair. With a final deep shudder, he reached his release. The vision of the white brilliance of this act swept over her through her contact with his mind--a shared revelation of pleasure given and received. Collapsing heavy upon her, he held her until her own tremors stopped. Then he lifted himself on one elbow, reached up, and pried her still-clenched fingers out of his hair.

"Ouch," he said, grinning and shivering with gentle laughter.

"Oh, Éomer, I love you," she answered.

She wanted to say more. Words came into her head—*I give my life and love to you, no matter what will come to us through all the ages of Arda.* But she could not say them. Why? Instead she said, "Éomer, I give you my love and will stay by your side for as long you shall live." A single tear slid down her cheek. He breathed a soft, sad laugh, leaned over her, and licked the tear away.

"No tears, my love," he answered. "It is enough. And you will have all my love. You will always be safe here."

"I know am always safe in your arms," she whispered. Another tear rolled down her face and he brushed it briskly away.

"It is enough," he said again, his voice proud and strong. "I have never asked for more than you can give."
Éomer raised his hand to shade his eyes from the few narrow beams of light that diffused the shadows of the room. He had grown accustomed to the bright sunlight that poured in each morning through the broad, tall windows of Lothíriel's room on the sixth level of Mundburg. Temporarily disoriented, he looked around to quickly realize that he had awakened in the grand bed of his Uncle Théoden's bedchamber. My room now. The warmth of Lothíriel beside him made it seem less strange and incongruous.

He raised himself on one elbow and looked at her adoringly--how utterly exquisite appeared her pale, refined features and hair black as a raven's wing spread beneath her on the pillow. It had become a cliché in their circle to refer to her Elvish beauty over the past months, but the description did capture something distinctly out of the ordinary about her. How calm, how trusting she looked in sleep, without any of the doubts and anxiety she had tortured him with the day before. Tenderness beyond description filled him.

Carefully he slid from under the covers on the bed and stood. He did not wish to wake Lothíriel so early. She had been tired and upset the night before, understandably so. He rummaged through the large wardrobe in the corner. His clothing had been transferred here from his old room down the corridor. Nothing personal belonging to Théoden remained in the chamber. He was relieved that he and Éowyn did not have to sort through his uncle's things now. But later, maybe in a few months, he wanted to retrieve a few items that he missed seeing in the room, perhaps the shield of his grandsire Thengel and Théodred's first sword.

There would be time to look to the past, now the present and the future must take precedence. So little time and so much to do. Yesterday belonged to the people. Today he wanted to spend as much time with Lothíriel as he could. When she leaves here tomorrow, I want it to be with the desire to return to the Riddermark--to me--as soon as possible. Éomer wondered if perhaps Imrahil's points held a validity he had refused to give them in his urgency to claim her as his own in those first, heady days at Cormallen. This could be too much to ask of a young woman who would not officially reach her maturity for some time yet. Act in haste, repent in leisure, is that how the old saying goes? But he thought that it did not have to be so.

He dressed hurriedly and left to find Éowyn. Perhaps the three of them could break fast together in the king's sitting room and discuss how Lothíriel wanted to spend the day. He knew she wanted to
see the nearby pastures where the Mearas ran free.

Lothíriel had asked about the Mearas repeatedly on the trip from Mundburg. He wanted to visit them as well. Will they know me? Do Mearas recognize an uncrowned king? He had already pledged himself, heart and soul, to this land, these people. Surely a coronation, simply a public, legal acknowledgement of his acceptance of the leadership of the House of Éorl, meant little to these fabulous creatures. While a living and breathing manifestation of the heart of all that was Rohan, they seemed to him more a part of an ancient connection to Béma, the Valar Orome, and Valinor itself than of this new Age of Men.

He walked down the corridor and pounded, harder than was necessary or courteous, on the door to Éowyn's room, just as he always had. He smiled at the thought of how it annoyed his sister.

"Éomer, for Béma's sake, calm down. I am coming," Éowyn called out from inside of the room. Affection for his sister swept over him. Some things never change.

Éowyn opened the door, looking fresh and rested, dressed to ride, wearing a big grin.

"How is Lothíriel today? Has she decided to let you live?" Éowyn asked.

They walked together in the direction of the staircase. They did not need to discuss where they were headed. He knew they would go to the kitchen. It is like the old days, except without Grima lurking around, without expecting to hear Théodred’s laugh, without our uncle. It is not like the old days at all, actually. But it can be good. It should be good.

Éowyn reminded him of Lothíriel at times although outwardly they could not appear more different. Éowyn could be terse and silent around those she did not know or trust, tending to broodiness, unaware of her elegance, and awkward with social formalities, while Lothíriel appeared talkative, light-hearted, stylish, flirtatious, reckless. But both were comfortable in the company of men, honest to a fault, frighteningly clever at times, and determined to find a place for themselves in the new world that would not be limited to the pursuit of womanly concerns alone.

"I do not think she is really angry. Just disillusioned, perhaps. I've never known how to make a woman happy. Never really tried before," he said.

"What about me?" Éowyn looked up at him with affection, but a challenging arch of her eyebrows.

"Only you. And that never worked. So, I've very little experience." He laughed.

"She just wants to be reassured that you love her and no matter what happens that she can be sure of you. That is all women really want. Well, there are other things, but I have heard from her and others that those have never been a problem."

I have to give my sister credit for one thing. She does not mince words.

"No. I suppose that is not a problem. But she still thinks of the Elf." Éomer said, looking to Éowyn for her reaction.

"You mean Elladan?" she asked, the narrowing of her eyes indicated to him that she had hoped not to be asked to discuss this subject.

"No, Legolas. Of course, I mean Elladan!"
She took his upper arm and squeezed, pressing her cheek against it, as they started down the stairs. "I am sorry, Éomer. I know she loves you. She will settle down. It was only yesterday that you presented her with a former lover great with child, possibly your own."

They walked across the long hall, slowly coming to life around them. Scullery maids laid a table at one end, probably for the rangers, and Elladan and Elrohir. Riders assigned to the Meduseld and others ate in small, quiet groups, scattered about the remaining tables still in place. Others of the household staff bustled about sweeping the hall and carrying loads of produce and bags of flour or meal into the kitchen at one end. As the brother and sister neared the kitchen the din of voices and clatter of utensils met their ears.

Shortly before they reached the kitchen doorway, Éowyn grabbed him by both arms and pulled him to one side. "Look at me, Éomer. She is young. Give her time. Can you say that you no longer notice other pretty girls?"

"It is more than that, Éowyn. I can read her thoughts. This is a strong fascination he holds for her, an infatuation of sorts." A puzzled, irritated look flickered across her face.

"Oh, you are reading minds now? How elegant and Elvish you've become," she said.

He laughed. "I do nothing. She opens her mind to me. Most of her strong reactions or emotions reach me. It is a strange gift—or curse perhaps."

"How like Lothíriel. She exercises no restraint and apparently even less common sense. Faramir has such a gift as well, but he uses it sparingly. I do not think I would want him to know my every thought or to be aware of all of his for that matter. It is only evident to me in the most intimate of circumstances." She looked sideways at her brother, blushing at what she had just revealed.

"How intimate, little sister?" he asked, with a taunting grin.

"Oh, unlike you, brother, I'm as chaste as the day I was born," she said, making a silly mug at him that revealed her blatant insincerity. "What makes you think that Faramir and I would be interested in such carrying on as you and your princess flaunt before everyone?"

"We have not had much time to talk. I can see that you are happy and Faramir is too. You are happy are you not, sister?"

"Very happy. And I know you will be too." She threw her arms around his neck, staring up into his face, her own countenance gleaming with contentment, appearing much as she had as a girl of fourteen years of age, with an untroubled brow, grey eyes clear, cheeks rosy, and golden hair flowing loose on her shoulders.

"I feel as if we went overnight from being orphans cast out into the mercy of a storm to being part of a large and often rather strange family," he said, shrugging his shoulders and patting her on the back.

He mused that he had been comfortable with Lothíriel, her brothers, and their father immediately, and by extension their cousin Faramir, who resembled in them in so many ways. They possessed a comparable openness of temperament and lack of guardedness to that of Thengel's grandchildren. Intimacy was a habit among the Dol Amroth heirs much as it had been for him with Théodred and Éowyn.
"Strange, but nice," she said, with absolute conviction. "Despite their fancy clothes, fine manners, and bookish tastes, I could see any one of Lothíriel's brothers easily riding with an eored if that should be their fate. Of course, it won't. But I am sure this marriage is the right one for you, Éomer. She will resolve her contradictions. And, if she does not, or hurts you in any way, I will personally wring her neck."

"There are then advantages to having a shieldmaiden for a sister?"

"Don't re-open an old argument, Éomer," said Éowyn, eyes flashing in a way that reminded Éomer there were also disadvantages to having a sister with Éowyn's resolve.

"Let us see then what Ætta has to offer today. Something smells good. I did not eat well yesterday. Too much happening," Éomer said.

The kitchen smelled of cinnamon and freshly baked bread and bustled with the organized racket that Éomer remembered from his boyhood. Ætta, the fixture and general of this chaos, red-cheeked and round of figure with an air of authority and a glint of humor about the eyes, spotted him immediately. She abruptly broke off a movement--to pull him into her strong embrace he wondered--to fall into a low curtsy.

"Your grace," she said, waving her arm in the direction of several trays loaded with hearty rolls, covered bowls, and individual teapots, "we had not expected you up and about so early. I shall send these up immediately." Nodding toward Éowyn, she asked, "Lady Éowyn, will you and his grace be eating together? And what of the Princess from Gondor?"

"Ætta," Éomer interrupted, "It is Éomer to you." Éowyn, her face plastered with a mischievous grin, appeared to be greatly enjoying a private joke.

"Éomer King, then, if you will," Ætta said. "Nothing less formal would be fitting. Why, Lady Éowyn, you look as lovely as I have ever seen you."

"Thank you, Ætta. What is that wonderful scent?" Éowyn asked.

"It is cinnamon from south Gondor or perhaps even Harad or thereabouts. A gift from the Princess--a fine lady, who does not object to being addressed properly," Ætta said, with a sniff in the direction of Éomer.

"In the kitchen? Anyway, she does not know you. Nor you her. She is not as fine as all that," Éomer said, determined to have the last word. "The last time I was in here, not six months ago, you rapped my fingers with a wooden spoon and chased me out with a broom. And, I was nearly starving, wounded, and half-frozen."

"Begging your pardon, Éomer King, but I remember the evening well enough. A warm bath awaited you in your room. You stank like pig, were covered with orc blood, and supper was ready to be served. What a way to speak of your betrothed and the future queen of the Mark," Ætta said, appealing to Éowyn, with a long-suffering look.

"Ah, then, Ætta, I will pardon you your insolence and let you call me Éomer King, if you will give me a kiss and promise not to strike me anymore."

"Éomer King," Ætta said, turning beet red, all the way up to the roots of her graying golden hair, and pecking him on the cheek. "There is your kiss, you handsome devil. You were a wicked charmer
when I met you as a boy of ten years and you still are. I hope the Lady Éowyn will be staying for a while. Someone will have to teach you your place before the lovely, young Princess comes here to stay."

Éowyn laughed. "Éomer was right about one thing, Ætta. You do not know Princess Lothíriel."

§§§§§

After breakfasting in the private sitting room of the royal chambers, Éomer, Lothíriel and Éowyn went to the stable and saddled up. Éomer could not bring himself to invite either the Peredhil brothers or the Northern rangers to join them. He would have welcomed Elrohir and the Dúnedain, but could not ask any of them without inviting all. He could not tolerate the thought of watching Lothíriel steal surreptitious glances at Elladan and the Elf studying her uninterruptedly until she chanced to look in his direction. *Neither of the lackwits thinks the other or anyone else notices.*

As they rode across the open grasslands, Éomer relaxed, taking in the scent of the late-spring growth and the movement of cloud shadows drifting across the undulating expanse of green stretching out before them.

Éomer felt the same thrill that he first experienced when, as a small child nestled securely in front of his father, he rode out to see the Mearas. His father told him he had taken him to see the fabled horses when he was an infant, but Éomer, of course, did not remember. Pictures and symbols of the Mearas had always surrounded him, but, until that day, they were only semi-mythical creatures of songs and bedtime stories.

Trips from the Eastfold into Edoras occurred infrequently in those years with a steadily increasing number of orc raids into outlying areas occupying his father. But that day had dawned fair and sunny. He recalled not if Éowyn had been born yet, or was perhaps still an infant. His mother and father, high-spirited and happy, talked and joked with his Uncle Théoden. Théodred, merely a lanky, impetuous lad, rode ahead and circled back, until Théoden good-naturedly scolded him for making a pest of himself.

A soft nicker from Firefoot jolted him back to the present. He took a quick look at Lothíriel. Her eyes reflected her usual intensity, while a faint smile softened her face.

She turned to him and said, "The movement of the grass reminds me of the sea on a calm day."

Finally he saw them in clusters here and there in the distance. As the riders drew closer he observed a number of the superbly beautiful and capricious Mearas spread out across the wide pasture, which, for as long as Éomer could remember, they had chosen as their site of favor during the late spring and early summer.

Éomer pointed to the center of the pasture that extended in front of them. "See the large white stallion not far from that group of mares. He is the highest ranking of the Mearas in the absence of Shadowfax. The dapple grey mare standing slightly apart is his lead mare," Éomer said. The three stood watching the magnificent, awe-inspiring creatures. Éomer suspected from observing subtle physical cues—the Mearah's head held up high, his ears pointed toward him—that the stallion noticed him.
"Look," Lothíriel said. "There is a small, black foal near the center of the band of mares."

"He eventually will be grey or white like the others," Éowyn said.

"I know that," Lothíriel said with a characteristic, impatient, upward jerk of her chin.

It amused Éomer that she always reacted strongly when she believed that he or Éowyn impugned her knowledge of horses. Lothíriel never tired of reminding them that, in comparison to the rest of Gondor, the people of Dol Amroth truly knew horses. Éowyn held the position that outside of Rohan no one understood much, if anything, about horses. He laughed softly, drawing a look from both women. Éomer believed the truth lay somewhere in between but the fact that Lothíriel did love horses boded well for her future in Rohan.

"Are they immortal like the Elves?" Lothíriel asked. Éowyn rolled her eyes behind the younger woman's back and Éomer gave her a warning look, pursing his lips together with a barely perceptible shake of his head.

"No their lifespan is but that of a long-lived man. In nobility and intelligence the difference between a well-bred horse and a Mearah is greater than that between a man of Numenor and an Elf. They have the instincts of horses, tempered by wisdom, and understand the language of men. Unlike Celegorm's hound Huan, they never speak," Éomer said.

Grinning at Lothíriel, he chuckled and added, "Although the simplest of horses can usually make himself understood in variety of other ways."

"What is the difference between a Mearah and an Elven horse?" Lothíriel asked.

"I am not competent to fully answer that question. Both are thought to have descended from the horses of Valinor. Elrohir claims that the Elven horses are bred lighter and longer of leg. The Mearas are of the bloodline of the horses of Béma the Hunter, the Vala you call Oromë, and will only carry the King of the Mark or his sons."

"Will you try to ride one?" Lothíriel asked, her voice and expression reflecting her anticipation and excitement at the idea.

"I have not decided yet." Éomer said. "Let us dismount and leave our horses with our escort and move a bit closer. I think the lead stallion is watching me. I will wait and see what he does."

"Does he have a name?" Lothíriel asked, lowering her voice to nearly a whisper.

With a flash of a teasing smirk shading perhaps into sisterly pride, Éowyn said, "If he has, he has not told us what it is. As my brother, apparently now an authority on the Mearas, explained, he does not speak. But we call him Wintergewæde, which means snow."

Handing off Firefoot to one of the Riders who accompanied them, Éomer moved quietly away from where the two women stood together, motioning them to stay.

The man and the Mearah stallion looked at one another for a short while before the horse broke into a trot in the direction of Éomer, slowing to a walk as he drew closer, then stopping for only a moment before carefully approaching him with a low, almost welcoming nicker.

Éomer reached out to pat and then stroke the Mearah’s broad, silky-smooth neck, extended toward
him in a gesture of curiosity or greeting. He felt assured that stallion accepted his presence gladly and thought it likely that he would accept the weight of him upon his back, but still a slight uneasiness held him back.

Finally he spoke softly in the Mearah's ear, "May I ride you, Wintergewæde?" The great stallion lowered himself into a regal but respectful bow before him, stretching one front leg out before him with the other bent. The gesture overwhelmed Éomer with emotions of both profound humility and exhilarating pride. *He accepts me as the representative of the House of Éorl and the King of the Mark.* Éomer slipped his leg over the great horse's back and tangled his fingers securely into the heavy mane. He settled onto the Mearah's broad back and Wintergewæde heaved to his feet.

Éomer gave the horse his head and the Mearah set out smoothly, increasing gradually in swiftness, making a wide circle of the plain, as though the stallion wanted to take Éomer on a tour of inspection of the various groupings of Mearas scattered throughout the entire pasture area. He grew more acutely aware of the physical sensation of the horse under him—of the strength, heat, and the perfection of it—when its spirit suddenly flooded Éomer's mind. It took him in a manner unlike any similar experience.

The rush of emotions and semi-coherent thoughts he had when his mind linked with Lothíriel felt nothing like this. He perceived the connection to the Mearah as simultaneously darker and yet more innocent, primitive and primal.

The bright sun which he felt hot upon his cheeks seemed to diminish. Within a dreamlike state he experienced the passage of time and shifts from day to night and back again. He understood the timelessness of the land beyond the Western seas, then the immediacy of the here and now in the grasslands rising up around him as reality slammed hard against him again. He could not control the wide grin that swept across his face. For the first time since he assumed the responsibility for Rohan and his people, he felt a logic in it and a joy, that went beyond duty and the will to fulfill it. *I can do this and do it well.* The talks of destiny and fate he and Lothíriel indulged in at Cormallen no longer seemed wishful thinking or philosophical pretensions but tangible aspirations.

The coming of the Age of Men that he recently thought of as some unfortunate phase in the final sundering of Arda, he now perceived as the dawn of something new. But he believed that he would not live to see it fulfilled, only its beginnings. His responsibility and that of his heirs included the protection of the Mearas and preservation of the memory of the passing of the Elves, their history, and the mystery of the direct intervention of the Valar in their daily life.

At last the Mearah returned to stop a few feet away from where Lothíriel and Éowyn stood watching. Éomer did not recall dismounting or exactly when the link between his fëa and that of the great horse broke apart. He did remember Wintergewæde's last expressive look from his large, beautiful eyes before he turned and ran back across the pasture, his silhouette contrasting against the intense blue sky, his mane and tale caressed by the wind.

A huge grin still stretched from ear to ear across Éomer's face as he approached the two women.

"Incredibly gorgeous," Lothíriel whispered, her silver-grey eyes glistening with emotion and her cheeks pink with enthusiasm as she reached to take Éomer's hand.

"Magnificent animal," Éowyn said, her face shining as well.

"Yes," Lothíriel answered. "Also the Mearah."
Edoras

After a day of riding and then tramping about the dusty streets and alleyways of Edoras with Éomer, Éowyn and Lothíriel had been delighted to take long baths. They lingered over details of their dress and fussed with each other’s hair.

Éowyn chose a dark, emerald green gown and Lothíriel one of the palest blue, reasoning that the contrast of their raiment with their light and dark hair became them greatly. They giggled in front of Éowyn's mirror before agreeing, that in all of Rohan and Gondor, two fairer women could not be found. Lothíriel suspected that time spent on such frivolous nonsense, a familiar part of her youth, was a novel experience for Éowyn and the thought flooded her with tenderness for her sister-to-be, wishes for her happiness and an easier future.

Éowyn and Lothíriel entered the hall together still whispering conspiratorially. The last evening in the Meduseld had arrived quickly for Lothíriel. The hall appeared much less crowded than the previous night. And she knew more people now and had begun to feel quite comfortable here.

At the sight of the two young women, the entire coterie of northern rangers shuffled to their feet and nodded in their direction, a gesture of innate courtliness, which, to Lothíriel, represented as great a contrast to their simple, rough garb as did their classic, Númenórean fine looks. Éowyn and Lothíriel smiled at one another before nodding back.

Éowyn whispered, "Lovely men."

Lothíriel laughed softly and replied, "Well, you snagged yourself one didn’t you? If a slightly more Elvish and better dressed one. But the type runs true. Where I grew up we heard Dúnedain still lived in the North, but never saw any of them."

Just then Lothíriel spotted Elladan and Elrohir entering the well-lit, hall from the kitchen area following two young kitchen helpers wrestling an huge ale barrel. Elrohir gave a self-satisfied point at the barrel and shot a broad grin in the direction of a table of Riders who broke out in whistles of appreciation, before he leaned to say something to Elladan who laughed loudly in response.

*He certainly looks cheerful enough when he does not know I am around.*
Scanning the long hall for Éomer, Lothíriel suddenly felt ill-tempered and annoyed. The entire visit had tantalized and frustrated her both with its brevity and the unanticipated wrinkles to her peace of mind she had encountered. She expected Éomer would be waiting for her, anxious that they spend every last possible moment together, but she did not see him anywhere. After they had taken their places at the main table a servant came up to Éowyn.

"My lady, Éomer King left word that you and the Princess should not wait for him. He was called away and will return shortly. Shall we serve dinner now?"

Éowyn exchanged a quick glance with Lothíriel and responded, "Yes, please, if you would. We are ready."

The dinner was served and eaten, although little of it by Lothíriel, who attempted to engage in conversation, smiling until she felt her face would crack from the artificiality of it all. But years in court left her well-prepared for just such eventualities. Once again Elrohir, as he had in the past, behaved in a solicitous, brotherly manner and attempted to distract her. Whether he did so on behalf of his absent friend, from his own innate generosity, or to make up for his brother's still firmly-maintained distance, she did not know or care, but accepted his attention gratefully.

Finally, late in the evening, after Éowyn had grown visibly aggravated and Lothíriel held onto to her forced, public amiability by a thread, a noisy commotion drew their attention to door. Éomer strode into the hall. Those remaining struggled to their feet as their king passed by them, motioning all to sit, grasping many Riders by the forearms in greeting and slapping others on their backs.

Lothíriel noticed with pleasure that Éowyn scowled outright at her brother. She herself presented him a narrow-eyed, tight-lipped smile that she hoped looked dangerous. His tall graceful form, handsome face, golden hair gleaming in the lamp light, his long athletic stride, and usual good-natured smile pleased her not at all at that moment, but rather added to her long pent-up annoyance.

"My love, forgive me," Éomer said, rounding the long table and taking Lothíriel's hand and kissing it in a gesture of ostentatious courtliness.

"Elbereth apparently looks after you. If you had arrived much later, I would have…” Lothíriel snapped, her words interrupted by his finger placed upon her lips.

"Shhh. I said I was sorry. I hurried as fast as I could," Éomer said, his azure eyes wide with, to her at least, an unconvincing display of innocence.

"Where have you been that was so important you left me here to sit alone at your table without any word and return sodden drunk?"

A lopsided grin broke across his endearingly comely face. "Nay, sweetheart, I am not drunk. And I am back now and completely yours. I went to see Hilda. She asked to have a word with me."

"How lovely for you. And how fortunate for her that you could rush off at her beckoning leaving your guests unattended…” This time Éomer silenced her with a light kiss and a consciously seductive smile.

"Has no one told the wench that drinking is ill-advised for one carrying a child?" she continued when he released her, refusing to be put off.

"I'm afraid I did the drinking, love. Be at peace. She leaves at dawn for the Eastfold with her family."
You will be troubled no more by her presence."

"Nor you by mine, as I leave in the morning as well," she said, rueing the pout she could not control and her relief to have him back in whatever state.

"I know, love. We have wasted too much time already. Will you come with me?" He pulled her up guiding her away from the table and toward the staircase. It seemed pointless to resist. Her curiosity and desire overpowered her exasperation. Any niggling doubts about him were momentarily overwhelmed by his physical closeness.

When they reached his bedchamber, Éomer pulled an object from his pocket and thrust it toward her. She took it—a gold ring, resting heavy on her palm, set with a large red gem.

"She gave me this. It belonged to Théodred. He thought he lost it. She wanted me to have it and to apologize for treating me so coldly before."

"Indeed, and to behave more warmly?" Lothíriel said, feeling a keen stab of jealousy.

"Quite to the contrary. Simply to part on better terms and to return the ring. It is an heirloom to be passed from one heir to the throne to the next. I believe that if she thought the child was either Théodred's or my own she might have felt some right to it."

"That occupied four or more hours? Did you kiss her a fond farewell?"

"Self-righteousness is not pretty. Virtue based on lack of opportunity is virtue untested, Lothíriel," he said, his tone was no longer soft or patient. She wished she could start over again and guide the discussion in another direction.

"What will you do with the ring?" she asked, floundering for a response.

"I would safeguard it for our son—yours and mine. Do not try to change the subject so easily. Do you think I notice nothing? That I do not see the unresolved tension between you and Elladan?"

"I have done nothing. A stray thought here and there is not what matters, but what I do. You on the other hand have been out cavorting with the most bold of your seemingly numerous former lovers, while I sit alone at the head table in your great hall looking a complete fool." Lothíriel said, with more vehemence than she had intended. She felt both injured and dishonest. Although she had told no lies, she felt her protestations of innocence were less than forthright.

"I thought of taking you or Éowyn with me, but realized that would be cruel. I did leave word. You and Éowyn were bathing when I left. I was gone longer than I expected, but that had nothing to do with her or you…I just needed to be alone for a while. The whole discussion made me think of Théodred. I was not ready to face a crowded hall." His explanation contained no note of defensiveness.

"I am sorry if you believe I showed disrespect to you by my actions tonight. It was not taken that way here I assure you."

"I am sorry, Éomer..." He placed his fingers lightly against her lips, sparking a familiar flicker of desire in her. A crinkle around his eyes, a gentle lift of the corners of his mouth revealed his awareness of the unintentional effect on her of his touch. Although his voice turned husky, he continued to speak.
"Shhh. Just listen for a moment. The gossip in these parts--none that I know to be malicious--centers on how obviously smitten the king is with his pretty Gondorian princess. That I cannot keep my hands off of you. I do not appear to my people to have the upper hand in this match. Though it matters naught to me what any think. I regret nothing."

She could not resist a giggle "Then they apparently do not know what a hero all of Gondor considers you and how romantic a figure you present to every unmarried Gondorian noblewoman. I know who took the prize in this case."

"Nonsense," he said, capturing her in a kiss that seemed designed to undermine any vestige of remaining ire on her part.

Finally pulling free of his lips, she answered, "I love you, Éomer. I was so jealous and worried and I spent such a long time trying to look especially nice for our last night here." Her remarks sounded petty and childish to her and she felt herself melting into the heat of him as he pulled her closer again.

"Then you need only tell me how to behave in court--come to meals on time, that sort of thing. Even the cook tells me that I am hopeless. But I do learn quickly with suitable motivation," he said, smiling sweetly before beginning to kiss her, with no apparent intention of continuing the discussion. In that moment Lothíriel put aside the anxiety that Éomer's mention of his name caused her. Yet she knew this was a discussion they were destined to have again and again unless she could take control of her ambivalent feelings for Elladan.

§ § § §

As their party prepared to depart the following morning Éomer appeared cheerful, energetic and untroubled. Lothíriel fretted, uneasy and unsettled, that too much had been left unconcluded and unspoken between her and Éomer, but his light-hearted good humor caused her to throw her doubts aside. Finally, at the last possible moment she pulled him to one side.

"I could stay. I need not leave. I can return to Minas Tirith with you and Éowyn shortly after midsummer," she said.

"No, love, we discussed this at length and all agreed you would go to Lothlórien. You will never have another chance. Perhaps it is for the best that we have a few weeks apart. We have been together every day since you arrived at Cormallen. You need have no worry for me. I will be occupied entirely with affairs that are new and difficult for me."

"We could say I was unwell when the others needed to leave..." she began.

"Do not be foolish. Besides you have told us frequently that you are never sick. Kiss me and give me a smile to remember. The time will pass swiftly." And so she did and they were off.

**The Road to Lothlórien**

Two days out of Edoras, the terrain began to change, and the open grasslands gave way first to a sparsely and then more thickly wooded landscape. The weeks before Éomer could return to Minas Tirith stretched out before her in comparison to the short days she had spent in the Meduseld.

She missed the constant good-natured banter between Éomer and Éowyn that she enjoyed on the long ride from Minas Tirith to Edoras. Doubtless the visit to the legendary enclave of Lothlórien would distract her, make their separation easier to bear. She looked forward to meeting Aragorn's betrothed. *If Arwen Undómiel resembles her siblings at all it is possible the rumors she is as*
As they rode she talked at length with Elrohir about his family and his earlier life, which also meant she learned details about Elladan that she had not known. Elrohir spoke of how he had been drawn to music while his brother shared his father's talent for healing, but they had both excelled at arms and events eventually led them to that pursuit nearly to the exclusion of all others. He did not speak of their obsessive seeking for revenge after the tragic events which led to the departure of their mother. But she knew of that already.

She rode silently next to Elrohir, who appeared to be lost in his own reverie—sleeping, thinking—she could not tell. The sun was strong, the road dusty, and the landscape grew monotonous. Hot, tired, and bored, she wished Elrohir would sing again. She loved it when he sang the old songs in his rich baritone. In Legolas's glowing tenor these stories lingered in one's memory as misty legends: heart-wrenchingly beautiful, but their protagonists remained untouchable and remote to her. Elrohir's renditions of the same adventures, sorrows, and ill-fated lovers took on drama and pathos. Heroes and villains of flesh and blood populated them. As a child she had loved the tales of the Elf-minstrels, who could bring their songs to life before the eyes of those who listen. She doubted the truth of such accounts, but Elrohir surely transmitted raw emotion, a sense of vibrancy and freshness to oft-told tales.

Elrohir's genial and comforting presence reminded Lothíriel of her easy closeness to her brother Amrothos. Yet, strangely, Elladan, so like his brother in appearance, elicited completely opposite and thoroughly disquieting emotions within her. Although she made an earnest effort to stop endlessly cataloging the differences and similarities between the two brothers, she failed dramatically.

"Actually, I was thinking of you. Of how well you sing," she answered.

Elrohir laughed loud. "Elladan thinks you are enamored of Legolas's singing," he said with a smirk.

"Oh, your brother is quite a fool at times. Of course I like our friend's singing. He has a charming voice and loves to sing. I was speaking of a less definable quality that I enjoy in yours."

"Legolas's voice is clearer and purer than mine, a greater natural talent, and he had no formal training, whereas I have had," Elrohir said, without a hint of envy. "Reminds me of a funny story. My father once told me that my singing resembled Maglor."

"Seriously? What a compliment."

"I thought so. So, I asked him if my voice truly resembled Maglor's and he said 'Not at all. There is none that can compare. But you do occasionally capture a similar emotional intensity.'" Elrohir laughed again. "My dreams of being a great singer were crushed, but I also experienced my first, and I think only, moment of unmitigated Noldorin pride."

"That is not such a funny story."

"Oh, there is more. Elladan teased me about it for months. Then when we next saw our grandmother, he asks, 'It is said that Daeron, minstrel to Thingol, was the greatest singer among the Eldar and Maglor second to him. You heard them both. What do you say?' Galadriel answers, 'There can be no argument. Macalaurë was far better.' Then grandfather chokes on his wine laughing."

Lothíriel let loose with a peal of laughter. She noticed that Elladan, several horses ahead of them
down the path, turned to look back. But Elrohir did the voices and intonation of his grandmother and Elladan so well, that she could not spare her attention to fret over his brother at that moment.

"There is still more. It gets worse for me," Elrohir chuckled and continued. "So, Elladan still not satisfied said, 'Ada says that Elrohir sings like Maglor.' Then grandmother gives him this look she has, perhaps you will see it, and says, 'Well, he has not the voice, but he does have a certain vitality.' Ever since then, if he hears anyone compliment my singing, he cracks up laughing and says, 'He does have a certain vitality.'"

Lothíriel could not resist laughing but said, "Elladan is cruel sometimes."

"Not cruel. If one cannot trust one's twin to keep one honest about oneself, who can one trust? Lothíriel, if you wish to make peace with Elladan, you need only ride ahead and speak with him. He will not approach you, for fear of antagonizing you further. I think he will gladly accept any terms of truce that you offer."

"I want to be friends again with Elladan. I dislike this tension. But every conversation between us ends with one of us saying or doing something to anger or upset the other," she answered, surprised at the sadness she heard in her own voice.

"My brother often disturbs me as well." Elrohir laughed. "I know he regrets frightening you away. Being in the presence of the two of you together discomforts our entire party, especially now that it is smaller. Ignoring the proverbial mûmak in the room becomes tiresome."

"I will not apologize," Lothíriel said, looking directly at Elrohir.

"Oh, Lothíriel, when you raise your eyebrows and stick your chin out like that, you look exactly like Arwen when she was young and annoyed." Elrohir laughed and Lothíriel's sensitive Rohirric mare whinnied softly and shook her head as though in defense of her mistress.

Elrohir could not restrain another laugh. "I will not take sides," he said. "You match one another in stubbornness and testiness."

"Do you think that I should speak with him?"

"I think you should do what you want to do. I can assure you he will welcome an overture from you. I think both of you would be less agitated, and easier to be around, if you spoke to him. He is incapable at this point of approaching you—partially injured pride, or perhaps some self-deceptive concept of righteousness."

"Then I will," she said. Giving her mare a little nudge, she moved forward before she could change her mind. She reached Elladan quickly and slowed her horse to walk along side of his.

"Elladan, may I speak with you?" He stiffened. The princess gave a quick smile and what she hoped was a polite nod to the ranger who rode beside him. The Dúnadan returned the gesture and dropped back to permit them privacy, while Elladan and Lothíriel pulled ahead a bit.

"I am listening," he said, inscrutable. His voice rising, he added, "My brother sent you. He fancies himself a peacemaker and meddles in things he does not always understand. Those who love him learned that many yenî ago." The soft humorless laugh he released contained none of the undercurrent of mockery she feared, despite his harsh words.

"He did speak with me, but I am here because I want to be. It grieves me that we cannot talk."

"That is not true. I do speak with you, multiple times a day," he answered.
"Indeed. 'Good morning.' 'Good afternoon.' 'I beg your pardon, my lady.' "Not exactly my idea of amiable discourse." After a pause, she looked directly at Elladan, trying to catch his eye. "This is utter nonsense. I want us to be friends again."

"Were we friends? I do not recall we ever truly were. Be at ease, Lothíriel. I do not need or welcome your sympathy." He returned her look, narrowing his eyes. When she did not look away, he finally sighed and spoke again in a lower and softer voice. "No one ever died of unrequited love—not even Elves—that is artistic drivel invented by minstrels to gain the regard of tenderhearted young women. In any case, I am no true Elf," he said, "Am only a Man, with all of the infuriating, but short-lived passions of one." His laugh already sounded lighter.

As he held her gaze, an errant breeze lifted several stands of black hair blowing them across his face. She resisted with difficulty the desire to brush them aside, to touch his lips. Nothing has changed for me, nor, I think, for him. "You never spoke of love, only of desire."

"No wonder you think so little of me, if you believe I would seek the attention of such a young woman on the basis of lust alone." His expression shaded into seriousness, but tender rather than grim.

Awareness of the controlled sensuality that first drew her to him, swept over her, along with painful memories of the adorable rascal, who had once used polite inanities with her to cover what she viewed as roguish purposes. She struggled against her quick responses to his seductiveness, recalling how easily he captivated her.

"I am not sure what I thought. But I know how I felt." Overwhelmed, terrified and utterly fascinated.

"Second thoughts already, Lothíriel?" he said, leaning closer to her, his silky voice entrancing her.

"No. I accept defeat. My fate is to be ever troubled by my responses to you, but I will accept that discomfort for the sake of your friendship, despite your fraudulent and impertinent denial of its existence," she answered, lifting her chin in defiance of his formidable charm.

"I lied, of course, another peredhil trick. Elves do not lie," he said and, to her surprise, winked. "Friends it will be then." The smile that finally entirely encompassed his pewter eyes was dazzling.

"Friends," she said without relief, but allowing herself a smile. Is this the same arrogant Elf lord, or some other kinder, easier being?

"So, my good friend, does it go well between you and your golden warrior king?" he asked obviously feigning heedlessness.

"Elladan, you do not give me even a five-minute respite." I am certainly not going to tell him now that they could be going better. That would be madness.

"Just testing the boundaries of our reforged friendship," he answered.

"As though you ever recognized boundaries!" she laughed.

"Maybe I can learn. I promise to exercise more self-control and not to pressure or beleaguer you as I have done in the past. However, you must hear me out in return. I still would love you if I could. If you should reconsider, any word or sign would bring me to you. I vow that I will wait for you."

She felt herself blushing, confused and ensnared. "What do you mean wait for me? You would remain celibate?" she managed to choke out. As usual, her curiosity won out over her better judgment.
"That was not what I said, my dear." He threw his head back in an unrestrained laugh. "You and Éomer must be doing well on one level at least. I confess to suffer with unrequited love of you, and your only reaction is to worry if I intend to live without the comforts of the senses: a rather transparent admission of the importance of those to you."

Another flash of heat colored her cheeks, but, relentlessly, she continued. "So, you will not? Do without, I mean." she asked. He laughed again. His laugh was more free and louder than she had heard from him before. He seemed to have tossed aside his ever-guarded pride and Elven reticence.

"Honestly?" he asked.

"Yes."

"No. I doubt that I will remain abstinent. You and I are more alike than you yet know in that regard." His open face and beseeching eyes held her spellbound.

"Ai, Lothíriel, can you still dare to pretend that you do not realize what you do to me? You turn away from me, but never leave me entirely without hope." His voice softened towards the end, making the last word into an almost tangible caress. She shivered and tried to look away.

"What say you to that?" he asked. His elegant, noble countenance was so endearing to her at that moment that it caused her to catch breath audibly. *I must muster some self control*, she thought.

"Honestly?" she asked, mimicking his tone when he had asked the same of her.

"Yes," he answered. He leaned more closely toward her. She turned her head and found her lips but inches from his own.

"Honestly," he said. She wished he would simply kiss her. But, aware of his brother and the Dúnedain who rode with them and her own weakening resolve not to be drawn quickly under his spell again, she turned her face forward away from his.

"You overwhelm me and cause me to feel most conflicted," she said. "Perhaps, I should not have opened up this communication again. I chose to take Elrohir's advice, although I doubted the wisdom of doing so. Do you remember in Minas Tirith, after the ball, you asked me to tell you that I desired you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will say it now. I want you terribly, but, I cannot see where that leaves us," she said. "Is that wrong of me to admit that I want you and yet offer you so little?"

"Are we still playing the honesty game?" he asked.

"Yes," she said more cheerfully.

"Then I will not take advantage of the opening you left for me, *melamin*. Instead, though it may be to my disadvantage, I will tell you the truth," he said, his silver grey eyes tender. She viewed his slightly parted sensual lips with an agony of desire. Lothíriel's heart leapt into her throat. *The truth to his disadvantage. Am I ready for this?*

Taking a long breath, Elladan continued, "But, you must remember that the truth is rarely pure and never simple. I know I missed my opportunity to attempt to win your love by a matter of hours, perhaps a day… but that moment is gone and cannot be recaptured. I lost you."
"If I were Éomer, I would not wish to share your heart with another. What kind of hypocrite would I be to want to try to take what I myself would not wish give? I see when you look at him that you love him. Then, of course, there is duty, commitment, honor...I know the value you place on those. I cannot, would not, compete with all that, nor have anything from you that you do not freely give."

"What are you saying, Elladan?" she whispered, painfully conscious of a nearly irresistible desire to ease his heart, his mind, his body.

"I will take any small gift I can wrest from you: another stolen kiss, a hour in your arms," he paused and looked at her, making her aware of her flushed cheeks. "Or a night of making love to you, to prove to you, or perhaps to myself, that, despite everything, I could bring you ecstasy." His wicked smile both irritated and aroused her. "I would make you remember me at least."

"Oh." She shifted uncomfortably on her horse.

"Is that a yes, a no, a maybe?" he asked, his voice nearly a whisper. His eyebrows arched up and his eyes glinted teasingly.

"Stop it, Elladan," she said, trying to sound gruff, yet unable to stop a smile.

"Ai, melamin, again a tiny smile of hope," he said with a sinful grin.

With more determination she answered, "You are incorrigible. You bring us right back to where we were before, except that you are bolder now than ever."

"The difference is that I entertain no false hope. And we are now more evenly matched. You are more truthful now and no longer quite so innocent," he said.

"Fine then. Have it your way. I admit that I can never win an argument with you," she said laughingly, but she was suddenly terrified at the countless years he hid behind those engagingly youthful features. More evenly matched, indeed, if I ever permitted myself to draw any closer to his blazing glory, I would be burned to ashes in seconds. Could I ever have such courage?"

"I insist we talk of other things. Tell me about Lothlórien. Tell me about Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel."

Elladan joined her laughter. "As you wish, fair lady."

He caught his breath enraptured when Lothíriel turned toward him at the sound of his voice. A completely ingenuous smile widened across her face. With her bright eyes shining, her straight dark hair falling loose down her back, he thought she looked less mortal than Elven. But mortal she is. She does not taste wholly Elven—though her lips are the sweetest I have ever touched. I am a fool to speak as I do. If she gives me half of what I ask, I will be lost. Yet ensnared by his own reckless impetuosity, his desire to push any small advantage, he could not stop himself.

"Lothíriel, before we speak of Lórien, I would ask just one question," he said.

"Of course, what is it?"

"Regarding your ears: they are rather Elvish in appearance. However, the ears of Elves ..." he began lowering his voice. Her expressive face flashed acute embarrassment and irritation,

"Elladan!"

He continued, "... are extremely sensitive to touch. Unlike human ears, the sensitivity is more akin to
"No! That is enough, quite enough for now. I will not answer such a question," she protested.

"Ai! Sweet one, you just did and your answer will haunt my fantasies. Now, what would like to know about Lórien?" She shook her head as though to clear her mind.

"I have heard that Lothlórien has the power to enchant Mortals and leave them ever changed and never again wholly satisfied," Lothíriel said. Elladan noted with satisfaction that her breaking voice and flushed checks revealed she struggled for control of heightened sensibilities.

"Rohirric superstitions of the enchanted land of Dwimordene and its all-powerful sorceress!" He laughed. He then turned serious, looking down to catch her eyes. "Lórien has a powerful affect on everyone who spends time within its borders--Elf, Dwarf, Hobbit and Man--it is true. One departs with a gentle, indescribably lovely sense of loss. But I would not take you there if I did not think the pleasure would far outweigh the pain."

"Elrohir and I feel it as well, even though it is like a second home to us. Others who have visited feel compelled to describe in detail how it has affected them. Legolas is happy to talk--and sing--about it endlessly. I wanted to throttle him that night he was singing songs of the Galadhrim to you," he chuckled. "As for Gimli, do not even open the discussion with him," he snorted.

"I still do not know whether to be excited or terrified."

"Be filled with joyous anticipation," he teased. "I promise to do all that I can to ensure that you appreciate it fully."

Note: "the truth is rarely pure and never simple" belongs to Oscar Wilde, but sounded to me like something Elladan might say.
They halted well before dusk so they could set up camp, care for the horses, and refresh themselves before it grew dark. After Lothíriel led her mare to drink, relieved her of her tack and curried her, she walked a short distance upstream to wash off the dust of the road. She stopped far enough away to be out of sight of the company, but to still able hear the gentle rise and fall of their voices and an occasional crack of laughter from the youngest member of the Dúnedain.

Crouching next to a small, woodland stream in the waning sunlight, Lothíriel dipped a handkerchief in the cool water. She loosened the lacings on the front of her tunic and cleansed her face, neck and chest. Just then the crack of a twig behind her caused her to turn. Elladan stood a few feet from her.

"Either you are a poor woodsman, indeed, or you actually chose to warn me before invading my brief moment of privacy," she scolded.

"Or perhaps I assumed that such an invasion would not be entirely unwelcome." She opened her mouth to respond, but was briefly distracted by the challenge that shone in his eyes offset by the sweet, boyish smile that curved his lips. The sight of him—slender and beautiful before the backdrop of the verdant forest, his dark hair loosened, damp around his temples and forehead—elicited a surprising surge of warmth within her. From Lothíriel's altered perspective his legs appeared even longer and his shoulders broader than she remembered.

Managing to collect herself enough to speak, she asked, "You deal easily in assumptions do you not, Elladan?"

"For which you should be grateful, Lothíriel, since you prefer to not recognize my responses to you, much less your own to me." Quickly closing the distance between them, he dropped to one knee and took the cloth from her hand. He dabbed at the end of her nose. Slapping half-heartedly at his hand, instead of giving him the frown she thought he deserved, she smiled up at him, while permitting him to finish tying her laces.
"Why did you come after me?"

"Lothíriel, has no one told you what an inveterate flirt and a tease you are?"

"What is wrong with me asking you why you were sneaking up on me?" He really is insufferable.

"But I did not sneak up on you. Will it disappoint you if I tell you that I came to tell you that Elrohir has tea ready? Was there something else you would rather hear?" he asked, still grinning.

Lothíriel attempted to sweep by him, hurrying off in the direction of the campsite. She stumbled on a root, stopped and stamped her foot in frustration. Melodic Elven laughter echoed from behind her. Turning abruptly, she blocked his path, causing him to nearly run into her.

"Elladan..." she began.

"You are delightful," he said. "You make me feel half an Age younger at least." He took her by the shoulders and dropped the lightest of kisses upon her partially parted lips. "Elrohir will be annoyed if we do not arrive soon. He is very serious about his tea being appreciated while it is still hot."

Later that evening Elrohir arranged Lothíriel's bedroll lengthwise in front of the fire. He justified its placement by explaining that, among all of them, Lothíriel, least accustomed to sleeping in the wild, needed its heat the most. She thought of telling him that perhaps the Dúnedain suffered more from the evening chill, but did not. The calming sounds and earthy smells of the early summer forest soothed her, but sleep would not come.

Elrohir took the first watch. She would have known exactly where Elladan rested, even if he had not thrown an occasional twig or pebble in her direction, knowing she could not respond. So old and still such a child. The thought that he shared the trait of such Elvish playfulness with her brothers inexplicably comforted her. Finally, his missives ceased. Still awake when his brother returned, she heard Elrohir quietly wake him and Elladan's soft grumbling whispers in response. Only when she heard him leave, did she at last drift into reverie, musing on his beguiling contrast of lightness and darkness.

§ § § §

The temperate breeze that blew Lothíriel's hair across her face rustled golden and yellow leaves beneath a cloudless morning sky. The travelers had at last reached the valley between the great rivers Celebrant and Anduin.

With a easy sweep of his hand, Elladan pointed to the golden splendor of ancient Malloryn and said, "Lothíriel, here we enter the forest of the Galadhrim, the heart of Elvendom in Arda."

"We will have been noticed already. Members of the forest guard will greet us soon. I would not be surprised if Haldir the Marchwarden of Lórien welcomes us personally," he continued.

No sooner than Elladan finished speaking, when three grey-clad, pale blond Elven archers stepped silently from among the trees, accompanied by a tall, strongly built, silver-haired Elf.

"Mae govannen, Elladan! Mae govannen, Elrohir!" the tallest Elf said, his stern, handsome features melting immediately into frank, almost boyish, pleasure at the sight of them. "We have received reports of your progress for two days now."
Both Elrohir and Elladan slid gracefully from their mounts to greet and embrace him.

"We thought of you and yours many times over the past weeks, Haldir," said Elrohir.

"It is gratifying to find you unharmed," Elladan said, completing his brother's thought. "And your brothers, how do they fare?"

"They are sound. Your safety has been in our thoughts as well," Haldir responded, grasping first one and then the other of the brothers in a warrior's hand clasp.

Nodding in the direction of Lothíriel, Haldir said "Mae govannen, my lady," with a solemn quizzical smile.

"Mae govannen, Haldir of Lórien. I am Lothíriel of Dol Amroth. It is an honor and a privilege to visit your renowned wood."

"My lady, the honor is mine," Haldir said. "I am sorry if I was staring. I was told to expect a princess of the Edain, but..."

Lothíriel laughed, "No, apologies, please, Haldir. My father, brothers, and I often hear that we appear not wholly of the Secondborn. My good friend Legolas Thranduilion assures me that he for one is certain that we have Elven blood."

"Legolas is well, my lady?" Haldir asked.

"He is. Having passed through great trials, he enjoys, for the moment at least, some well-deserved rest. Please call me Lothíriel if I may call you Haldir," Lothíriel said. She slipped to her feet and patted her mare's neck, murmuring soft endearments in the horse's ear in the way of the Rohirrim and the Elves.

Turning her attention back to Haldir, Lothíriel said, "I feel enchantment in the air, the trees, and even the sounds of the forest. It is like walking into a vision."

"It has not yet begun to fade," said Haldir, his brow wrinkling momentarily.

§ § § §

As the last rays of strong sunlight glimmered through the trees, they arrived in the center of the Elven city of Caras Galadhon. The illustrious City of Trees appeared far larger than Lothíriel expected and, to her amazement, even more magical and dreamlike.

Lothíriel, Elladan and Elrohir climbed the long winding stairs leading to the chamber of the Lord and Lady of Lórien at the top of a giant Mallorn. When they finally reached a wide platform they paused in front of a doorway covered by light shimmering drapes. Points of lights flickered on throughout the darkening leaves looking as though the stars had come down from the heavens to rest among them. Lothíriel was suddenly conscious of her dusty riding clothes. She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and raised her chin reflexively.

"Come along," Elladan said, "I assure you they do not bite." She saw that he took a mischievous pleasure in detecting the cracks in her usually unflappable assurance. She forgave him instantly when
he took her hand, placed it through the crook of his elbow, and covered it warmly with his own.

"Remember, they are only our grandparents, and indulgent ones at that," Elrohir said.

When the three entered the chamber, both Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel stood to greet them. Elrohir and Elladan immediately approached them and were pulled in turn into strong embraces by each of their grandparents.

Lothíriel waited quietly. She still felt slightly flustered by her own travel-worn garb and less than pristine appearance, but dismissed the emotion quickly. Galadriel and Celeborn showed no squeamishness at all in embracing their grandsons, grimy and smelling of horse.

The extraordinarily handsome visage of the silver-haired Lord and the radiant fairness of the Lady of the famed tresses of multi-colored gold were beyond merely beautiful; they were stunningly complimentary. *He is impossibly perfect, but with an edge of the earthly. No light of Aman on this ancient Elf, but his own natural luminescence outshines even that of Legolas.* On the other hand, the slightly eerie glow of Valinor about Galadriel was unmistakable to Lothíriel and more than a little disconcerting.

Seeing them reminded her of her first impressions of Legolas and the twins, so splendid and yet so alien. She mused that if she had grown so accustomed to them that she could adapt to Galadriel and Celeborn as well. The legendary Lord and Lady of the Golden Wood were simultaneously more and less than she expected. They seemed less imperious, but warmer, more vital, and, despite what she had heard, approachable.

Celeborn studied her with a hint of teasing in his smile, reminiscent of his grandsons. Galadriel, more direct, met her eyes with a bold, unconcealed, feminine curiosity. Lothíriel’s first impulse upon finding herself face-to-face with the Elven couple was to drop into a deep, formal Gondorian curtsey, but she reassessed the situation. *They stand to greet us. This is nothing like a court of Men.* She wondered if perhaps Aragorn's impatience with the stiff ceremony and protocol practiced by Mortal nobility manifested traces of his Elven sensibilities.

Instead of performing the obsequious gesture of deference, she placed her hand over her heart, inclined her head slightly in imitation of the far less formal, shallow Elven bow. She always had admired its concise elegance when she watched Legolas or the twins execute it. *I hope this is properly done by a female.* She was relieved with her choice when she saw the Lord and Lady's welcoming smiles widen and discerned glances of encouragement from Elladan and Elrohir.

"Welcome to Caras Galadhon, Lothíriel of Belfalas," Celeborn said.

"Come closer, Princess Lothíriel," Galadriel said, extending both her hands. "Sit next to me."

"Thank you, Lady Galadriel, Lord Celeborn," Lothíriel answered, allowing the Lady to take her hands, "I am overwhelmed-to meet you, to be here. This land is like a reflection of my dreams or nearly forgotten treasured memories brought suddenly to life."

"Young lady, your speech will entrance my husband as it mirrors the accent and inflection of his roots," Galadriel said. "We received a letter of introduction to you from Aragorn."

Lothíriel felt herself blushing. "King Elessar knows me rather too well, my lady."

"He said nothing unkind," Galadriel said, her eyes softening with affection. "He recommended you
to us as the highest ranking woman in Gondor, noting only that your father is the ruling Prince of Dol Amroth of Belfalas and that you are betrothed to the King of Rohan."

Switching to High Elvish Galadriel asked, "Do you speak my native tongue as well?"

"Yes, my Lady, I value it greatly and have studied it so that I may read the ancient lore," she answered carefully in High Elvish with the slightest Sindarin lilt.

"You speak it exceptionally well," Galadriel said approvingly. "And I would guess by looking at you that your mother is of Silvan or Sindarin heritage."

Lothíriel could not control a glance in the direction of the brothers. Uncharacteristically it was Elladan who registered surprise, with his eyebrows arching up and his mouth dropping open slightly, while Elrohir's face remained impassive.

"I did not know my mother, Lady Galadriel. My father still grieves her loss and speaks little of her," Lothíriel said. She felt the light touch of the Lady upon her mind and opened herself to her with only the slightest trepidation.

Lord Celeborn, looked from his grandsons to Lothíriel, and said, "It grows late. You traveled far and hard these last few days. Tomorrow is soon enough for you to be greeted properly. Others are arriving as we speak and all will be as tired from travel as you are. Arwen, in particular, will be eager to see you, but you must refresh yourselves and rest tonight."

"Yes, Elladan, Elrohir, go now and bathe and change. We will see that Lothíriel is shown to her lodgings shortly." Each of the brothers kissed Galadriel, then Celeborn and quickly rose to leave. Elladan stopped at doorway, looking as though he wanted to speak, before turning and following his brother.

"Please accept my apologies, Lothíriel," Galadriel said smiling. "I did not realize that my grandsons did not know that you are half-elven. My powers are not as strong as they once were. I am still accustoming myself to their diminishment."

"My lady's penchant for speaking her mind rivals my own, which is unfortunately notorious," Celeborn said, a comforting smile parting his lips.

"Let us offer you a light refreshment before you leave and you can tell more about yourself. I also received a charming letter from Legolas mentioning, among other things, that you are young and I should look after you," Galadriel said.

§ § §

At twilight, Lothíriel, having bathed and eaten, walked alone, lost in the enchantment of the wondrous trees, thinking of her conversation with the Lord and Lady, when she heard the sound of a footfall, and a familiar voice. "I have been looking for you," said Elladan.

She turned to Elladan who appeared astonishingly beautiful to her eyes under the rapidly fading light shining through the canopy of the Malloryn. She would never again be able to look upon his face without seeing Celeborn in the curve of his jaw, in the arch of his high, sculpted cheekbones. "Thank you for showing me all of this," she said quietly, taking his hands and pulling him close to her.
"I wish I could accept your gratitude, but I cannot. You may thank Estel for sending you here when we return to the White City. What did Galadriel want to speak with you about?"

"Things I have never discussed with anyone before..."

"But that you will tell me, I hope," Elladan said.

"Does my family history really matter to you? It is respectable I assure you, if somewhat unusual, although not as illustrious as yours." She looked up into his face, her eyes wide and questioning.

"It matters not at all to me what the answer to the mystery of you is. But I would know everything about you, since I have asked myself who and what you are since the first day I saw you."

"And I would tell, especially since you ask so nicely and look at me that way," she answered, reaching up to touch his cheek and softly kissing him, for the first time on her own initiative. "But it is hard to speak of it. Do you know what it is like to always wonder who you are and why you are different?"

"Of course, I know, sweetheart. I have never known who or what I was, although I did have a brother and sister who felt exactly the same way," he said, laughing.

"How silly of me not to have seen that. My brothers never seemed troubled. They always appeared to me to be perfectly happy to be who they were."

"Like my father I suppose. Wait until you meet him. He feels far more surely Elven and yet looks more of the Edain than any of his children. So did my grandmother confront you with some knowledge heedlessly and without regard for your readiness to hear it?" he said, feeling a familiar irritation with what he perceived as Galadriel's often imperious manner.

"No. It was not like that at all. She first apologized for surprising me and then told me that she knew immediately that I was at least half-Elven. I presumed you knew as much as I did, if not more. But you looked shocked when she spoke. Legolas has dropped hints to me that he knew something of my heritage since I met him." Elladan moved closer to her, taking her by the waist with both hands.

"He liked to speculate. But I avoided talking about you with Legolas. I feared you liked him too well," Elladan said. She laughed shaking her head as though in disbelief. "That surprises you?" he asked.

"Frankly, yes. I am flattered yet mistrustful of such declarations. You always hold the upper hand with me."

"I would have had you think that, but it never has been true. I will not push like Galadriel. You may tell me what you wish, when you wish," he whispered into Lothíriel's ear and then ran his tongue slowly over its tip.

"Elladan, how wicked. I have told you how that feels," she gasped in mock complaint, while encircling his waist with her arms and pulling him hard against her.

"No, Lothíriel. I well remember that you mulishly refused to admit it."

He studied her as though he could read the future there, or as though she contained a new lesson he
must learn, but he saw only the same well-memorized features that he had studied so many times over the last few months, smiling up at him tenderly. He took her face between his hands, kissed her, opening his lips gradually as she responded to him, and then pulled away. He heard a tiny protesting moan over the distant sound of fair Elven voices raised in song.

"Lothíriel, I must confess that my plan was to let you wander alone for an hour beneath these blessed trees. I wanted to let the magic wrought by Nenya and the music of the Galadhrim seduce you for me. Then I would find you and make you mine. My intent was that you would never forget this night or me," he whispered. "But now I find I cannot continue. I can only take you with your eyes open and your full consent."

"Elladan, Elladan, you dim Elf-man. Look at me. Are not my eyes wide open? Do you not leave me breathless with a single chaste kiss? Have I not suffered enough from your black moods, your arrogance, and your haunted ancient eyes? Do not deny that you knowingly twist my heart with your every smile?" she said. Her voice, silky with its slight Belfalas accent, which always held for him a hint of the erotic, dropped lower than before but remained clear and resolute.

"Lothlórien is our place and this is our night, Elladan," she said her voice filled with rapture.

"Yes, melamin, then we will share this night," he whispered.

His heart clenched in his chest as a soft whimper escaped her as his lips took hers again.

"I must have you," he said grabbing her shoulders roughly, the tremor in his voice revealing the intensity of barely restrained passion.

"You will be mine, for tonight at least," he added. "And, of course, you can have whatever you want of me," he said.

"Then I will take all of you," she answered. She moved her hands under his tunic onto his chest.

"What would you have of me first?" he asked.

"I want to look at you," she answered surely. He held her eyes with his, as he pulled his tunic over his head and dropped it onto the mossy ground.

"Ai, vanimelda, I fear I am not so interesting to look upon. I think you must be far more fascinating."

She moved closer to him and rubbed her cheek against his warm bare chest. She kissed and tasted his skin. He exhaled sharply. "Elladan, I can hardly believe that anyone can have skin so smooth, you are surely the most beautiful of all the Firstborn of Ilúvatar."

"Lothíriel," he answered quietly, smiling again, as he looked into her face, luminous now with the first moonlight.

She touched one small plait of several that began at his temple, while her other hand caressed the tip of his ear. "Let us sit on the grass. I would unbraid your hair." He caught his breath at the simple perceptive intimacy of both gestures.

"You surprise me, Lothíriel, that you know so much of Elves."

"I know only you, Elladan, but I can deduce what may arouse you. You know the Knights of Dol
Amroth wear the same braids, but only for battle. You have seen my brothers. Sit." She pulled him down onto the grass facing away from her between her legs. "May I undo your hair?"

"It would please me greatly," he answered. "We call them warrior braids. What name do you have for them in Dol Amroth?"

"We call them the same. But in Minas Tirith they are considered strange, foreign, and are referred to as Elf locks," she laughed.

"Elves consider unbraiding another's hair among the most personal of attentions," he said shivering under her ministrations.

"Humpf. In Dol Amroth it is thought completely wanton for a girl to do this for a man who not her close kinsman or husband. I hope you appreciate my offer."

"Ai, Lothíriel, you combine the innocence of a child, with the most seductive manner."

He leaned his head back to look up at her, seeing that her eyes sparkled. With unshed tears?

"Hardly so innocent anymore. But you accept me as I am?" she asked. Her hands dropped to her sides.

"You realize you hurt me before in Minas Tirith," Elladan said, stroking her cheek.

"You frightened me. Overwhelmed me. And Éomer was there," she said, her voice dropping so low he strained to hear her.

"You thought making love to Éomer would drive me from your thoughts, did you?" He turned around, knelt between her legs, now looking down into her face. I did not intend to start this discussion.

"In the end it was his idea, although I suggested it before," her voice lifted. Struggling to sound straightforward?

"Then he thought it would make you forget me? And did it?"

"What do you think? For the moment! But then when I saw you after that, it was oft times worse."

Lothíriel moved as though to stand up, but he put his arms around her and held her close to his chest, buried his face in her hair.

"Ai, curiosity built on experience, rather than longing based in innocence," he said in a low voice.

"Elladan, you can be so cruel to me," she said, "I thought you cared for me." He thought that she sounded as if she felt less judged than unfairly punished by his words.

"I have told you that I love you," he said, feeling as petulant as a child. He let go of her and turned back around, again facing away from her. "Please finish what you started. There is one more braid. The large one in the back."

Completely ignoring his grumpiness, she returned to unplafting his hair. "There--the last one. That must feel better now," she said, massaging his scalp and running her fingers through his hair, as he
sighed in appreciation. "Elladan, your hair falls down your back so long and shiny."

He laughed and pulled her down to lie next to him on the grass. "It is identical to your own." She continued to play with his hair.

"No. You have more of it and yours is not so fine," she said, laughing back at him. He brought one hand to her hair and stroked it, to test her assertion.

"Does that feel as good to you as it does to me?" she breathed.

"Open your mind to me and you will know and can stop asking silly questions," he said.

"You had only to ask, oh wise Elf-man. I did not want to be forward."

Elladan pulled her into an impassioned kiss, leaving her breathless and him surprised at his own urgent need. Suddenly the bright wave of her fëa surged upon him, flowing with her tenderness and desire, but with a steely core. *Yours is a frighteningly powerful fëa, young one.*

"And you, Elladan, are nothing like the charming Elf princes of every young girl's daydreams. You are far too male, dangerous, flawed, and terrifyingly irresistible."

Lightly tracing her fingertips across his lips, she said, "Those who claim that Elves are more ethereal, less sensual than Mortals, or less capable of erotic transport, have been fooled by that exterior of pale, seemingly bloodless, perfection, and certainly have never been kissed by you."

"You talk too much," he said, his voice low and hoarse. He sat up and swiftly undid the fastenings at the back of her gown. He pushed it down past her waist and pulled her to him again, bare skin against bare skin.

The feel of the defined muscles of Elladan's broad chest, his smooth pale skin, luminescent in the moonlight, his strong arms holding her firmly affected her far more strongly than she might have imagined. Thoroughly enchanted yet overwhelmed half with fear and half astonished joy, she shuddered in his longed-for embrace, speechless at last.

"Now, I will torture you with words, my love, as you torment me," he said. He proceeded to whisper into her ear, in deliciously explicit terms, numerous ways he would give her pleasure. He began to describe, among increasingly inflated claims, that he knew things that would drive her crazy with desire, that would surprise and amaze her, that Elves could last longer than Men and recuperate sooner, even peredhil, or, he amended, especially peredhil. She remained stubbornly self-possessed and he valiantly restrained, although not without labored breathing on both their parts, until they both broke down into helpless laughter.

Suddenly his hands, lips, his tongue seemed to be everywhere. She met him with equal fervor. He kissed her softly on her eyelids, on her breasts. A kiss on her mouth was hard. He parted her lips with his tongue, exploring, probing, caressing.

His hands moved over her, tender yet playful one moment, the next firm, demanding, ardent, but ever generous. *Oh Elladan, I was born for your touch, for you* He moved his body over hers, guiding her thighs apart, poised to enter her.

*Oh, yes, Lothiriel, touch me. Like that, yes. Please wait, slower, stop, or I will finish too soon. Yes, that is sublime.*
"Please, please do not stop. I must feel you inside of me," she said, moaning softly as he entered her and again with each inward thrust. Her breath against his ear made it difficult for him not to become instantly undone. But Elladan was resolute and Elvish in his endurance. *You move with me so perfectly. No woman has ever opened her body, her heart, to me so unconditionally. I love this, love you . . .*

She sensed that he approached his peak. She moved her head so that her mouth met his, then cupped his chin in her hand, and locked her gaze onto his silver eyes. But he held her look only for a moment before he let his eyelids flicker shut. Moving faster, he allowed his need to conquer his restraint, saying, "Come for me now, my love."

Elladan fought to control the urge to bind himself to her. Only his fear that he would pull her with him held him back. At the last possible moment before he climaxed, he barricaded himself from her. *She is far too Elven. This is a dangerous game I play,* he thought. Then he tenuously, gently reestablished communication with her, fairly certain she did not discern the break.

In the aftermath of their passion, Elladan held her firmly against him, overcome by the heartbreaking certainty that they would not be able to easily leave this night behind them. He knew she felt it too, but in her youthful brashness chose not to ponder the consequences.

Instead, she grasped his face in her hands, said, "I love seeing you like this-out of breath and sweating. Completely done in . . . Your face is all splotchy and red. Your hair is everywhere. What a tangled mess. My image of you as a perfect superior Elf lord is gone forever. If you could only see your face."

His heart was still pounding. He wanted to speak and could not. Finally, he asked, as lightly as he could manage, "You wish to remember me like this?"

She nuzzled closer to him, burying her face between his neck and shoulder. She murmured, "I want to hold this memory of you always."

Then Lothíriel reach up, grabbed a fistful of tousled hair, and playfully pulled his head back looking into his astounding grey eyes, at his flushed handsome face.

He grinned and said, "Good. Then we will imprint it on your memory with indelible Elven clarity before we leave Lothlórien."

"Yes. How will we do that?" she asked.

He responded, almost self-assured again, "How else? Through frequent repetition, of course." Then a shadow passed over his spirit. "Time has little meaning here. All else seems far away. I intend to make the most of it before we must leave and everything alters for us."

Despite it being a glorious summer night, Lothíriel shivered. *Melethron-nín, just hold me. Now you talk too much.* Her lips touched his cheek. Her hand smoothed his tumbled hair.

It was late when Elladan accompanied Lothíriel back to talan that had been prepared for her use.

"Do not leave me alone. I am afraid," she said suddenly.

"Shhh, Lothíriel. I do not intend to leave you tonight, or any night while we are here. What do you
fear, little one? We are as close to Elvenhome as one can be in Arda. Nowhere could you be safer," he said, enfolding her in his arms.

"I am afraid of leaving here. And, earlier, the first time we made love, you closed yourself off from me. I fear losing you. I fear I may have lost Éomer already," she whispered.

"I did that to protect you and only for a moment. I promise that you will never lose me, not even when you leave me, as I know you must. As for Éomer, I know you have not lost him. He believes strongly that the two of you share a destiny," he sighed. "I think that you and I do as well, although I do not understand what it may be yet."

Hours later in the treetop talan, Elladan held Lothíriel quietly in his arms, first telling her stories, then whispering endearments, and finally singing, almost to himself, songs of the Galadhrim.

When she slept at last, Elladan leaned over and softly kissed her forehead, thanking all the Valar for the gift of this ineffable bittersweet joy. He spooned his body against hers, holding her as closely as he could. Before passing into his own reverie, he murmured, "The world is changing and I have changed already."
A gentle tap on the doorpost awakened Elladan a few short hours later. The sound did not permeate the consciousness of the deeply sleeping princess. Elladan pushed aside the diaphanous hangings at the door.

A serious-faced Elf-maid with merry eyes greeted him, “Good morning, Lord Elladan. I am sorry to disturb your rest. My Lord and Lady sent me to your rooms to ask you to join them for breakfast and beg that you invite the Princess of Dol Amroth. When I reported that I did not find you there, they instructed me to come directly here and fetch the princess.”

“Thank you, Tórasin. Please tell them you found me and that I will be along shortly,” Elladan said.

“Your sister and brother are already there,” she said with just a hint of a smile. He rolled his eyes expressively. “Your father also has arrived, but he will not join you until later.”

“Thank you again,” he answered. *No time for a bath, no time for braids.* He hurriedly dressed and set off for his own quarters, where he freshened up, using what water he could find, and donned fresh clothes.

Elladan found Galadriel, Celeborn, Elrohir and Arwen gathered around an elegantly set but rustic table in the small garden where his grandmother preferred to breakfast.

“You could not find Princess Lothíriel?” Arwen asked with patently insincere virtuousness.

“Good morning everyone,” Elladan said. “I am afraid you will have to meet the princess later, Arwen. She has had too little sleep and I had not the heart to wake her.” He shrugged his shoulder insouciantly, a familiar signal to his sister that he would not be provoked.

“Here, my dear,” Galadriel said, handing him a cup of tea. “You, however, are looking very well today—so youthful without your braids. Now, indulge your sister’s curiosity. I told her that I only met the princess briefly. Your brother deferred to you, as well, claiming that you know her much better than he does.”

“Best to get it over with, so we can speak of other things,” Celeborn said widening his eyes in
sympathy in the direction of his oldest grandson. “It seems Estel also wrote a few lines to Arwen mentioning her, which raised more questions than they answered.”

Without even taking a breath, Elladan said, “She is betrothed to the King of Rohan. She is very young, but competent. She has run her father’s households in Dol Amroth and Minas Tirith for some years and worked in the Houses of Healing during the War. She has a worthy father and three strapping brothers, fine warriors all. Faramir, the new Steward of Gondor, Lord Boromir’s brother, is her first cousin. Her entire family counts itself among Estel’s staunchest supporters. Now, Galadriel informs us she is also half-elven.

"What more do you want to know, Arwen?” he asked, but not waiting for an answer continued, “She is beautiful. Speaks Elvish as her mother tongue and is learned without being bookish. She is frank and funny. Do not worry; you will like her.”

Four pairs of eyes fixed on him and he held their gaze, determined not to flinch under their scrutiny. Finally, after a long silence, Arwen spoke, “Do not play the fool with me, Elladan. What is she to you?”

After a pregnant pause, Elladan reached out and took his sister’s hand tenderly, meeting her eyes beseechingly, “Truly, Arwen, I do not know.”

“You love her,” Arwen stated.

“Arwen, it is hard that I have found someone that I might love only a bit too late. Please do not be judgmental,” he answered, looking not at his sister but to his grandfather, as though Celeborn might hold the solution to the troubles of his heart.

“What of King Éomer of Rohan?” Celeborn asked in a low, deliberately mild voice.

Elladan turned to his grandfather, “He is an admirable young man and intends to make her his queen. His soldiers in Minas Tirith respected her and Edoras received her well.”

“From her time in the Houses of Healing, no doubt,” Galadriel mused.

“He has not told you the half of Éomer,” Elrohir added, dropping his shoulders demonstratively and sighing. “He resembles a young Glorfindel—all blinding golden radiance and valor, but, in his case, coupled with the compelling intensity of his mortality. He is charismatic and adored by his people. He promises to be well qualified to lead his country ably into the new Age. Only Estel and Prince Imrahil, dozens of years his senior, surpass him in the respect he holds within the Armies of the West. If you had seen Lothíriel and Éomer together, you would truly wonder how Elladan would presume to interfere…”

“Elrohir, I accept that Lothíriel will be queen of Rohan. I know she loves Éomer,” Elladan said impatiently, tossing the sweet roll he held in his hand onto his plate. “I have lost my appetite.”

“For your breakfast?” Celeborn asked, with a dry smile.

“Enough of this for now,” Galadriel said in a silky, soothing tone. “Let him have a few days of peace. Stranger things have been resolved to good effect.”

Elladan slumped in his chair, but made no move to leave the company of his family.
“Or tragic effect,” Elrohir muttered.

“Estel asks me to befriend her,” Arwen said.

“You will not find that difficult. Elladan is right. She is a good sort. Unpretentious,” Elrohir said. “Legolas was quite taken aback when he first met Prince Imrahil, so Elven does he appear. The origins of her family are lost in myth. No one in Gondor seems to know the true history. Then last night grandmother asserts, to all of our surprise and that of the young woman as well, that she is half-Elven.”

“I know a bit of the history,” Galadriel said. “Celeborn does also. The heirs of Dol Amroth have numerous predecessors among Elvenkind. Most of them his distant kinsmen.”

“Strange. She has black hair. She quite resembles our sister in appearance. In fact, she is the exact type that Arwen was on the cusp of her maturity. Uncommonly tall, pretty, slim, small-breasted,” Elrohir added.

“That is her Númenórean blood, I would guess,” Galadriel commented. “I sense no Noldor in her background. I speculate Sindar or Silvan. She does, however, strikingly resemble an Elleth I once knew well.”

“Sounds as though you have done your research, grandmother,” said Elrohir.

“No at all. I have an excellent memory. Remember your grandfather and I spent quite some yenî in that area before coming here,” Galadriel said.

“Are all of you intent on driving me away from my breakfast?” Elladan sulked. “Can you speak of nothing else? You sound like naturalists discussing different varieties of tree frog.”

“He is right, my dear,” Celeborn addressed his wife, “You say ‘enough’ and then you go on and on. Elladan needs to eat. He has been traveling for days.”

Elladan laughed, shrugging his shoulder and shaking his head. “Ai, the joys of family, but I expected nothing less. Let us speak of Arwen’s plans for a while. That is usually distracting. How long may we rest before we must set off again? How is Ada faring these days, sister?”

“Does Ada have to hear of your speculation about Elladan and his princess while we are here?” Arwen asked, anxiously looking around the table.

“Arwen, later,” Celeborn said warningly, leaning to place his hand comfortingly on Elladan’s knee.

§ § § §

After Elrohir and Elladan left to look in on Lothíriel, Celeborn, Galadriel and Arwen remained at the table.

Arwen looked at her grandfather pleadingly, willing him to comfort her. Celeborn, as though he read her thoughts, spoke. “Arwen, you are overwrought. You cannot single-handedly protect your father, your brothers, and Estel from every exigency of daily life. Much less, will your heavy-handed needling of Elladan result in any lessening of his predicament.”

“You coddle him. You call a ‘predicament’ what others might consider a potentially damaging
scandal. I am worried. Estel said little, but I read between the lines that he is troubled. And what of Ada? How will he react?” Arwen asked, allowing herself to become increasingly emotional. “Did you see Elladan’s face when he admitted that he loves her?”

“Elladan sought your compassion. As for Elrond, he must find his own peace, Arwen. If you believe that knowledge of this liaison will cause him to fear that Elladan will not leave these shores, you should know that he has long wondered if either of your brothers could ever bring themselves to leave Arda,” Celeborn answered.

“He has?” Arwen asked surprised. “He never told me that.”

“It wearies me at times how everyone is so overcome with sympathy for Elrond. None of you seem to have any concern to spare for how I will fare leaving all of you behind me,” Galadriel said. Celeborn sighed, took her hand, and kissed it tenderly.

“You decide for yourself as always, my love. Whereas Elrond once again has had his fate presented to him,” said Celeborn. Arwen sighed. Must they always drag us into the middle of their endless sparring.

“That is your version, husband,” Galadriel said, placing the subtlest pejorative emphasis on the final word. She jerked her hand free of his, but then relented and placed it on his thigh.

“Your father did not want to add to the burden of your choice,” said Celeborn, turning his attention back to Arwen. “As for Elladan, I have had greater fear that he would never know love. It is far preferable to experience love than not, whatever pain may come with it.”

“What does he see in this young girl?” Arwen asked puzzled.

“Why he is attracted to a child of Moriquendi refugees and Númenórean nobility? Perhaps he mirrors the females of this family in his taste,” Celeborn said with a chuckle.

“Possibly he is attracted to her Elvishness, or to her humanity, or, more likely yet, the mixture of the two. He may feel less alien with her than he has with others who have sought to win his heart,” Galadriel speculated.

“Perhaps, but Elrohir also told me that they bicker and argue all the time,” Arwen said. At that remark, her grandparents exchanged knowing, affectionate looks, which Arwen did not miss.

“The two of you are impossible. The relentless airing of every petty disagreement is not a sign that two individuals are well-matched. Your marriage has been a strong one, despite that, not because of it,” Arwen exclaimed.

“Whatever you say, dear. You are the expert,” Galadriel replied with saccharine sweetness.

“So tell us, Arwen. What exactly did Estel ask of you in his letter?” Celeborn asked.

“He only said that my ‘generosity’ and ‘humor’ would be useful in coping with the two of them,” Arwen said with chagrin.

“You will have to retrace your steps a bit to achieve that, my sweet one. But I have complete confidence in you. I do have a feeling that there may be a future in this unlikely relationship, although what that may be is not obvious to us now,” Galadriel said.

“From whence comes this foresight, grandmother? Have you seen portents or omens?” Arwen asked. Celeborn turned his head away from Arwen, stifling a chuckle, which gained him a glare
from his wife.

Galadriel answered, “Nothing of the sort. I observed a novel forbearance on the part of Elladan in the face of your hectoring and that of his brother. He looks rather well these days and I liked the young lady. They seem comfortable together and genuinely fond of one another, well beyond the margins of unguarded passion alone—not the usual earmarks of a tragic love affair.”

“Come along, Arwen. Show me how your gown is coming on,” Galadriel said rising. “Elladan will bring the princess to meet you shortly and then you can form your own opinions. Please try to remember what it is like to be young and exercise some patience. According to Elrohir, she flirts with everyone, even Estel. I well recall that you had the same failing when you were young.”

§ § § §

Elrohir and his brother stopped at the foot of the Mallorn that held Lothíriel’s talan. No sound but birdsong and the muffled ruffle of wind through leaves reached Elrohir’s ears.

“Would you like to go up and fetch her? I will wait here,” he said.

“I promise I will not be long,” said Elladan, his face lightening.

“Try not to be. Ai, what am I thinking. I know better than to place any credence in that pledge,” Elrohir said, cocking his head to one side. “I will accompany you since the morning grows old.”

“Suit yourself, brother,” Elladan said, climbing the winding staircase, his long legs taking two steps at a time. Elrohir followed him. When Elladan pulled aside the curtain that hung in the doorway of the room, Lothíriel opened her eyes and held out her arms to him.

“Elladan,” she said smiling winsomely. Elladan moved quickly to the bed, straddled her on top of the sheets, knees on either side of her thighs, and pulled her up into his arms.

“Good morning,” he said.

Elrohir shook his head in reluctant indulgence at the sight of the two of them. He wanted to be annoyed with his brother, but was unable to control his sympathy at the sight of his brother’s unabashed naturalness, the like of which he had not seen in Elladan since before the loss of their mother.

“Good morning, princess. I am glad I followed you up here, Elladan. You obviously would have stayed too long,” Elrohir said. “You will have time for all that later. Hurry now. There are those who want to meet you, Lothíriel. My sister, in particular, is most curious.”

“Your sister and father have arrived?” Lothíriel asked, her voice rising in anticipation. “Oh, she could not possibly be as curious as I am.” She fidgeted under Elladan, trying to slide out from under him without loosing the sheets that covered her.

“See what you have done,” Elladan complained cheerfully. “I did not even get a good morning kiss.” Elrohir watched fascinated as she somehow did manage to squirm free of his brother and pull herself into a seated position, clutching the sheet to cover her breasts.

“I think I can get dressed faster if both of you leave.” She paused then to plant a brief, but forceful, kiss on Elladan’s mouth.

Elladan shrugged and, smiling, joined his brother in the doorway. “We will be at the bottom of the stairs if you need anything.”
Instead of walking down the stairs, Elladan, in a manner that would not have reflected poorly on Legolas, grabbed an overhead branch, swung himself to within reach of a stronger lower one and dropped onto it. He lowered himself into a squatting position, gripped the limb with both hands and dropped himself to land with catlike grace on the ground. Walking sedately down the rustic set of stairs, Elrohir watched his brother, while heaving a heartfelt sigh, noting that he had not seen his brother execute such a stunt since they were youth—at least not without life or death motivation.

In the bright sunlight, the forest seemed spectacularly beautiful but not nearly as mysterious and lost in the time of the Elder days as it appeared the evening before. Elrohir thought for a moment that it almost could have been no more than one of the most beautiful woodlands in Arda if one did not look up at Malloryn. No, he thought, the grass is too brilliantly green, fine and level. Everywhere he looked, he saw something, like the smattering of the blossoms of elanor and niphredil at his feet or the perfect cloudless sky above, which revealed the enhanced beauty of their surroundings.

For a fleeting moment, Elrohir wished that they had not come to Lothlórien. He knew of how Lórien could enchant and captivate, driving away quotidian cares and concerns. He had not recently experienced that to any perceptible degree, so familiar was this place to him from his earliest childhood. However, on that day, it seemed to him that Lothíriel and Elladan existed in an alternate universe, removed from and out of kilter with the ordinary course of their lives.

Elrohir mused that neither he nor Elladan, nor Lothíriel for that matter, had ever experienced a life that was in any way commonplace. Maybe the unreachable hope, well beyond the range of their expectations, would be to simply love and be loved without it always being wrapped up in a weighty shroud of epic drama and destiny. One can almost smell that as a possibility in an Arda freed of the Shadow. But we have not reached that point yet.

He pondered the fact that Lothíriel, now so childishly impetuous, but intelligent, sensual, self-assured, was destined to become a beloved queen of Rohan and worthy consort to the young man who conceivably could become Rohan’s most illustrious warrior king.

Éomer undoubtedly will rank among the heroes of an Age. What possible role can my brother have in that? I hope this is not some Fëanorian misstep that will leave Elladan outside of the rhythm of his fate. Perhaps, there is a chance it is not, but instead this is compensation from the Varda for yeni of effort and sacrifice with little thought of himself. But, if that is the case, it would be paltry thanks indeed if it is to be but a few short days in Lothlórien.

But Elladan and I must return to help Estel secure and defend his reign, while we all engage in the work of reclamation and restoration of Arda. I hope this interlude will restore my brother’s spirits rather than crushing his heart.

At that moment, Lothíriel appeared at the doorway of the talan, smiling and eager. She skipped down the steps and grabbed Elladan by both hands.

“One more detail and we will be ready. Sit beneath me on the steps, Elladan. I will quickly braid your hair. I do not want you to meet your father after all of these months looking as though you made love all night,” she said grinning.

Elrohir groaned, but could not summon the appropriate impatience, overridden as it was by the look the simple contentment he read in his brother’s eyes when Elladan looked up and smiled at the princess.

§ § § §

When they reached the secluded garden where the rest family had gathered, they stood for a second
or two before the others, who all seemed to be talking at once, acknowledged them. Lothíriel had the briefest chance to consider the four older Elves before they turned to her.

Her first glimpse of Elrond completely overwhelmed Lothíriel. Anyone who had studied history and lore had heard of the noble Elven-lord Elrond. She learned as child of how he had been sent by Gil-Galad, the last High King of the Noldor, to lead the attack on Sauron in Eregion. She knew he was the founder of the Elven enclave of Imladris and that he had been a great warrior and commander second only to Gil-Galad on the battlefields in the War of the Last Alliance.

Elrond was known even in these days, along with Celeborn and Galadriel, as the wisest and most powerful of the Eldar left on Arda. Lothíriel had cultivated a precise expectation of what he would be like and it fell wide of the mark.

She believed he would be fairer than fair, more Elven than his sons, and, above all, intimidating. Instead, if anything, he was far more human. Handsome he was, indeed. He surpassed Celeborn in fairness—yet more intense, a spirit of fire rather than starlight. His sons strongly resembled him with the same magnificent black hair and clear grey eyes. However, Elrond was even taller, more broadly built and ruddier of complexion, and far more youthful in appearance than Lothíriel had envisioned, except, of course, for the eyes. Therein she saw reflected the wisdom of Ages and the gentleness of a healer. His face, though a model of nobility, totally lacked Elven detachment. It was mobile, expressive. His human roots were undeniable.

Arwen was quite simply the most beautiful woman Lothíriel had ever seen. She shared the Elven radiance of her brothers and grandparents, combined with the high color of Elrond. She shared her brothers’ black hair and grey eyes with features more resembling those of her father than her grandfather. Unlike her father and the twins, her hair was not sleek and silken straight, but thicker and wavy like that of Galadriel. She radiated the intensity of the Peredhil, combined with the artless regality of her grandmother.

Like many in Gondor, Lothíriel had so immediately given her heart, soul, and loyalty to Aragorn that she assumed that any Elf or woman he chose would be fortunate to have won his love. However, when she first laid eyes on Arwen, as much as she admired the king, she was momentarily stunned at Aragorn’s utter audacity. Her second thought was defensive: Never mind that she is the daughter of Maia, Elves and heroes among Men, and surely looks the part, I hope that she is worthy of him.

At that moment, Elrond gave the three newcomers a quick sideways glance, met Arwen’s eyes and laughed aloud. “Here they are now,” he said.

Elrond then turned, smiling widely at sight of his sons and their guest. Lothíriel inhaled sharply. She instantly recognized the curve of that smile, that unique sound. Both brothers may have received Celeborn’s jaw line and cheekbones, and Elrohir his grandfather’s frank manner, but Elladan inherited Elrond’s laugh.

Elladan and Elrohir respectively pulled their father into strong embraces and were hugged tightly in return. Then Elladan turned to Lothíriel and drew her into their circle.

Lothíriel bowed and said, “Suilad, Lady Galadriel. Suilad, Lord Celeborn.” She looked wide-eyed at Elrond and Arwen, uncertain if she should speak first or wait.

“Ada, this is Lothíriel, Princess of Dol Amroth,” Elladan said.

“So, we finally meet, daughter of Númenor. I think your king sought to mislead me,” Elrond chuckled, eyes alight with all the warmth of summer. “He wrote to tell me that he was sending a noblewoman of Gondor to accompany my daughter to Minas Tirith and instruct us in its customs and
politics along the way. What I know of Estel, tells he presumed I would envision a stern, wise, perhaps haughty, older woman.”

“Lord Elrond, I am honored to place myself in your service and that of the Lady Arwen,” she said merrily with a graceful Elven bow, “I may be young and unwise but, in my father’s house, my brothers and I were fed the specifics of the political affairs of Gondor along with our mother’s milk.”

Arwen stepped closer to Lothíriel and took hold of her hands, “You are most welcome, Lothíriel. Both Estel and my brothers have told me a great deal about you. I look forward to your company and learning to know you better.”

“Arwen, I have so longed to meet you. But Aragorn and your brothers know far too many awkward and embarrassing things about me. I hope you will keep an open mind.”

“I will do that if you will. You did not guard your thoughts well when you first looked at me. I read there a most gratifying and touching concern for Estel,” Arwen said with a grin. Lothíriel, both abashed and amused, warmly squeezed Arwen’s soft hands and looked up into her starry grey eyes. *Perhaps she is worthy of him after all.*

“Come and find a seat, Lothíriel,” Galadriel said. “Share with us some details of what we may expect in Gondor. We have planned feasting and merrymaking later for you and all our guests. But this afternoon is reserved for family and for us to become better acquainted.”

§ § § §

Later that afternoon, Elladan intersected Arwen on the way back to her quarters. He took his sister’s hand in his own and led her to a secluded bench.

“Take a moment and talk with me, Arwen,” he said.

Arwen looked at Elladan and was again struck by how well he did look and happy, if with a slightly frenetic edge. “I had nearly forgotten my handsome, funny, vain brother of days gone by. Well, not forgotten but it has been a long while since I have seen you like this.”

“Vain?” He asked, arching his eyebrows in pretended umbrage, while barely controlling his mirth.

“Well, you do look a bit smug, pleased with yourself today.” She reached up to touch his cheek in tender, sisterly affection.

“Pleased? Yes,” he said with a short laugh. “Not so much with myself, but with another.”

“I sense nothing of the grim, angry *fea*, we have been forced to endure . . .”

“What? Not still handsome? Only grim and angry?”

“Oh, Elladan, you are quite the buffoon today! It has been ages since I have seen this side of you.”

“Not that long, little sister. A couple of *yeni* or a bit more perhaps.”

“Now you sound completely Elven. Does time suddenly mean so little to you? Until recently you seemed so oppressed by it.”
Galadriel’s Mirror

(This chapter takes up where the last left off: Elladan and Arwen sitting together, having an intimate heart-to-heart.)

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The afternoon shadows lengthened as Arwen and Elladan spoke. To Arwen it felt like a lifetime since they had spoken like this. He told her many details she had missed over the past months: the Paths of Dead, and of how Aragorn had called upon the Oathbreakers identifying himself as Elessar, Isildur's heir. She cried when he told of Aragorn’s kinsman Halbarad falling on the Pelennor defending the banner she had made, for she had known and loved him well.

Elladan also spoke of the Morannon, the Voice of Sauron, the downfall of Barad-dûr and passing of Sauron, of Cormallen, and their return to Minas Tirith. Arwen in turn told him what she knew of the Battle of the Golden Wood and how Celeborn led the host of Lórien against Dol Guldur, and how Galadriel threw down its walls. Finally they both grew a bit teary-eyed in joy and humor at the picture of Thranduil and Celeborn meeting in the forest and renaming as Eryn Lasgalen the part of Greenwood the Great that had long been referred to as Mirkwood. That, of course, led Arwen to ask of Legolas.

Elladan replied, "Oh, we see him constantly. He is well and as beautiful as ever. Lothíriel is quite taken with him--his relentless good nature and his singing voice."

Arwen tried and failed to control a laugh. "Why, I think you are jealous of him."

"He is as charming as ever he was," Elladan said. "You hardly are in a position to laugh at that little sister. I recall when you yourself were susceptible to the charms of our woodland prince, when he had barely reached his majority and you were more than old enough to know better."

Then Arwen answered, “Hmmm. Well, hmmm, at the risk of being accused of self-servingly changing the subject, these are not the things that led you to want to speak with me alone. I think I need not ask what troubles you. In light of your obsession with this princess, you wanted to speak with me without our brother because you want to know how it was that I came to love Estel.”

“I have been blindsided by this. I did not look for or expect it and less do I understand it. I always thought that you must have felt the experience of giving your heart wholly to another, holding nothing back, especially to a Mortal, wrenching, even torturous on some level. Now, I feel if I did not have the uncertainty of fulfillment, that this kind of love is easy. That it matters little whether the object of it is Elf or Mortal. Now it is only the lack of her love I fear.” Elladan sighed.
“I cannot answer for you. I know only what it means to me to love Estel. I know something of what it means to be Mortal through him and I am drawn to it, or perhaps I was drawn to him above all others because he is Mortal. I do not want to live as an Elf lost in a half-life of dreams and memories, one fading into the next inexorably without being fully touched by any. I am drawn to the intensity of mortality. I want live every moment unconditionally,” Arwen said.

“I feel something akin to that also. It is in my blood to reach, to grasp, to react, to need, to seek that sudden flare of the senses... I have been a poor Elf, little sister—no patience and no stillness before fate. But I fear I might be an even poorer Man,” said Elladan.

“Then you do understand something of the dilemma at least. I am not sure that even Estel fully understands me. My only grief has been the thought of hurting Adar, or you and Elrohir. I have not even thought of Naneth, because I do not believe that such an ache can survive across the Sea,” Arwen said.

‘Across the Sea’ you say. It has no pull for me as yet. Legolas also rejoices in the intensity of the moment. He is infected by that same love of Mortals, and yet his answer is to long for respite from it, for peace from the passion and the longing. He is a true Elf,” he said.

“Elladan, I think there may be yet another form of joy for you,” Arwen said, taking his hand. He squeezed it and held it firmly, but did not meet her eyes.

“So many friends have talked to me of their longing for peace, to find a sweet, calm Elleth, to bond with her... I never experienced that and for that lack others labeled me as somehow immature, incomplete—all the joking about me breaking hearts,” he said shaking his head ruefully.

“But do you not remember, it was the same with me before Estel? How impatient I was with everyone’s sly suggestions of appropriate matches. Or horror at the thought of inappropriate ones.”

“I do remember, now that you mention it. At the time, I thought little enough of it. You were my little sister and it did not seem strange to me that you did not seek to bond with anyone then,” Elladan laughed.

“A rather over-ripened little sister I was,” Arwen answered laughing. “My anxiety was never over the ubiquitous choice of the peredhil that everyone endlessly debates, but whether or not I could trust my own heart. Estel was so young and rash when he first spoke to me of love. He was such a boy and yet laden with the hopes of so many. I did not want to do anything that would make his burden heavier.”

“Perhaps we are not so different after all, little sister. I would not deprive Lothíriel of the destiny she has foreseen with Éomer. I saw it myself in Rohan. She was quite taken with that rough, war-torn land. But I cannot entirely let go of the idea that there might be a place for me somewhere in her future as well,” he said.

“What will Éomer think of what has happened between the two of you?”

“She opens her mind to him. He will see everything we have shared here. But he will also see that it has not lessened her love for him or her desire to participate in his destiny,” Elladan said calmly.

Arwen moved closer to her brother, solicitously touching his cheek and taking his hand in hers.

“Sweet brother, where does that leave you? I only want you to be happy.”

“I do not know where it leaves me. In a moment more of lust than love, I told her that I would wait for her. I know not what impelled me. Whether it was the result of foresight or wishful thinking,”
said Elladan, “or perhaps a passion that one does not look for or choose, but which overtakes one nevertheless. Tell me what you think.”

“Elladan,” Arwen answered him with a question, “what did you mean by ‘wait’?”

“Strange that you should ask that, for she asked me the same more directly,” said Elladan with a soft laugh, ducking his head slightly and looking up at her with solemn grey eyes. “She wanted to know if I would remain celibate.”

“And you said that you did not think you would be.” Arwen laughed at his spectacularly unsuccessful attempt at youthful diffidence.

“I try to be honest,” Elladan said, lifting his eyebrows in umbrage.

“Poor girl. Then you offered her no choice but to come to you. She, like any woman in the throes of such infatuation, would want you to discover what she could be to you as well,” Arwen stated.

“That impulse is not limited to the female sex, Arwen. I have been most wicked with her. Inventive, one might say, and more than a little vain. I have done everything I could conceive of to make it impossible or at least challenging for her to try to forget me,” he answered. “Ai, but she is good at that as well…”

“Please, no details,” Arwen said and laughing lifted her hands as though to cover her ears. “There are particulars one does not want to imagine of one’s brothers.”

“But, Elladan,” Arwen asked, “You still did not answer my original question, what did you mean by ‘wait’?”

“I am not certain, sister,” Elladan answered, “Perhaps if I wait for her, I could still make her mine and then we could be together through all the Ages of Arda—here or across the Sea.”

“Elladan! That is madness. The choice of the peredhil comes to us through Eärendil. It not as though the offshoot of every Elven-Mortal encounter can choose to be an Elf!” Arwen said.

“Now she is an ‘offshoot.’ Lovely choice of terms, sister. I expected more of you,” Elladan answered.

He dropped her hand abruptly, rose and turned his back to her, his arms folded across his chest. Arwen stood, wound her arms around his waist, and pressed her cheek against his back. Elladan did not pull away from her.

“Arwen, do you now presume to know everything that is written in the Music of the Ainur? I know that you and Aragorn made your choice based upon what you both desired most. You chose to be tied to him and his destiny. Neither of you ever longed to leave these shores. Why should I not be granted that choice to leave or stay with my own love?”

“You must hear how preposterous you sound. Do you intend to storm the gates of Tirion dragging this half-elven child behind you?” Arwen said. Elladan did not move or speak. Arwen wished that she could see his face, but was afraid to move or let go of him, fearing he would rush away.

“I do not want to see you hurt. Talk to Grandmother. She is wiser and has seen far more,” Arwen said.

“I intend to do exactly that,” Elladan said, biting off each word as though it were distasteful. He turned to her and added in a softer tone, “We let you cherish your hope when it was but a fool’s hope
and now you have him. Must you be so eager to smash mine?"

"I recall you shared that hope. That he could be king, I mean. But we are not speaking of the heir of
Elendil here, but a princess of 20 years, betrothed to the king of Rohan, friend of Estel, an ally, and
your own comrade-in-arms."

Elladan did not answer her. Arwen could think of nothing more to say or do but simply hold him in
her arms and so she did that.

* * * *

Lothíriel walked along a forest path behind Galadriel, entranced by the lightness of her step, the
graceful, swing of her hips, her loose white dress that swayed with her movements and the sunlight
that gleamed on her hair. She was taller than Lothíriel, and broader of shoulder, but still slim and
feminine. Observing her from behind it was impossible for Lothíriel to imagine that Galadriel could
have lived in Valinor in the Years of the Trees.

"Would you like to look into my mirror, Lothíriel?" she said without turning around. Although
Lothíriel could not see the Lady’s face, she thought she could detect a hint of a smile in her voice.
Try as she might to maintain some dignity, Lothíriel could not hold back a giggle that she feared
sounded absolutely infantile.

"Oh, my lady, please forgive me. I was laughing at myself. When you said ‘Would you like to look
into my mirror?’ I thought of all the childish daydreams I had that I would someday meet you and
you would ask me exactly that."

“My husband and my grandsons oft times laugh at me too when they hear me ask visitors that. As
though I were a conjurer at a village fair offering to predict the future of an unwitting dupe. I am not
saying that they always deny that it has any value, but they never miss an opportunity to tease me. I
suppose the fact that I react opens me up to their jesting,” she said turning and smiling at Lothíriel.

"From what I know of your grandsons, I can easily believe that."

“And if you knew my husband better, you would believe it of him as well. So, if you were to look in
my mirror what would you like to see?” The dappled sunlight filtering through the golden boughs
cast a shimmering glow upon the Lady’s face that forced Lothíriel to imagine how she might have
looked under the light of Laurelin.

"When I was young I always wanted to see the face of the man I would marry," Lothíriel said.

This time it was Galadriel who laughed. The sound was a close to a giggle as Lothíriel could imagine
the Lady could produce.

"When I was girl, if I had seen the image of an extraordinarily tall, stubborn, hard-headed Sinda with
silver hair, no matter how pretty his face, I think I would have run away screaming in horror,"
Galadriel said. "But the first time I actually saw him my reaction could not have been more
different."

By now they had reached an opening in the trees and walked down a set of shallow stone stairs into
an enclosed garden. Lothíriel spied what she believed must be the mythical Mirror of Galadriel. She
forced her heart to still and asked, "Would it be rude for me to ask, my Lady, what was your first
impression of Lord Celeborn?"

"To me he was the handsomest man I had ever seen. I was absolutely captivated, enthralled. Even in
the full light of the midday sun, his silver luminescence was reminiscent of the light of Telperion. I
had seen silver-haired Teleri of great beauty before, of course, but they were usually slighter of form, not so tall, and did not have his presence.” Galadriel laughed, extending her hand to Lothíriel to direct her to stand to the right of a carved pedestal holding a shallow, wide silver basin.

“Did you know immediately that you loved him?” Lothíriel asked.

“Far from it,” Galadriel said smiling. “I detested him. He stood there with an air of assurance that my Grandfather Finwë himself never would have dared assume, and him a petty Sindar princeling, I thought. I felt like he saw right through me as well. Then he touched my mind. It took all of my will to shut him out and I had secrets in those days, grim secrets.” The Lady of the Golden Wood allowed herself a full, hearty laugh, so unexpected it caused Lothíriel to startle.

“Elladan did the same to me, tried to read my thoughts, I mean,” Lothíriel blurted out. “The difference for me was that I could not close my mind to him quickly enough to prevent him from seeing how strongly he affected me.”

“And so it began for you. My grandson saw your weakness, also your struggle to resist, and could not refuse the challenge. He resembles his grandsire greatly, especially in his bullheadedness.”

“And then what happened with you, my Lady?”

“Oh, much the same as you, princess. I could not stop thinking of him. All he really had to do was wait and he did that very well. I would warrant a guess that my grandson had less patience, partly because he encountered the obstacle of a rival.”

“Is it obvious that we have become lovers?” Lothíriel had been told that the Lady could read one’s thoughts at a level of skill well beyond that of anyone she had encountered. She decided in an instant that she would rather be fully honest than have bits and pieces of truth filtered through by Galadriel.

“It is too late for me to judge, my dear. If you have not already discovered it, you should be aware that Elrond’s progeny have an underdeveloped sense of privacy. Arwen has been the subject of their discussions for years, now it seems to be Elladan’s turn.”

“Your family discussed Elladan and me?” She knew they had not been circumspect, but neither had she envisioned herself the subject of conversation.

“You need fear no judgment from me, my dear. By comparison to the crimes of passion I have witnessed, whatever happens between you and Elladan will appear a minor indiscretion—rather sweet and romantic. However, if you repeat that, I will be forced to deny I said it.” The Lady smiled in a falsely innocent manner that reminded Lothíriel of Elrohir.

Galadriel picked up a large silver pitcher sitting near the base of the pedestal and gestured toward a nearby stream of water with it. “But you have not told me if you would like to look into the mirror or not yet. I thought that you might perhaps like to see your mother, since you did not know her. I, however, cannot assure you what the mirror will chose to reveal to you.”

“Would you recommend that I look? The thought that the mirror can show things that might or might not come to pass could exacerbate my quandary rather than assist me in my choices,” Lothíriel said. A sensation of uneasiness and anxiety flooded her. “As far as the question of my mother goes, my father’s and my brothers’ reluctance to speak of her, has not increased my curiosity, but actually tended to make me think that there may be things about her that I would be happier not to know.”

Galadriel’s fair face sobered, for a brief moment she looked older and careworn. “It could be I am succumbing here to my own desire to know the answer. This decision should be yours alone and not
done under any pressure from me.”

“Forgive me, Lady. What you offer, whatever maybe your motives, is an opportunity only a fool or a coward would let pass. I will look, but will ask the Mirror for naught and let it show me what it will,” Lothíriel said, with more confidence than she felt.

“You make me wonder if I have done right to offer, my child. But if you wish, then we will do it. It is best not to ask for anything. As I have often told visitors who voiced specific requests, more often than not it is things that are unbidden, which have far greater significance than things we wish to behold.” The Lady bent to fill the pitcher from the stream, filled the basin and blew softly upon the water.

“Come closer now and do not touch the water,” Galadriel said.

Lothíriel moved toward the basin and looked into it. Sunlight glinting through leaves of gold and the clear blue sky visible through gaps in the foliage reflected onto its surface. The mirror darkened, swirled for a moment with a kaleidoscope of colors, and revealed a newly familiar landscape—the plains of Rohan and with its mountain peaks as a backdrop. Three figures came to forefront of the image: her own, the face of Éomer, glad and alight with enthusiasm, and a male child, with the dark, bright blue eyes and thick mane of hair of the same shining gold as that of Éomer. The boy’s expression, a picture of joy coupled with fierce determination, shone on a face more resembling Imrahil’s than of either of his parents. Éomer lifted him onto a horse and he rode off across the plain without a backward glance.

Images of others dear to her flashed by, one following another, in rapid succession: Arwen and Aragorn greeting her and Éomer in the Merethrond of Minas Tirith; her father and brothers on the beach near the keep of Dol Amroth, with a small group of dark-haired children she did not recognize and the golden-haired boy, running in front of them; Legolas seated on the ground in an autumnal forest, laughing and taking a drink from a tankard of Rohirric design; the taut visage of Elladan, angry and accusing, a trickle of red blood against white skin from a cut on his lip, then her own hand reaching up to touch his face and his countenance softening with a look of hope and promise. Finally, she saw herself standing with Elladan on the wall of a city of glittering white stone (not Minas Tirith), his arm around her and a smile of profound contentment on his face. The mirror clouded and cleared and again she saw only the reflections of the mellyrn which surrounded them and a glimpse of the sky.

After not being able to decide if she should react more strongly to her feelings of foreboding or joy, Lothíriel experienced a surge of anger and irritation. What were these teasing images? Random imaginings, foresight or distractions? She wanted to splash her hand into the basin in frustration, but restrained herself just barely. She looked up at Galadriel who gazed at her expectant, with just a hint of impatience.

“Would you tell me what you saw? I sense it troubles you.”

At that Lothíriel released what sounded to her own ears to be a short, rather unpleasant laugh. “I apparently was not the ideal candidate for drawing anything helpful from your illustrious mirror. I saw nothing but a serious of useless images that I might have conjured up while falling asleep any night.”

“Do not be so quick to judge, my dear. You may have seen more than you know,” Galadriel said.

“I am sorry, my Lady. My expectations were too high. I tried to remain open, but, in truth, I hoped to receive guidance but instead saw only contradicting hopes, dreams and fears.”
To Dream or To Portend

A sudden bright flash of sunlight burst through the leaves and shattering the other-worldly sense of timelessness and lack of orientation as to place that Lothíriel had been experiencing. Galadriel held her gaze, not with her wise, unnerving, ancient-Elf-Lady-of-Aman intensity, but once again as the grandmother of Elrohir and Elladan.

"Well, you are young and I am foolish," Galadriel said with a light laugh. "I do find myself drawn to mysteries. The afternoon wears on and Arwen wants you to meet others close to our family and doubtlessly will want to consult with you about your attire for our feast tonight."

"I have little to choose from but Aragorn told me that Arwen would want to dress me," Lothíriel said, greatly relieved to return to more mundane concerns than prophecy or foresight.

"He knows his lady. She comes by her interest in apparel honestly--an obsession of the Noldor--but then I am sure you have heard that. It is a tiresome cliché in the books of tales. Yet closer to the truth than I am pleased to admit," Galadriel said.

"Arwen is a bit fuller-figured than I am," Lothíriel said in a voice that hinted of envy.

"Bosoms were never my strong point either," said Galadriel, laughing. "It has been two ages since I worried about that. But it did cause me pain when I was young, and, if that were not drawback enough, I inherited the Finwëan rather overwhelming height."

"Do you think Arwen's curviness a trait of the Edain?"

"Well, I suppose it could be. But among Eldar I have known voluptuous women as well," Galadriel said. "Nerdanel is certainly bosomy. Although Fëanor, of course, was quick to remind everyone that he loved her for her mind. Could not seem to keep his hands off her though."

"Fëanor, the Spirit of Fire, oh, my. Of course, you are his niece," Lothíriel said. "You had your marvelous hair. Surely that must have made you stand out--even in Aman. And what about the story of you refusing Fëanor even a single strand of your hair. Please, tell me that story." Galadriel laughed aloud.

"My child! It is astounding to believe that an intelligent girl in the late Third Age is still infatuated by his glamour. The story of the hair is pure nonsense, of course. He barely gave me a second glance. Although he did tolerate my father better than he did his brother Fingolfin. But he did not care a fig
for any of his nieces or nephews except my cousin Fingon, who was close to his eldest son. And it was impossible for anyone, even Fëanor, not to love Fingon the valiant."

Lothíriel was overcome by fascination and thoroughly entranced by speaking of history with one who had lived it. "This is so exciting. To hear these stories from you, my Lady. So where did the story of Fëanor and Galadriel's hair come from?"

"The only memory I have that had anything to do with Fëanor and my hair occurred when one of the youngest of Fëanor's son--I think it was Telvo, the one you call Amras in your tongue-wrestled me to the ground and sat on me pulling my hair. Fëanor yelled at him to let me up. He stopped and we ran off but I heard Fëanor said to Nerdanel. 'Annoying brat. She teases the twins non-stop. If I were one of them, I would want to pull her hair out too.'"

"That sounds like me and my brothers. I was smaller, a girl, and aggravating, but they were always scolded for hurting me," Lothíriel said giggling.

"You take Fëanor's side in this ancient dispute then?" Galadriel asked with threatening growl in her elegant voice.

"Not if you can tell me, my Lady, that you were a sweet, placid child."

"Lothíriel, you are uncharitably wise in your assessment. I was a terror among my younger cousins. It is well that we are alone, princess, because my grandchildren moan when I speak of any of these things. 'We have heard it all thousands times,' they say. Nor do they please my husband, because they remind him that I am determined to sail soon. I must see my home again and he says that he will follow, but he is not happy about it."

After a long, long walk they finally neared the center of Caras Galadhon again. Lothíriel heard voices drawing closer to them in the wood, definitely masculine, but with that purity and clarity of tone that she was learning to describe as unmistakably wholly-Elven, so unlike that of her brothers or Elrohir and Elladan or even, she now knew, Lord Elrond. A peal of laughter, joyous and filled with hope, grabbed her heart and lifted her spirit—a bit like the first time she had heard Legolas release a full-out laugh. There, in the golden late-afternoon sun, stood two tall Elf-lords.

"Ai, little one, you are in for a pleasant surprise," Galadriel said. "Some dear friends approach who will satisfy your craving for history and lore and enable you to practice the Ancient Tongue."

"They are beautiful," Lothíriel said.

"Do not tell them that. Each one of them is, in his unique way, nearly as vain as my grandsons. Glorfindel! Erestor!" she called, raising her voice just enough to carry down the shallow hillside into the clearing below.

Lothíriel remembered that Legolas and Elrohir had teased her that Éomer, after she had convinced him to shave his beard, reminded them of Glorfindel. She could see the resemblance. Both had a wild mane of hair of a rich gold, although Glorfindel's was Elven long while Éomer's barely reached his shoulders. The famous warrior had the same dark, bright blue eyes as her horse lord.

She searched her memories, bits and pieces of old stories and verse in the ancient tongue flitted through her mind—he had the tall, strong physique she had learned to associate with the Noldor. But the hair. Where did he get the blond hair? Erestor. He was easier to place. He was the quintessential, storybook picture of a Noldor-raven-dark hair, silver grey eyes, perfect in form and face. He could
have been Feanor himself. And they both had those eyes. How did the ancient scrolls, brought from Numenor, in library of the Dol Amroth keep, describe them: "the light of Aman was not yet dimmed in their eyes." How she wished Faramir were here to meet these two legends with her. But he would see them soon enough in Minas Tirith. They truly did live in a time when legends sprang to life before them. She flushed furiously and closed her mouth, which she belatedly realized hung open.

Both of the magnificent Elven warriors smiled benevolently upon her. Glorfindel spoke first in a voice, clarion clear and filled with mirth, "My lady, are you not going to introduce us to your young companion?"

Galadriel gracefully took her hand and guided her forward. "Princess Lothíriel of Dol Amroth of Belfalas, I present to you Glorfindel chief of security of Imladris, formerly of Gondolin, Tirion and various other places both here and across the Sea and Erestor, also now of Imladris, chief counselor of Elrond, formerly of Lindon, Himring, Formenos, Tirion, etc., etc."

The Elf-lords stepped forward to greet her, nodding, hand-upon-heart, before each respectively took her hand and bowed to kiss it lightly.

"It is an honor, my Lady," said Erestor, with a sharp, but not unfriendly, examination of her face.

"It is my pleasure to be of service, Princess Lothíriel," said Glorfindel, flashing a brilliant, cheerful smile.

Lothíriel could barely choke out a faint, "Your lordship," to each one in turn. Never one to be left speechless and feeling she had the honor of Belfalas, indeed, all of Gondor to uphold, she struggled to add. "Please excuse my awkwardness. I must explain that I never expected to have the pleasure of meeting any of the illustrious actors of the tumultuous and heroic events of First Age of Arda."

"The princess was sent to us by Estel as a representative of Gondor to succor and guide us through the intricacies of the court of Minas Tirith. Her father is the ruling prince of Dol Amroth and she is cousin to Faramir, Lord Steward of Gondor," Galadriel interjected. "From what she tells me, curiosity for the history and lore of the Elder Days has been kept alive not only in the North, but in the South as well."

"I think I speak for both of us when I say that we would enjoy answering any questions the Princess may have," Glorfindel said. "Erestor can give you the historian's view and I can extrapolate on the parts that are not written down." He earned an exaggerated glare of mock umbrage from Erestor.

"The cataloguing of dinner menus and concert programs of a hidden city separated from the struggles of the greater part of the Beleriand against the encroachments of Morgoth's hordes are without a doubt a fascinating, if somewhat narrow and arcane, part of the history of that period," Erestor replied, not succeeding in controlling a wicked grin.

"Ai, yes," Glorfindel responded with jovial equanimity, "My esteemed friend is correct in noting that the construction of Gondolin, which rivaled Tirion itself in beauty and grandeur, and the preservation from annihilation of a significant part of the Noldor, certainly does not provide the prurient titillation of accounts of the personal proclivities, endless feuding, and jockeying for position among the sons of Feanor and their allies."

"Comport yourself with a little dignity in front of this young woman, please," Galadriel said, her tone sharp but her expression betraying an Age-old affection for the two of them.
Lothíriel said, "I want to know it all-the inspiring as well as salacious."

"Well, then, fair lady, you will have to spend time with us over the course of the journey to Minas Tirith as well as while we are all the guests of the Lady Galadriel here in Lórien," Erestor said.

The late-afternoon sunlight lit the open area, at the base of the tallest tree that housed the dwelling of the Galadriel and Celeborn that Lothíriel had visited the afternoon before. A three-sided, delicately-carved lofty hall, constructed around the trunk of the great tree, bustled with the trudging to and fro of carriers bearing fruits, breads, barrels of wine, and roasted meats. The fragrance of broths simmering wafted from within it its sheltered depths. The sound of laughter reached Lothíriel's ears, so like that of another, but particularly and indefinably belonging to Elrohir. She pivoted to see Elrohir approaching them, guiding his sister by her upper arm, with Elladan walking a few paces behind them.

"Wait! Lothíriel, please do not make any promises to either of those rogues without consulting my brother and me," Elrohir called out.

Elladan passed Elrohir and Arwen to reach Lothíriel first. He bent and kissed her hand. "I see you have met the two who are largely responsible for making us what you see today. Glorfindel instructed us in the arts of war, while Erestor, by his own choice and not any lack of skill, limited himself to the transmission of history and lore." Each of the brothers in turn grabbed the legendary Elves into rough bears hugs, followed by enthusiastic, noisy kisses.

Elrond appearing behind Galadriel, accompanied by Celeborn, interjected, "As their father, of course, while I appreciated the care my dearest friends and colleagues took with my challenging sons, I did what I could to overcome the negative influences of their mentors' personalities and prejudices."

Lothíriel fought hard against speechlessness. She recalled how the handsome King impressed her, yet she still found the spirit to tease him when he danced with her at his coronation. Her brothers had often dipped their heads to hide silent laughter when a grim look from her Uncle Denethor had been greeted with a roll of the eyes by their plucky sister. A certain awe in the presence of the brothers Elrondion the first time she met them dissipated quickly as soon as they addressed her directly. Legolas the first full-blooded elf she had seen filled her with wonder, not only then but still. Yet his company delighted her rather stunning her into silence. She had already begun to feel easy with Galadriel who had spoken with her that afternoon as though to another woman—a younger and far less experienced one indeed—but cajoling her with personal details and confidences.

However, this august company, all together in this mythical place, left her momentarily tongue-tied. She spoke, willing her voice not to falter, "Good afternoon, Lord Elrond, Lord Celeborn."

Celeborn grinned and nodded, with the ease of man who loves women, but knows he is remote from having to deal with any unwanted flirtation. Elrond's mobile features lit with an open, kindly smile, "So, you have met the rest of my household."

"I was just ready to explain to Lothíriel to take care with our golden warrior who is well known to harbor an attraction for darkling, young princesses, who have scarcely left childhood behind," Elrohir said cheekily.

"Must you always confuse rudeness with humor?" Arwen asked, with a marked lack of ire.

Elrohir continued, "Other the other hand, Erestor, unless his recent taste of battle has reawakened
baser appetites long held in check, is likely safer company."

"Arwen is right," Elladan sighed. "You are acting a buffoon. Check yourself." Turning to Lothíriel, he added, "My brother reverts to childishness when confronted with this particular indulgent grouping. In the absence of Estel, he has to be content to trifle with Glorfindel and Erestor and try to make you blush."

"I appreciate your attempts to defend me, Elladan. But I think I will have to learn to endure greater challenges than your brother's teasing if I am to survive in our demanding new world," Lothíriel said. "In any case, I suffer far worse torments from my own brothers, although in a more familiar setting and less intimidating circle," she added, looking from Erestor to Glorfindel, hoping that Elrohir's cheeky prattle would not cause them to shun her companionship.

Erestor said, almost as though he could read her thoughts, "I assure that we are less capricious and more tolerant than the lords of Gondor and Belfalas, especially in presence of a fair maid such as yourself. We have far less opportunity to consort with a young woman like you also, so you will find we will exert ourselves to be as agreeable as we can."

Arwen moved to take Lothíriel by the arm, saying, "Meanwhile, there will time enough to become better acquainted later. The princess and I have a project. Estel tells me in his letters that you travel light and he promised to reward your good judgment by assuring you that I will see that you are garbed to suit your station for any social functions while we remain in Lorien. What a lovely figure you have, tall and slender, a seamstress's delight. Shall we take our leave?"

"Thank you, Lady Arwen," Lothíriel replied.

"If you are comfortable addressing my brothers and the Prince of Mirkwood without titles, which I am told you are, then you should be at ease calling me Arwen." Elrohir poked his tongue out at his sister. Elladan flushed slightly, which appeared to amuse Erestor, Glorfindel and Arwen.

"If you like," Lothíriel answered, feeling at ease again, but sparing a sympathetic look in the direction of Elladan. "But only in private. For once we reach Gondor, it would not be fitting for me to address you publicly in such a way."

Arwen and Lothíriel nodded to the others as they walked away. "We will see the rest of you shortly after sunset," Arwen said. Elladan joined them.

"I am sorry," Arwen said to Elladan with a small, affectionate smirk. "You are more sensitive than I remember you." Turning her attention back to Lothíriel, she continued, "So, tell me how do you address your cousin the Lord Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien?"

"Well, I call him Faramir, of course, when I speak to him. If I refer to him among those who are not intimate or in a public place, I would refer to him as the Steward or even Lord Steward. Perhaps, later when there is more society in Ithilien, in similar circumstances I would call him the Prince."

"Good. Then you will call me Arwen to my face and speaking of me in company, you can chose whatever form is considered correct in Gondorian society. And I will expect that you will instruct me on the niceties of protocol. We are all most informal, except for Erestor, whose use of formal titles dates back to Tirion. Despite what he may think, it in no way masks his highly-developed, or some might say over-developed, sense of self-worth."

"Arwen, shame on you," Elladan said. "You are not coaching some fragile, shy, young maiden here."
She needs no goading from either you or my brother to deal with Erestor or Glorfindel."

Lothíriel luxuriated in the temperate breeze and fragrant air, while observing to her delight and wonder the similarities and differences between the perëdhil brother and sister. She had already decided that she thought Elladan and Arwen were more like one another and their father than Elrohir was. She had also determined that while Elladan most resembled Celeborn in face and form—although certainly not in coloring—that Elrohir had his grandfather's manner.

She was eager to dig out her sketchbook from her luggage before she slept that night and record some of her impressions of all of these glorious examples of the Firstborn. In her imagination, she had begun to think, since arriving in Lothlórien and meeting Galadriel and Celeborn, that Elrohir was more the Sinda and Elladan the Noldo. Silly speculations no doubt. And what does that make me? She recalled how Elladan and Elrohir loved to tease Legolas and call him the Wood-elf, but now she categorized him as well: Sinda also, like Celeborn—slender, tall, strong and light of skin and hair, more alien and remote even than the Noldor, perhaps more open and merry in some ways and yet less transparent and obvious in others.

"Lothíriel, my love," Elladan said, lifting her hand to his lips. She looked up into his eyes and smiled, happy to realize that he had followed them simply in order to a few minutes to be with her away from the searching eyes of the rest of his family and friends. "You are far away. Arwen asked you a question."

"Please forgive me, Arwen. I was lost in my thoughts."

"It is not important. I only asked if you have a color that you prefer. But you can decide soon enough when I show you everything. I have far too many dresses. There will be a color and style to suit any whim or taste," Arwen said, laughing.

"Do not let her force you to do anything, or most particularly, wear anything that makes you feel uncomfortable," Elladan said, his eyes glinting with merriment at Lothíriel's apparent uneasiness.

"Ai, vanya vendë, then we shall see you tonight at the festivities," Erestor said.

"Come with me, Lothíriel," Arwen said, pulling her along by the hand. "We will have a long evening and night to listen to this chatter. Elves can be solemn indeed when it suits their purposes, but have a seemingly infinite capacity for nonsense when they desire only to make merry. See how these two Eldar affect even my solemn oldest brother."

It did not take long given Arwen's decisive taste and the large selection of gowns available to them to find something that would suit. They had jointly decided upon a simply cut tulle-over-silk gown of the palest rose for Lothíriel. Arwen had decided upon a light blue gown for herself, with a slightly more structured bodice. "More support," Arwen has said. "Which you, of course, happily do not need."

Lothíriel then explained to Arwen's amusement that the simple, flowing freer style was referred to as "Elvish" in Minas Tirith and much more popular among fashionable ladies of Dol Amroth, who were quick to use any means at hand to call attention to the legend of their lauded Elven ancestry, than it was in Gondor's capital city.

The younger woman had prattled on about how Arwen's emergence into Minas Tirith society would doubtless case a rise in the star of supposedly Elvish Dol Amroth in fashion, if not politics. Lothíriel sought to explain how Dol Amroth had fallen in favor during last years of the regime of Denethor.
She asserted all of that was history in this new epoch in light of Dol Amroth's role in preserving Gondor's coastline and ports and the compliment of Swan Knights so visible in the defense of Minas Tirith.

Lothíriel claimed not to know if this was based upon Denethor dislike in treating with Dol Amroth in this later years was because he was loath to be reminded of his lovely wife's untimely demise or if it was in fact a political question based upon a balance of power between Minas Tirith and the Falas and the Steward's mistrust of his younger son as a "wizard's pupil"-something he had been heard to call Faramir more than once. She explained how Faramir had always been closer to his uncle Imrahil and how Boromir was more trusted by Denethor.

The last thing the princess wished was to appear to lecture Arwen on the political affairs of Gondor. She initially used a method she had developed in her young life of communicating information through gossipy chatter, having noticed that those who considered themselves older and wiser than such a slip of a girl often found it more palatable. She swiftly realized that Arwen saw through her technique when the Elf-lady asked her a series of pointed and thoughtful questions that cut right into the meat of the political points that Lothíriel had tried to make. After that Lothíriel felt more comfortable and Arwen appeared most interested. They briefly discussed economic strengths and weaknesses of the region and worried a bit about any lingering military crises that might arise in the next short period.

Arwen provided more information about the members of the Grey Company in their party than Lothíriel had discovered traveling with them for several weeks. The princess blushed to admit that she had been preoccupied first with Éomer and later with Elladan when she might have learned to know them better. They were both laughed at Lothíriel's descriptions, some flattering and some distinctly not, of the principal players of Gondor.

"My cousin is more of a scholar and statesman than his older brother. Although they both spent their entire adult lives in warlike pursuits," Lothíriel stated. "But you must have met Boromir when he passed through Imladris, did you not?" she asked Arwen.

"I met him briefly," Arwen answered. "But I really did not have the opportunity to draw any strong impression of him. I noted he had the presence of one used to exercising authority and was a fine-looking man."

"Physically, Faramir resembles him strongly but has always been the more handsome of the two. I like to draw. I will show you some of my sketches later. I bought them with me precisely so I can show you what some of the protagonists look like before we arrive in Minas Tirith."
Finally Lothíriel and Arwen returned to the open grassy field surrounding the large Mallorn that held the talan of Galadriel and Celeborn. Twilight was nearly full upon them. Deepening shadows were lit by countless glittering crystal lanterns. Lothíriel caught her breath at the shards of light reflected jewel-like within the leaves of the surrounding Mellyrn. She was reminded of the glory of the starry host described in hymns to Elbereth sang on the beach of Dol Amroth at various festivals throughout her childhood. She recognized snatches of melodies and lyrics in the Silvan tongue that Legolas had shared with her in Minas Tirith. The magic and otherworldliness of her surroundings once again drove all practical thoughts from her mind and when she spotted Elladan walking toward her his flushed cheeks, piercingly silver-bright eyes and dark hair, braided by her own hand, beset her with their beauty. Within this one person she saw an exhilarating blend of the blood of Eldar, Edain and Maia that spoke to her of a unique perfection. She feared her desire for him too prideful to be tolerated, that to reach for him could be to taunt fate. What could she possibly offer?

He took her by the arm and led her away from the center of the gathering. Insisting that they grab drinks and plates of food from the long tables laden with every form of refreshment and find a place where they could sit and talk alone for a while.

"Lothíriel, I heard that you went with my grandmother and looked into her mirror." Elladan said, his face shining with a desperate hopefulness. "Did you see us? Together?"

"Tell me only what you saw of us, my love. You need not reveal everything," Elladan pled of her. The cursed mirror that muddled and confused and revealed nothing before its time--the folly of foresight understood only in hindsight he had often complained. And how much less reliable it must be now in the absence of a ring of power of augment it. But it was the only shred that he had to cling to and just a bit of hope would be comforting.

"Yes, I saw us. We stood high up on a hill in a city of white walls, terraces and towers. Your arm held me firmly against you and your face shining with the brightest light," she said in a quick jumble of words, anger and frustration evident in her voice.

Elladan struggled to control his jubilation, while refusing to give credence to her irritation. Softly, and as cautiously as though he spoke to an armed and dangerous foe, "And what do you think that might have shown you?"

"I am no fool Elladan. I am well read and I have an imagination. I memorized the description as child. I know you know it as well. She recited for him in High Elvish: "'. . . on the green hill of Túna the city of the Elves was built, the white walls and terraces of Tirion; and the highest of the towers of that city was the Tower of Ingwë, Mindon Eldaliéva, whose silver lamp shone far out into the mists of the sea.' Sound familiar, Elladan, or were you too busy wrestling with your brother and fighting with wooden swords to do your lessons?"

"Of course, I recognized it. But I wondered if you did. I might have hoped you found the image pleasing," he said, his voice dropping to barely an anguished whisper.

She grabbed both of his arms, her fingers cutting into them. "That was not all I saw," she answered. "I saw Rohan and Éomer and a child, clearly mine; he resembled both Éomer and my father strongly. There you have the whole thing. What can I make of those visions? They tell me nothing. I do not deserve you, Elladan. You deserve someone far more exalted and grand," Lothíriel said.

"Do not be silly, my love. You have everything I have missed in the last yeni of my life. You are funny, frank, fair and joyful. But I have the unmitigated temerity to try to win you from a valiant, great man, who offers you the future of Arda while I am naught but an agent of its past. Yet I would
try to make you happy, take the chance that I could."

"Indeed, glorious Elf-lord, part-Maia, destined to live out all the Ages of Arda in Aman, you expect that I would ask you to give that up?"

"I do not have to be an Elf," Elladan said laughing. "I can be only a Man. The choice is yours."

"I get so tired of that refrain: "only a man." You say it so that I will plead with you that you are so much more than either Man or Elf," Lothíriel said.

He couldn't argue with her. Elladan knew that he did say it far too often, but not for the reasons she suspected. He wanted to remind himself that he could offer her neither a kingdom of Men, nor the peace and immutability that an Elven lover might. Elladan took her hand, so small, but strong, and as yet as unmarred by any mark or scar as that of any fully Elven. "And you, Lothíriel," he said, "you are like me, neither wholly human nor Elf. If we were simply Elves and could do whatever we pleased what would you want . . . then would you want to stay with me?" Suddenly he felt a child or a fool; he felt his eyes clouding and he heard a tremor in his voice.

He forced his gaze to remain on Lothíriel and not to waiver. "What would you choose?" She looked into his eyes and held them with her own. A small hand lightly caressed his cheek. The very last ray of sunlight, shifting through the trees, cast a golden hue upon her upturned face. The smile that she gave him turned bittersweet, while with a single finger she touched a tear in the corner of his eye and wiped it across his cheek.

"Then I would be wholly, completely, unconditionally yours and would beg you to choose for both of us. I would gladly stay with you here or go West with you, because nothing else would matter to me but you."

Elladan's sighed deeply. "If you were not a princess of Gondor and were not loved by the king of Rohan, and I were not Elladan Elrondion, and beholden to my sister and to both of my brothers. . . " he said, his voice now clear and strong. "And, if you did not expect to become a queen, if you had no ambition, and no dreams except of love, who then who would we be? It's all nonsense. Would we even care for one another if we were not all the things that we are?"

"It is too late," Lothíriel said. "Too late for me to change how I feel about you and yet too late for me to turn my back on all the promises I have made. And I do love him." Elladan took a step back, sought to control his breathing, and his facial expression. He did not speak for a time, more than certain he could not control his voice. Finally, he released a sigh and took a chance.

"So, you will go back to Éomer." Of course, you will. I knew you would and you knew I knew.

"If he will have me."

"Oh, he will have you." Silly, foolish girl. Your bright, young king took a brave gamble and he won.

"But what of us?"

"You tell me." He would not permit himself to touch her, although he longed to do so. The point beyond which he would attempt to impel her had passed. Pain swept over him at the realization that she feared as well to reach for him. The next move is yours, princess. But, you have never lacked for courage have you? As he thought she would, she jerked her chin upward and spoke.

"We still have this. We have Lothlórien. Two more days." Her voice quavered as she choked back tears.
Elladan laughed. "Yes. We have two more days. Who is dafter? You or I?" He pulled her into his arms and held her against him, pressing her head against his chest, inhaling the light, fresh scent of her hair, aware of a new sweetness in her uncertainty, that touched him at least as much as the clever self-assurance, unusual even among Elves he had known, that first had caught his attention. "That is not a fair question. I am far older, but I am no wiser, which undoubtedly proves that I am even madder than you are."

"From whence comes your madness, my gorgeous, adorable Elf-lord? I know my own well enough, but I do not understand yours?"

"From the first time I saw you in the Houses of Healing, when I did not know if you were a woman grown or still a child, an Elf or a Mortal, I loved you. Your face so beautiful, yet smeared with grime and gore, and your gown and apron as blood-soaked as those of a butcher's assistant on market day. Your kerchief had slipped to one side revealing the color of your hair and one Elvish ear." The animation returned to her eyes and the color to her cheeks. Irrepressible--that's part of why I love you.

Then Lothíriel looked up at him, her visage radiant, and said. "I well recall. That was one horrible night--of death and its revolting stench. You and your brother came straight in from the Pelennor seeking to help Aragorn. Ai, I'll never forget the sight of the two of you, as far out of my reach as a pair of stars. I had never seen such fearsome beauty. You especially in your Elvish battle gear. Elrohir had a somewhat milder look but you, with your blazing eyes and grim expression, wearied but still determined and proud, looked like a Fëanorian warrior of old to me."

He jerked his head back in surprise and took her face in his hands. She looked as innocent as babe of the impact of her remark. He could not restrain a deep laugh.

"And you found that appealing?" he asked, feeling an uncontrollable grin spread over his face.

"I am embarrassed to say I did. Remember I was still quite a girl the first time I saw you. When I heard the tales of Fëanor and his sons, I always found them so attractive in their determination, not to mention the descriptions in the ancient manuscripts of their physical attributes."

"Lothíriel, please do not repeat any of that to my grandfather; my father might tolerant such remarks better. Indeed, he might even be persuaded to tell you of the fire and beauty--even in their decline and despair--of Maedhros and Maglor." He laughed again at the sight of her furrowing brow and exaggerated pout. "So that is what interested you in me? I believed you loved me for myself. Now I discover it is only my Finwean blood that interests you. That you thought I might be similar to one of Fëanor's sons? Which one did you fancy I resembled?"

"No. You're infuriating." She punched him on the upper arm. She then raised herself up onto her toes and took his face in her hands to give him a teasing kiss. "No. You walked up behind Aragorn and touched him on the shoulder. When he turned, you kissed him on temple, so gentle and tender, as though he were but a boy. The love in your eyes took my breath away. I thought of how I had always wanted someone who could love with such intensity."

"So, it was my love for my foster brother that made you love me?"

"It was your capacity to love. And I have never loved you less from that day to this, even on the days when I find it hard to like you." She tried to adopt a teasing tone and make light of the emotion of the moment, but a single tear betrayed her.

§ § § §
Faramir entered his bedroom agreeably tired. It had been a challenging, if difficult week, ending with both the Steward and the King in high spirits, pleased with one another and themselves at their accomplishments. One young and one old warrior, each with an inclination to intellectualism, through wits, charm and cajolery had been no match for the motley mix of soldiery, diplomats and bureaucrats they had been forced to engage. He dined alone with Aragorn and stayed to drink for a while. Faramir had left the King's quarters moderately intoxicated. *I must remember next time that Aragorn has a far better head for alcohol than I do.* Aragorn expected his bride within a few weeks and had spoken of his elation at the thought in an unembarrassed and frank manner. Faramir missed Éowyn, but a quick calculation earlier in the day revealed to him that he also must only wait another three weeks or so for her return to Minas Tirith. *I will sleep well tonight.*

He did fall easily asleep. The dream found him in an unrecognizable environment of moonlight and golden leaves. He leaned over his cousin Lothíriel, looking down upon her face transported with desire, her arms reaching up to him. Even in a dream he recoiled from the thought of making love to his close kinswoman before almost immediately realizing that he was not the lover in the dream. The man in the dream, however, had nothing about him of the *fēa* of Éomer that he occasionally had sensed. At that moment his body became his own again and the face he gazed upon transformed into that of Éowyn.

Faramir woke up suddenly, completely sober and perspiring, with his night clothes twisted uncomfortably around him and his legs tangled in the sheets. The experience of such dreams dated back to his early childhood becoming more vivid as he aged. He only spoke to Boromir of them, after he had first mentioned them to his father who scolded him--a gruff but affectionate attempt at reassurance--saying they portended nothing beyond an overactive imagination and a fondness for eating sweets too late at night.

Boromir comforted him when he would wake up crying as a child after one of the more frightening ones, like the dream of the great wave. The brothers began to call the good or neutral ones dreams of foresight. The negative ones they referred to as dreams of foreboding. In time they recognized some of them as a reflection of a collective memory of those whose ties to Numenor were strongest.

Their inability to interpret the vast majority of them until the event they foreshadowed loomed upon them resulted in endless speculative, frustrating discussions. This time he would speak to Aragorn or Mithrandir who perhaps knew more of such things than he did. He left his bed to wash his face and drink some water before returning to sleep until dawn.

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*vanya vendē* - Quenya - beautiful maiden
Lothíriel dismounted from her horse to take one of the last respites they would have before the group from Lothlórien rode into Minas Tirith. Elladan came up behind her and gently placed his hand on her shoulder and turned her around so that she was looking up into his face. They stood between their horses, which Lothíriel noted gave them a small measure of privacy at least.

"I do not know if I can bear this," she said forlornly. "What a fool I have been. If I hurt so bitterly, what must I have done to you?"

"My love, you could not be more wrong. I cannot deny the pain I feel at letting you go, but I knew the limits before I began. I would not trade my anguish for Ages of peace in which I would never have known you," Elladan said softly.

"What can I do to make it better?" Lothíriel asked.

"Give me another kiss. Please go on being fond of me in whatever way you can manage, but know that I will not interfere with your life. I also want you to know that I will always love you, as much as I wish, and in my own way. No one can take that from me."

"But you must not torture yourself that you have hurt me, Lothíriel. You have healed me of a tenacious despair that I have harbored for over 200 of your years. For that I will ever be grateful," Elladan said. His face appeared placid, but his eyes filled with ardor.

She threw her arms and around his neck and clung to him with a vice-like grip. Elladan pried her loose with some difficulty and laughed tenderly. He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and lifted her face. His audacious grey eyes met hers with a flash of one of his ever-alluring smiles.

"I only asked for a kiss, not to be strangled," he said indulgently, softly stroking her cheek. She thought her heart might break. He bent his handsome head a little and touched his lips to hers, at first tenderly, somewhat tentatively, and then in an impassioned kiss.

When he pulled away from her, she moaned imploringly, "Elladan, I need you now."

"I am sorry, my sweet, sweet girl. It is too late to make any more memories. Last night will have to
"What of our memories of Lothlórien?" she asked.

"Those are unalterably exquisite, but I prefer last night to the almost too perfect dream that we dwelt in there," he answered.

This time, she laughed and teased him, "I am not sure that I prefer the cold, damp ground with rocks and sticks poking in my back."

"I wanted to know I had you at least once in a real world as well. Anyway, it is not what was poking in your back, but what was between your legs, that I want you to remember of last night," he said with mock gravity.

"You are very wicked, Elladan. What will I do without you?" Lothíriel said, trying to maintain the lightness of his tone, but choking a little on the words before beginning to sob in earnest.

"Shhh. You must do all the things that you have dreamed of doing, my love. You will be a worthy queen, a wife, and, in not so many years, a mother. Quiet now. I will come to see your children, to teach them to question authority, and how to torture you and Éomer, as all parents should be tortured. Do not cry. I promise that you will be happy," he said. "If you ever need us, Elrohir and I will come to you immediately. Please do not cry." He held her close against his chest, his arms wrapped about her.

"Lothíriel, please, you are killing me," he beseeched. "Help me with this."

"I cannot," she sobbed.

"You can," he answered, "and you must, for me. For I cannot do this alone."

"Then for you I will try, Elladan," she said, trying to control her voice and ragged breathing. "Yet I cannot, will not, be sorry we were together."

"I am not and I do not want you to be. Now, I must leave you here. Elrohir and I will ride ahead and scout. We will then circle back to meet you," Elladan said.

"So we will meet again in a day or two. But all will be different then," she whispered.

"Yes, dear one, all will be different. Yet, you will still be you. I will be me and we will always know what we have shared," Elladan said. Lothíriel looked up to see that Arwen had approached them and stood waiting, while patting Elladan's Elven steed.

"Arwen," he said. "Elrohir and I will leave now. Will you stay with Lothíriel for a while?"

"Of course I will, brother. We have decided that we will rest here tonight and follow you in the morning," Arwen said, kissing Elladan and slipping her arm around Lothíriel's waist. "Come with me, we will sit and talk. I've asked someone to look after your horse."

"Elladan!" Lothíriel cried out, suddenly frantic, as he walked away from them. He came back, gave her kiss. He hesitated for a second, then reached inside his jacket, pulled out a folded piece of parchment and put it in her hand.
"Namárië, my love," he said, turned, and was gone.

Lothíriel sagged against Arwen, feeling terribly nauseous for a moment and as though she might faint, when Arwen's kind voice brought her immediately to her senses.

"Lothíriel, are you going to be sick?" Arwen asked, yanking Lothíriel's skirts back against her legs, as though to prevent them from being soiled.

"Oh, no," Lothíriel answered, horrified. "I am fine."

"Then let us go sit for awhile," Arwen said. "Is this your bag?" she asked, picking up a large leather satchel that the Elf who had taken Lothíriel's horse had removed and placed on the ground near them. Lothíriel nodded. The two women walked to a nearby fallen tree and sat. Arwen took the parchment from Lothíriel's hand and started to place it inside of the bag, after catching the younger woman's attention.

"Shall I put this here. It looks as though Elladan has written you a poem or a love letter. You should guard it well. I have never heard of him favoring a lover with such a romantic gesture," Arwen said.

"Thank you, Arwen," Lothíriel said, "I feel like such a fool."

"Do not be silly. You have just done something exceedingly difficult for one so young. And done it gracefully as well," Arwen said, with a gentle laugh.

"Gracefully? Hardly. Look at my face," Lothíriel said sniffing. Arwen reached into a pocket and produced a large, but delicate handkerchief, which Lothíriel gratefully accepted.

"You turned away from him for another man and yet left him with his pride intact. You gave him cause to comfort you. He departed feeling the brave, strong one. If I did not know you did so completely without calculation, I might have thought you were a very clever girl," Arwen said smiling sadly.

"You and your family are not angry with me for all of this?" Lothíriel asked.

"We are not, my dear. You have been good for him. Elladan's heart seemed to have turned to stone after the loss of our mother. We all feared we had nearly lost him to his dark obsession with revenge. You opened up his heart and in doing so freed Elrohir as well. Everyone who loves him sees the change. We are grateful," Arwen explained.

"Oh, Arwen. It was so hard for me to let him go. You cannot imagine what it is to turn away one such as your brother. He is so . . . He is so . . ." Lothíriel could not finish.

Arwen was afraid that she was going to break into tears again. She moved closer to the Lothíriel and put her arm around her waist.

"I do know what that is like. I once rejected an Elf I idolized, who was much older and wiser, and glowed with the light of Aman. Unfortunately, at that time, I had not a young lover to take his place. But that is a story for another time. Today I want you to tell me about your King of Rohan," Arwen said, hoping to keep her occupied until she calmed down.

"I will. Like Elladan, Éomer is impossible not to love. He is beautiful, tall and strong like Elladan, perhaps a bit heavier, but with glorious golden hair and blue eyes. His life has been hard. He has
been a warrior since he was little more than a boy. Despite all that, he is a happy person at heart and always filled with hope. I am no artist, but I have some sketches that will give you an idea."

Arwen watched as Lothíriel reached for her satchel and brought out a leather portfolio, relieved to see that princess's tears had dried and her face had brightened. Lothíriel withdrew several pages of pencil sketches. She handed the one on top to Arwen.

"This is one of his face," she said proudly. "And here is another in armor. The Rohirrim are splendid in full armor. See the tuft on the helmet made to resemble a horses' tail. Here he is in courtly garb. Oh, this one is somewhat immodest, but you are an Elf. It should not bother you." She showed one with Éomer clad only in his trousers. His muscled chest and heavy mane of light-colored hair was drawn in careful detail. Arwen could see how the attractive young king, with his aura of heroism, must be irresistible to a young woman with Lothíriel's imagination and resolve.

"He is truly as handsome as I have been told, unless your love for him has made the pictures too flattering," Arwen said.

"You can judge from this one if I am able to capture a fair likeness. It is of your brothers, as they were when I first saw them," Lothíriel said, handing her another sketch.

Arwen took the picture in her hand and studied it. It was Elladan and Elrohir: dark-haired, light-eyed, and their faces Elven-fair, clad alike in mail. They look tired and grim, proud yet harried; their faces were smudged with the dirt and grim of battle.

"It is remarkable how you have distinguished Elladan from Elrohir. You have talent. This was how they looked after the Siege of Minas Tirith?" Arwen asked.

"Yes. Thank you. My tutor told me that I have a good eye, but no refinement, because I do not practice enough. I drew it from memory. They came straight from the field of battle and into the Houses of Healing. That is how they looked when I first saw them—so beautiful and stern. They shed their armour, washed up, and, together with Aragorn, laboured with the wounded far into the night. I did not see them again until the celebrations at Cormallen in South Ithilien. That was where I first learned that Elladan... oh, never mind, that is another story. And one I should not think of now," Lothíriel said. She sighed deeply. An expression of pain and longing flickered across her face. She quickly regained control, although not without effort, and handed another sketch to Arwen.

"Here is one of Éomer's sister. She is much lovelier than that now," Lothíriel explained.

"She is very beautiful," Arwen said. "Though fragile-looking for a warrior maid."

"Yes. She is fine-boned, tall, just a bit shorter than I am, and as slim. But not fragile at all. She was still unwell in that picture. She is like a sister to me already, although a bit opinionated at times. She does not have her brother's easy temperament, but she has a warm heart. I want to find one of my father and brothers and I have some of Aragorn as well," Lothíriel said, hastily shuffling through the sketches.

Arwen reached out and took a sketch, "Elladan," Arwen said. "Forgive me, Lothíriel. I did not mean to pry. If you do not want to me to see this one . . ."

"You may look at it. Perhaps it is my best. Do not tell him you saw it. It might embarrass him. Though he has never seen it," Lothíriel said, blushing.
"It is magnificent. Truly astonishing," Arwen said. In fact, Arwen found herself to be slightly embarrassed, but unable to put it down, mesmerized by its authenticity. It was Elladan's face, framed by a pillow, softened and relaxed, unmistakably caught in the aftermath of lovemaking, youthful, blissful, his hair tousled, his cheeks flushed, with the slightest smile curving his lips.

"I was pleased with it," Lothíriel said, close to tears again.

"I should think you would be. To make someone feel like that and then to capture it forever as you have . . ." Arwen said gently, taking her hand and squeezing it.

"Well, there is always what Elladan likes to call imprinting a memory with indelible Elven clarity. But I was afraid to trust my much diluted Elven blood, so I drew the picture," Lothíriel said.

"I do not think anyone would ever forget such a moment," Arwen said handing it back to Lothíriel. "Now, find me the one of Estel and the ones of your father and brothers."

"Here. I found the one I like best of Aragorn. This is how he looks at me," Lothíriel said.

The sketch showed Aragorn with a mirthful, quizzical expression, handsome and at ease. "I think he must be quite fond of you," Arwen laughed.

Lothíriel laughed also, responding, "Your Estel is a generous man. He tolerates me well beyond what I deserve, but I adore him. I have another you may like better. He is looking very kingly in this one. You may keep it if you like."

"Thank you. It is beautiful. Yes, I would like very much to keep it. I have seen him look like that."

"He does look kingly, my Dúnadan--but a king of men, the star of Elendil on his brow, and, with some worry lines softened, his beauty shining through--still not at all the handsome Elf-lord my grandmother still persists in seeing, she thought."

"Does he truly look so young and well these days?" Arwen asked wistfully.

"It is a good likeness I think. Oh, here are a several of Legolas Thranduilion. You surely must know him. I have done many of him, because he is so hard to capture. He is so perfect that I fear they always come out looking stylized. This is one more natural, but sad . . . the sea longing troubles him. But he is brave and uncomplaining," Lothíriel said gravely. "I am so fond of him. He is kind to me, although he does like to tease."

"You are wrong. The other sketches are like him as well. Even among Elves, he truly appears that flawless," Arwen answered. Lothíriel ignored her with a shrug, to Arwen's amusement, her manner demonstrated that she was clearly certain she could do better.

"I knew I had at least one good one. Here he is with Gimli the Dwarf," Lothíriel said, triumphantly pushing the sketch at Arwen, who laughed as she took it.

"I concede. You are right. This one does have more life about it," Arwen said, smiling. Legolas was opening his mouth to speak, a hint of mischief playing about his eyes, while Gimli looked decidedly put out. Nonetheless, their affection for one another was evident.

"And one of my father, with all of my brothers." Arwen considered the noble, nearly ageless, wise face of Imrahil, looking more a lordly Elf than a Prince of Men, surrounded by three cheerful, astoundingly comely young men, who resembled their father and one another strongly.
"Well, it is clear to see why your father is called Imrahil the Fair," Arwen laughed. "He is indeed a most attractive man. That is not to say your brothers are not handsome, but they look so very young. Except this one," she said pointing to Elphir. "You have drawn him as the responsible one."

"That is my brother Elphir—the heir. He has endured the weight of expectations beyond those of the rest of us. I often wonder if my father was fortunate in the character of his firstborn, or if it is Elphir's position that has made him more serious," Lothíriel said.

"Now, tell me the names of the others, the striking one, who looks most like you, and the impudent one," Arwen demanded gaily.

"The striking one, as you call him, is Amrothos, the youngest. Growing up he was my greatest trial and dearest friend. He is not at all less impudent than Erchirion, but more so. He knows how to hide it—the better to disarm people. Erchirion is the truly intelligent one among us, but perhaps with the most still to learn about life," Lothíriel said affectionately.

Arwen's eye fell upon the next sketch. The face affected her greatly. He had the classic nose and jaw line, black hair and light eyes, of the type of Númenórean blood run true. She picked up the picture and studied it carefully. Far more than his singular attractiveness drew Arwen to the picture. She thought that Lothíriel had imparted to him a depth of character beyond that of the other portraits, except perhaps the one of Elladan. She sketched him with a mixture of vulnerability and strength, perhaps nearly shading into stubbornness, a subtle but undeniable sensuality, and a capacity for warmth and happiness that did not completely overshadow an underlying sadness reflected in his grave expression.

"Oh my," Arwen said in a surprised voice. "You saved a most interesting sketch for last. Who is this man? Can it be Faramir, Steward of Gondor? He resembles you too much not to be your kin and there is a definite touch of Lord Boromir about him."

"It is Faramir. You will grow to care for him, for you will work closely together, since it will be the two of you who will advise Aragorn on a daily basis," Lothíriel said with complete conviction.

"Faramir is like Éomer in that everyone loves him. He is one of the gentlest and wisest of men. Aragorn respects him greatly already. Mithrandir too. I cannot begin to tell you how kind he is to me. Now we will be doubly joined, since he is to wed Éomer's sister Éowyn. She will be the most fortunate woman in Gondor, except for you, of course. I think Faramir knows me better than anyone, even better than Éomer or my brothers."

Arwen could not hold back a hearty laugh, "Lothíriel, you are gifted."

Lothíriel answered earnestly, "Thank you, Arwen. Do you think I should take lessons again?"

Arwen laughed again and hugged the young woman, "It is not the sketches I refer to, although they are marvelous indeed, but that you have an impressive capacity to love so many people so unconditionally and to be loved by them in return."

"Arwen, that is so kind of you," Lothíriel gushed. Arwen was tempted for a moment to object that kindness did not motivate her observation, but feared she would be misunderstood and remembered that she had all but explicitly promised both Elladan and Estel to be kind to this young woman. She held her peace and tried to remember if she herself had ever truly been so young.
Lothíriel gathered all the pictures into the portfolio. "There are more, but I will bore you into a stupor if I show all of them to you at one time. Would you like me to keep the one of Aragorn with the others until we get to Minas Tirith so that it will not get wrinkled?" she asked.

Arwen held the parchment against her chest. "Thank you, but I would like to keep it. I would like to look at it again later. I will handle it with care. Truly, you have not bored me at all. I feel as though you have introduced me to a whole world that I must learn to know when I arrive in Minas Tirith. It already seems less strange to me."

"Oh, I am glad. Maybe tomorrow during one of our rests, I should show you more of those people." Lothíriel said, placing the portfolio in the bag. She then took up the parchment that Elladan had given her and unfolded it.

"It is a poem," she said. A single large tear fell onto the parchment and threatened to wash away the initial tengwa of the first word."

"Oh," she said in a tiny voice and shoved the parchment at Arwen. "Will you read it to me, please? I cannot." Arwen reluctantly took it and began in a soft voice,

"He begins with the word, 'Unfinished.'"

Was it the double of my dream
The woman that by me lay
Dreamed, or did we halve a dream
Under the first cold gleam of day?

I thought: "There is a waterfall
Upon fair mountainside
That all my childhood counted dear;
Were I to travel far and wide
I could not find a thing so dear."

My memories had magnified
So many times childish delight.
I would have touched it like a child
But knew my finger could but have touched
Cold stone and water. I grew wild.
Accusing the host of Valar because
It had set down among its laws:
Nothing that we love over-much
Is ponderable to our touch.[2]

"Arwen, it is lovely. It is about us, but it is not. It is about his life and the condition of life. I am right to think that it is extraordinary, am I not?" she asked overcome with emotion.

"You are right. It has pain and the promise of healing in it as well. You should treasure it. Perhaps someday he will want to finish it," Arwen said.

"Arwen," Lothíriel whispered, afraid to speak it aloud. "It is not finished is it?" Arwen knew she did not refer to the poem.

She looked at the brash young princess, with a sense of annoyance and impatience that faded into
reluctant compassion. Then, taking a deep breath, she answered, "Only you and my brother can answer that question."

"Come now I intend to look after you tonight. I think I smell food cooking; we should go back to the others and see. It is important that you should try to eat when you are upset. We have a long way to travel tomorrow and we have much that awaits us when we reach the City," Arwen said. "And, Lothíriel, thank you for the picture of Estel."


Lothíriel walked quickly from the Dol Amroth princes' townhouse to the Citadel where she had promised to meet Faramir promptly at midday. She pushed against the sluggishness that pervaded her every attempt at movement. *I will be late again and he will be annoyed.* Her ability to motivate herself since she had returned to Minas Tirith had deteriorated dramatically. If Irilde or Cook noticed her uncharacteristic lack of intervention in the day-to-day running of the household or the kitchen they had chosen not to comment. *They are probably relieved not to have to argue with me. It certainly is more peaceful around the house.*

Lothíriel occasionally spied Irilde casting a puzzled, worried sideways glance at her when she responded to a suggestion or request for approval with a "Whatever you think best," or "Let us think about that later." Her only pleasure or distraction came from the time she spent with Arwen. But she felt lately that even Arwen had begun to give her *those* looks.

A mid-day reception she hosted for her father during the week of the royal wedding had shaken her out of her lethargy for a mere two days. But a dinner in honor of Aragorn and Arwen that she planned with the staff of the House of the Steward on behalf of Faramir had come and gone without evincing the faintest ripple of enthusiasm on her part. She dismissed a momentary flash of guilt that she had not given her beloved cousin her usual single-minded attention in that instance with a half-hearted self-assurance that the affair had been more than good enough as those things go. She had overcome any originality or flair the dinner may have lacked with a profligate raid on the finest vintages in Denethor's wine cellar.

Now she was late to meet Faramir who had invited her to ride out with him to meet the Rohirrim who were due in the City by late afternoon. When a messenger had arrived during yet another festive dinner the previous evening at the king's house, Faramir beamed with happy excitement at the news, while she felt only anxiety coupled with dread.

Spotting Faramir where he stood waiting in the courtyard outside of the Citadel, she picked up her skirts and ran to meet him, calling out to him, *"I am sorry, Faramir. I am so, so sorry."*

"Lothíriel, we have no appointment to keep. In fact, I am sure we will surprise them. We do this only for our own pleasure." Faramir smiled but his fine grey eyes widened with concern. "I should have asked you to meet me at the stable, so I sent someone ahead to saddle our horses." He took her hand and began walking quickly in the direction of the stables.

"Oh, dear, Gaerros prefers for me to care for her. Now I have disappointed her as well." Faramir stopped, his sudden movement jerking Lothíriel to an abrupt, slightly painful, halt. She turned to see
his brow furrowed and his generous lips pulled into a thin line.

"I truly think your mare will hold up under the hardship. Are you going to tell me what is the matter with you?" he asked in a tone of voice that broached no possibility of outright refusal. His suddenly grave eyes met hers challengingly.

"Did Ada ask you to speak with me? I have already endured one interrogation on his behalf earlier today. From Erchirion."

In a circular fountain near the patch of grass that held the white tree, young mothers and nurse maids watched over a bright group of youngsters who sailed toy ships upon its wind-ruffled surface in the hot noonday sun. Some of the vessels were models of the proud Swan ships of the Belfalas navy; there were brightly-painted black-sailed Haradrim pirate ships and the occasional Vingilot, usually topped by a glittering imitation Silmaril made from rock crystal or glass.

Lothíriel recalled how she had sailed her very own Vingilot there only a dozen years ago or a little more during one springtime visit to the White City. How she longed she could return to those days when her greatest care was the superiority of her little Vingilot over a larger Haradrim vessel belonging to the cheeky son of a Tower Guard who she happened to know had perished defending Minas Tirith's Great Gate against the Enemy's battering ram. *No. I do not wish to turn time back. Those days were not so bright either. The air would have smelt of sulfur and already Orodruin was belching ugly plumes of smoke with regularity on the horizon.*

Faramir's deep, soft voice intruded upon her trancelike musing. His Southern accent suddenly surprisingly sweet and familiar to her ears after the absence of hearing it.

"No, Lothíriel," he said. "Uncle Imrahil has not spoken to me of his concerns. Your brother did tell me that you refused to open up yourself to him. Everyone notes the difference in you. I want no false words of reassurance just the simple truth. Did something happen in Rohan?"

"Nothing in Rohan...well, nothing so terribly important there..."

She wanted to tell him everything as she had as a child when worn into tears of desperate exhaustion by her two youngest brothers' relentless teasing. Faramir could make it better, ease the pain, and counsel her back onto the path before her. In the present case, if he could not grant her redemption, he could at least show her how to accept her doom with resignation.

The clean, clear touch of his mind upon hers, signaled that he wordlessly asked permission of her to grant him admittance. After first clenching for a moment in fear and embarrassment, she lowered her barrier. She tilted her chin to look up into Faramir's mild sea-grey eyes. He took her other hand and held them both lightly against his chest. Before he could speak she felt a slight, surprised shimmering of their bond. *Now he knows.*

"Ai, By the wrath of the Valar, Lothíriel! What have you done? Elladan? Aragorn's brother and an Elf?"

In the hard, bright sun of the open plaza, bureaucrats, courtiers, and guardsmen moved around them, some who lived in the upper levels of the city returning home for a midday meal and others busy with affairs state. Still others lingered farther away in groups of twos and threes, gazing with wonder at the fast-growing sapling of the White Tree. All of this activity hovered on the edges of Lothíriel's consciousness, while Faramir seemingly without effort held her attention.
Her sense of his steady power reminded her of Elladan, though he used it more gently, with less insistence. *Is that the difference between a lover and a kinsman?* When she and Amrothos communicated by thought she had trouble distinguishing where she stopped and he began and who had initiated the contact. But with her youngest brother, the touch was light, shallow, did not delve, composed of a flicker of understanding, a flash of shared insight, or even a sense of the absurdity of a situation.

Joining minds with Éomer was similar. Additionally, he could always sense her love and, of course, her desire for him. Less fortunately perhaps, Éomer had often sensed her conflicted responses to and feelings for Elladan. Also with Éomer she had always to initiate the contact. Faramir, however, initiated, controlled, probed, definitely seeking, yet still requiring acquiescence at each deepening level of shared consciousness. *Such a beautiful mind and a perfect gentleman even at this. No wonder he is so well loved.* Then slowly he withdrew. Lothíriel felt somehow lighter, less frantic, although still distressed.

"You are well, cousin. You are only troubled and confused." She had thought he would ask her why. "Why would you do such thing? Are you mad? Is he mad? What about Gondor? What about Rohan?" But I should have known he would choose to look at one thing at time. *Why create a political crisis before it has happened. Faramir is no panic monger. He dealt only with the here and now. He did not even consider what all of this could mean for him. Her actions could have made his life much more difficult as well. She might have complicated his future interactions with Éowyn and Éomer. But it was unlike Faramir to make a crisis where one did not yet exist. He had suffered enough trouble in his life to desire to look for more here. If there is to be trouble it will find us quickly enough.

"Are you a healer?" she asked, half in what seemed to her a feeble attempt at a jest but was actually half to thank him for his effort.

"No. Only a friend who considers you to be the closest to a younger sister that he has ever had or ever will have."

"I have always told you that you are much kinder than my brothers." Faramir took her chin in his hand and turned her face upward.

"You do know that you are much too young for him—several lifetimes too young. For that matter, you are too young even for Éomer, who has been forced to grow up even faster than you. But times like these show little respect for youth or fragility. So, you are faced with a choice," he said. She feared that the tears she felt burning at her eyes would spill out, but managed to control them.

"A choice such as it is. How can I know that Éomer will still want me? Elladan and I ended our connection after we left Lothlórien. He knows I love Éomer and that I would hope I can share a life with him."

"And what does Elladan want of you?" Faramir looked stern, raising an graceful eyebrow skeptically.

"He loves me!" Lothíriel said, her voice spiking in shrill defensiveness.

"I gave him that much credit," Faramir answered.

"Fine," she sniffed. "Sorry. He says that he is a Man, can live as a man. But I am not so young and stupid as to believe that. I know that he is certainly is not and never will be, however much blood of
the Edain flows in his veins. And it is not that much."

"In this case your experience is far superior to mine. I have noted a distinct difference between Elrohir and Elladan and Legolas, who feels far more alien and less human to me."

"What if what they say about Elves is true and I bound him to me for all the ages of Arda and died and left him alone after only a few years? Aragorn has far more courage that I have."

Faramir laughed. "Aragorn and Arwen had more than a few years to think about their choices. And Aragorn has told me that Arwen chooses a mortal life. He believes even if she did not love him she still would not have sailed to the West." Lothíriel jerked her head up to look intently at Faramir, truly surprised by his words.

"Indeed? She is very attached to her grandfather. I do believe Elladan might wish to see Aman. He even fancied I might be able to somehow accompany him on such a journey," she said, watching Faramir's face closely for a reaction. "You know what is written of these questions."

"As do you, little cousin. However, neither of us know how much of what is written is true. You might consider speaking with Mithrandir." His eyes lit up with mirth. She knew he remembered the last time they had discussed the possibility of her inquiring of Mithrandir regarding a question relating to her personal affairs. Lothíriel hit Faramir on the arm.

"Shameless man. Do you laugh at the tragedy of my young life?"

"I am actually not laughing, Lothíriel. Do you still want to come with me to meet Ówyn and Ómer, or would you rather wait until they reach the City to see him?"

"I want to see him now."

"You would have made a stalwart soldier, Lothíriel, if a bit reckless for my comfort. You and Ómer are well matched I think, but if he keeps you then you should stay closer to him until you have gained a bit more life experience," he said.

"So you do not think he will turn me away?"

"I am not a seer. I know he will be angry and hurt. But he is generous, has a most independent mind, and is certainly not lacking in courage. Now, let us go before your pretty Gaerros truly is upset with you."

"Thank you, Faramir."

"I only wish you well, cousin." He kissed her on the forehead, before giving her a wicked grin. "If you were a man, I might ask you what it was like to make love with an Elf."

"If you were not the Lord Steward of Gondor and standing in a most public place, and if I were not struggling with a broken heart, I might punch you."

"Don't pretend with me, Lothíriel. You are dying to tell me all about it. But I don't want to hear it." Faramir shook his head at her, narrowing his eyes, his lips falling into an impatient pout.

"Fine, then. I will not tell you. Ever! Except that it is astonishingly different and wonderful. So there!" She raised her chin and crossed her arms over her chest, while lengthening her stride.
"I will not fall for your baiting, Lothíriel," he said from behind, grabbing her by the elbow and laughing.

They walked in silence until they reached the stables. Before entering, Faramir turned to face her and spoke, his voice low, his eyes and expression once again serious. "Lothíriel, whatever happens, I am certain of one thing. Éomer will treat all of this as a completely personal matter between the two of you. It would be better if you spoke of it to no one else."

"Not even Ada?" she asked, greatly relieved. She knew he heard the unspoken words of gratitude of her heart

"Especially not your father. He is burdened enough as it is. Aragorn needs him here for now. Meanwhile, there is news from the south coast. Elphir is being bull-headed and dismissive of Amrothos, who in turn is responding with petty provocations. Every ship that docks from Dol Amroth carries reports and counter-reports from each of them. Imrahil fears they are perilously close to taking their bickering outside of the family."

"Why have I heard nothing of this?" For the first time since returning to Minas Tirith her mind firmly fixed upon something outside of her own head. She needed no answer to her question. Memories of numerous, half-heard references to the situation crowded in upon her now. Normally she would have deluged her father with questions and read all of the reports. "He should call Amrothos back here and send Erchirion to Dol Amroth."

Faramir threw his head back in laughter. "Amrothos should arrive before we leave for Rohan. Erchirion prepares now to depart in two days. Your father hasn't known whether to be relieved that you have not taken sides in this latest imbroglio or worried that you no longer cared."

"Taken sides! Elphir deserves loyalty and respect. He is in a difficult situation. But he has always underestimated Amrothos's capacities, is overwhelmed by the responsibility and defensive of his own authority. Amrothos presents considered, serious opinions as a joke and when it comes to discussing anything with Elphir he shows the diplomatic skills of a drunken orc."

"Well stated, Lothíriel, but old news," Faramir said, in a gently chiding tone.

"Now who is being arrogant and dismissive?"

"Ai, feeling a little better now are you? If you want to be queen of Rohan your opinions are going to have to stand up to more than a little teasing from your favorite cousin who has always told you how clever he thinks you are..." His handsome face burst into a dazzling smile. "...for your age," he added, his smile transforming into nearly a smirk. "There will be few allowances in your new life for Éomer's age or yours."

She sighed. "I know that. The leaders and counselors I met in Rohan are either tough warriors, some of them older than my father, used to governing under the harshest of conditions, or younger than you, hot-headed with strong opinions. None of them deal in any of the courtliness of Dol Amroth or diplomacy found in the ruling circles of Minas Tirith."

"And what did they think of the pretty little Gondorian Princess Éomer brought home to them?"

"They seemed to like me well enough. They do not know me, of course. People grow up fast there and are judged on their merits. They adore Éomer. His people are proud of him. They see his uncle,
his cousin and his father in him. Éomer receives great respect from his countrymen who make few allowances for youth or rank. Oh, but, Faramir, they are splendid. You will love them when you go there. They are honest, fair, outspoken and generous. But I have told you many times how much I love the Rohirrim."

"So that is truly what you want to do and where you really want to be?" He brushed a lock of hair aside that the strong wind of the top level of the City had blown across her face. Faramir's face turned serious again yet tender.

"I am certain of it," Lothíriel said.

"Then you must fight for it. Make sure Éomer understands you are willing to do that."

"So you do think there is hope for me?" she asked. Faramir laughed.

"There is always hope. Look at what we just survived. Shall we be off to meet my heart's joy and your possible doom?"

"Now you sound like Amrothos. I love you, Faramir."

"I love you too."

***

Faramir and Lothíriel rode in silence, despite the fact that their escort followed several lengths behind them to permit them privacy. The heat had grown less oppressive after they left the glare of the City's white stone behind them. Lothíriel suppressed any guilt she might have felt at depriving Faramir of an additional hour of Éowyn's company, by observing to herself in an admittedly self-pitying way that he could look forward to a lifetime with his beloved, while she had only a fool's hope of holding onto Éomer.

Considering that to be the case, she thought a little self-indulgence might be permissible and allowed her thoughts to drift to Elladan. Best to get him out of my system before I see Éomer, because it will not do to think of him then. After the most recent time they had broken their pact not to make love again, Arwen pulled Lothíriel aside and lectured her. She asserted that she took no position on their choice, but warned Lothíriel that they were torturing themselves with the repeated "last times."

After that, Elladan and Lothíriel had engaged in yet another emotional discussion and tearful farewell. One remark cut her to the core. She shuddered at her memory of the pain in Elladan's eyes when he remarked, not for the first time, "The idea of a political marriage is one concept of the Edain that I will never understand."

She refused to argue the point again, as much to spare him anguish as for any other reason. If he chose to cling to the explanation that she had somehow decided to stay with Éomer principally for political reasons, how could she deprive him of comfort of that opinion. Since they had arrived in Minas Tirith there had been no more lovemaking, no more painful discussions.

Lothíriel saw the first glitter of sunshine against bright metal in the distance. Her heart had just begun to palpitate wildly in her chest as Faramir called out to his aide, "Unfurl the banner!" The unadorned white flag of the Steward of Gondor, now sharply cracking in brisk wind, would identify them to the rapidly approaching Rohirrim.
Faramir flushed madly. The wind lifted his dark hair away from his handsome sun-darkened face. The sight of his uncomplicated joy flooded Lothíriel with a wave of sympathy for her dearest cousin's much deserved happiness mixed with sorrow that she could not share such an untainted emotion due to her choices and actions in Êomer's absence. Faramir and his gelding slowly pulled ahead and then picked up speed. Gaerros clearly made it be known that she wanted to follow with an enthusiasm that Lothíriel did not feel but acquiesced to readily.

At the first sight of the Steward's flag, several horsemen in the front rows of the Rohirrim had unfurled long red and green banners with their figures of the stylized white Meara and the golden sunburst, which were now visible to the company from Minas Tirith. The comforting sound of Rohirric horns rang out, as rank upon rank of riders appeared over the slight rise at the horizon. The approaching Rohirrim, several hundred in number, were not clad in full armour yet wore chest plates that glittered in the mid-afternoon sun and only a few wore helms. Despite the predominance of light hair—hues from nearly white, to yellow, to copper, to even a pale brownish shade—Êomer was easily distinguished by his superior height and wild, extraordinarily bright gilded mane.

Lothíriel belatedly remembered that she should have ordered the Dol Amroth flag raised. She turned her head back around to the small group of horsemen accompanying them and sought eye contact with the leader of the Swan Knights. No sooner had she nodded her head and raised one hand than the alert captain had unleashed the standard of Belfalas. The white-swan ship upon a field of blue, prompted a shout of approval from the ranks of the Riders of Rohan. An agonizing burn suffused Lothíriel's face at the sound. Well aware that the acclaim had been raised almost entirely in affection for Êomer, she nonetheless became painfully aware again of how beyond personal desire had been the matters she had toyed with in the past few weeks.

When the two groups had drawn close together Êomer raised his right arm straight up signaling the troops behind him to stop. The small company of two dozen or so, made up in equal parts of Swan Knights and City Guards, also stopped behind Lothíriel and Faramir. The Princess and the Steward rode forward to meet Êomer and Êowyn. Êomer swung off of his horse, landing easily, firm and sure. He raised his arms up to Lothíriel and she permitted him to help her dismount from her horse. She felt tears on her cheeks, but he simply laughed and kissed her. She thought, as she always did, that he nearly overpowered her with his wanton, generous sensuality so imbued with the urgency of mortal youthfulness. She had encountered Elves in Lothlórien who surpassed him in perfection of mien but none who were any handsomer, not to mention none more dashing or regal, than her horse lord. If I have lost this opportunity forever even a semi-immortal life with Elladan in the Blessed Lands to the West would not comfort me. When he claimed her with a scorching kiss, she could think of nothing but how welcome were his lips. Lothíriel noted that a similar moment of joyful reunification took place along side of them where Faramir greeted his white lady of Rohan.

After they had led the horses down the sloping side of a small embankment to a stream, which ran for some distance nearly parallel to the road, and allowed them to graze and rest for a while, Êomer finally insisted that Lothíriel mount Firefoot and ride together with him the short distance to Minas Tirith. Although Lothíriel had not attempted to unguardedly link with Êomer, neither did she sense in their light touch of mind-upon-mind any suspicion or anxiety upon his part.
The throng of the populace of Minas Tirith awaiting the return of the Rohirrim, both before they reached the refurbished city gates and after they had passed through them, nearly rivaled the crowds which had gathered to bid them farewell some weeks earlier. Lothíriel watched fascinated at the innate regality with which Éomer greeted all and sundry. If she had not believed in doom or fate, watching her beloved, who had never presumed or aspired to rule his people, accept both the adulation and responsibility of that role with modesty and sureness of purpose would have convinced her. She was ever delighted to note that Éomer was well-loved by the people of Minas Tirith, perhaps nearly equally to their own favorite son, Faramir, or her father, Prince Imrahil, who had been beloved by the City since his youth as the younger brother of their own Lady Finduilas and the heir to Gondor's most illustrious fiefdom. Of course, the true heroes among heroes of the City of Minas Tirith were the illustrious members of the Fellowship of the Ring.

Once inside of the city walls they were forced to a walk by the slippery streets on the uphill trip, level-by-level and gate-by-gate, to the Citadel. Éomer whispered into her ear a question which nearly caused Lothíriel's heart to stop: "So, my sweet, have I managed to hold onto to your heart during our separation or did your Elf-Lord make use of his opening?"

"Éomer, I will always love you," she protested, the energy of her response fueled by a surge of dread and guilt.

"Ai, so the answer is not as simple as I had hoped. Well, we will speak when we reach the Citadel," Éomer said. "You came to meet me at least and seem happy to see me. Perhaps I should be grateful for that."

"Stop, Éomer. Later. Look there is Aragorn and his Lady, our Queen, whom you have not yet met."

"Indeed. So that is the sister of the famous Peredhil twins. Now it is obvious to me how he could wait decades one such as her," he said.

"I am told I resemble her," Lothíriel said, utterly unable to keep the peevishness out of her voice.

Éomer let loose a broad laugh. "Oh. I believe you are jealous. Well, rest easy, little one, I can see the resemblance myself. Perhaps you do look a bit like she might have in her early youth."

After they had left their steeds at the stables, they walked back into the open courtyard before the Citadel, where Elessar awaited them with his Queen. The royal couple stood alone, accompanied only by Legolas.

"My good friends," Aragorn said, greeting both the Rohirric lord and lady warmly, bending to kiss Éowyn's hand before clasping Éomer by the forearm. Gesturing toward Arwen he permitted an endearing, pleased-with-himself smile to pull up at the corners of his mouth. "And this is my wife
and Queen, Arwen Undómiel. Arwen, please greet Lady Éowyn of Rohan and King Éomer."

Arwen stepped forward and approached them with open arms, black-tressed, tall and slim, and yet consummately womanly in figure, her features exquisitely fine and her complexion fair with rose-colored cheeks and red lips. The queen first embraced Éowyn and then Éomer, saying, "I have heard so much about you. You are both much admired in Minas Tirith, in all of Gondor."

Lothíriel was left standing alone, with a heavy and fearful heart, acutely aware of how Arwen apparently had enthralled Éomer. Since she had known him she had never seen him react with such obvious fascination to any woman aside from herself.

"We will stand on no courtly formality this afternoon," Arwen continued. "If you are not too tired, I would like to invite you to come inside and share a quick drink and some light refreshment before you leave to change from your travel garb and rest. It would please me if you would meet some of our family members briefly now. You may become better acquainted with them tonight at dinner and afterwards."

Éomer bent graciously over Arwen's hand and kissed it, then, looking up into her eyes and smiling, he said, "Whatsoever your highness shall command of me, either now or in the future, I shall most gladly do."

"Your lady told me that you were handsome, brave and capable, my lord, but she did not tell me that you were a model of courtly considerateness," Arwen said, smiling at Lothíriel with an encouraging wink invisible to all except for the anxious Princess. Arwen took Éomer's arm and Elessar took hold of Éowyn and the royal party of Rohan, along with Lothíriel, Faramir, and Legolas, entered the Citadel.

One of the smaller and more elegant of the halls and meeting rooms near the entrance to the Citadel had been set with two long tables set end-to-end and covered in pristine white cloths. Handsome young serving-men, simply but elegantly clad in black tunics bearing a stylized monogram of the White Tree, moved among the newly-arrived guests offering them wet cloths and towels for cleansing their hands before seeking refreshment. Platters of Elven-style fluffy, buttery pastries filled with vegetables, meat or mushrooms were arranged side-by-side with plates holding fragile pyramids of individual-sized custard and berry pies and a wide selection of fresh fruit and cheeses. Large carafes of wine, both red and white, were placed near clear glass pitchers holding a variety of iced fruit-waters and tea.

Legolas drew alongside of Lothíriel and took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. "Chin up, Princess," he said. "Arwen will put him neatly in his place and you are certain in any case that you are the one he truly loves."

"Would that were all there is to it," Lothíriel said.

"Indeed!" Legolas said, with a laugh. "You have no secrets from me. Trust me when I say that much is forgiven the young, foolish and too beautiful for their own good. Éomer is also more clever than he is proud," he added in an enigmatic whisper.

"I love you well, sweet prince, for you never allow me to become too vain nor to languish in self pity," Lothíriel said, reaching up to touch Legolas on the cheek. He took her hand and kissed it graciously. At that moment she heard the crack of Éomer's laughter and looked up to see him totally absorbed in a conversation with Arwen and Frodo, but beyond him stood Elladan who watched her with shadowy eyes his arms folded across his chest in a defensive, gloomy stance.
Lothíriel hung back in the company of Legolas as Éomer, Éowyn and a number of the Rohirric King's captains and advisors were introduced to Elves of delegations from Imladris and Lothlórien. A familiar snort of laughter barely heard above dim of conversation around her called Lothíriel's attention to the front of the hall where she noticed that Gimli and Éomer seemed to be engaged in some tomfoolery that greatly amused the Periannath and Aragorn. Introductions had been made and the diverse assemblage relaxed and began to mingle. Lothíriel smiled to herself watching Lord Celeborn's serene face closely, his long silver hair, pale gray eyes. Despite their complete contrast of coloring, she again was struck at how greatly Elladan resembled his grandfather. She involuntarily glanced in the direction where she had last seen Elladan and he instantly caught her gaze and smiled with understanding, and slowly wended his way to her through the gathering. She blushed but did not look away.

"Why?" Lothíriel asked, when her bold Elf-Lord reached her side.

"Why not? Am I not permitted to speak to you at a public reception now?" he asked, feigning to be innocently aggrieved. Lothíriel dropped her shoulders and sighed, wheeling around without answering him only to find herself face-to-face with Éomer.

"Enough," Éomer said and took her by the elbow and led her quickly out of the chamber and down the hallway. Lothíriel would not have said she was pleased to leave the hall with him, nor was she disappointed. She did not like to postpone inevitable encounters.

"Where can we talk?" Éomer said.

"There. The door to Faramir's study is open," she said pointing. "He will not return soon."

They entered the chamber, flooded with late afternoon sunshine. The charm of its dark wood and comfortable interior was marred only by the desk in one corner, overflowing with papers and official-looking documents.

Éomer kicked the door shut behind him. Lothíriel examined his face without trepidation to determine his temper. He looked less angry or sad than resigned.

"So, nothing has changed," he accused.

"Everything has changed."

"But not for the better."

She reached out for him and then let her hand fall without touching him. She had forfeited the right to touch him. The fevered touching of another could deprive her of him. And yet, though she could not unwish those other touches, she feared she could not live without those of Éomer.

She and Éomer had always touched when they should have talked, had made love instead of making plans. She had opened her mind to him, pretending to him and to herself to offer the purest form of honesty, when in fact it seemed her to now a cowardly refusal to make choices and be willing to defend to those to him. Now it may be too late.

She could not look up to meet his eyes, but instead fixed her glaze upon the gold braid and lacings at the neck of his tunic, inhaling his scent of sun light, horses, and leather in brokenhearted desperation and need. At that moment he took her chin in his hand and roughly jerked her head upward forcing
her to meet his eyes—those eyes the blue of a summer sky, darkened now in sorry, anger, or confusion?

"What do you want of me, Lothíriel?" he asked, the naked pain in his clipped voice as hard, fine and sharp as the edge of a newly honed sword.

"I only want you to still love me." She fought to keep her voice from trembling. It will not do to appear to bid for his sympathy with the quavering voice of a spoiled child deprived of a trinket. *This is the man that I want to marry—a creature of rare passion and pride but not one to be mastered by the excesses his own emotionalism. This is the man who offered me his love, a kingdom and a life of purpose.*

"I am doomed for good or ill to love you. You presumptuous Elvish witch." The quiet tone of his voice might have hidden his anger if the emergence of a rough Rohirric accent had not betrayed him.

"I'm sorry." She wanted to touch his hair, barbaric in the golden splendor of its wild, sun-scorched curls. It had grown since she had seen him. Wind or sun had reddened his cheeks. *He shaved his beard for me, because I say I like to see his face. To touch his face.* She raised her hand to caress his lower lip, chapped, with a tiny crack in the center, but could not complete the gesture, unable to bear the thought that he might grab her hand or push her away.

"Dare you tell me you are sorry when you reveal your every thought to me, force me to view the hopeless clutter of your emotions?" he asked, his voice a harsh whisper.

"Éomer, I am sorry. Surely you can read that?" *No tears. Tears will push him out of my reach entirely.*

"Sorry you hurt me? Perhaps. Sorry you did what you did. No."

He grabbed her by the shoulders—suddenly, painfully hard. *His strong hands, so graceful, so beautiful—the blood of Westernesse? His mouth upon mine. Not tender or gentle this time, but so necessary, so desired. Yes, my love, yes.*

Releasing the kiss, he breathed into her ear. "That's better. Not so cluttered now is it?"

He softly stroked her cheek and then pushed her against the wall. With both hands, he lifted the layers of her light, summer skirts, ripped a delicate undergarment into two pieces, and pulled it off of her. He held it up for moment, as though for her inspection, with the barely perceptible upward turn of the corners of his mouth—the guilty smile of a bad boy satisfied with a small success—before shoving tattered remnants of lace into the deep side-pocket of his jacket.

Her heart pounding with relief, she began urgently, but efficiently, without fumbling, to unlace the front of his breeches. The doorknob rattled. Projecting his voice to be heard through the closed door, Éomer asked, "Who is there?"

Faramir answered, "Sorry. Not important." Receding footsteps echoed on the tile floor beyond the door.

Éomer released a sigh. "A good man, your cousin." He drew another deep breath and spoke slowly enunciating each word carefully, no Rohirric accent now, but elegant, Gondorian Elvish, "It must end. I cannot bear it. I cannot live like this."
"Please, Éomer...no." Her words came in out in a pitiful-sounding bleat. She felt her throat closing up. *I cannot breathe.* Her chest felt as though it might explode, while she stood there painfully aware of his hands holding her skirt hiked up to her waist--exposed, vulnerable and totally bereft--her arms now dangling at her sides.

Unable to speak, feeling weak in the knees, she allowed herself to collapse against him. He dropped her skirts and took her in his arms.

"Not us. You and him. Apparently your Elvish communication-by-thought is fallible after all." There was a return of tenderness to his voice, if colored still by anger and exasperation. He leaned heavily against her, pressing her body against the wall.

"If you want to be with me, you cannot see him any more. You must agree not speak to him. I cannot even bear the thought of you seeking him out for explanations and fond farewells. I know what that sort of thing involves," he said. He sounded hoarse, his tone young and hurt.

"I love you, Éomer. I love you so much," she threw her arms around his neck, with an elation that matched the intensity of her sense of terrible loss of a moment earlier. "I thought you understood. It is over. We...I already told him that...He promised me...I explained..."

"Hold your tongue, woman. Spare me the details," he said, his voice dangerous with warning.

Éomer felt his immediate outrage melt away as he realized Lothíriel's sense of defeat and despair when she believed he intended to break with her. He loved and hated the way her Elven senses and emotions were sharper. The manner in which Elves could open their minds to another mixed with their apparent aloofness and detachment baffled him. The ones he had met so far, the Peredhil brothers and Legolas, had an ability to crawl inside of one's mind and have a quick look around. Before Lothíriel had taught him to recognize when it was being done to him, he never would never have imagined or noticed such things. Legolas did it lightly, affectionately, almost as though he were announcing himself with wink and smile, and then withdrawing quickly if he felt he had interrupted a thought too dark or private. Elladan and Elrohir, on the other hand, marched in like mûmakis on parade almost daring one to object. Lothíriel, however, tortured him with the indiscriminate sharing of her thoughts with him. *No privacy. No sense of proportion. Maybe we are too different. But I will not decide today.*

He held her in his arms and, although he felt betrayed and angry, for the moment he comforted her.
The sun rose hot and clear on the day of the tournament to be held to honor King Théoden. The entire populace of Minas Tirith, and most of all the knightly participants, had hoped for more temperate weather, but bright sunshine flooded the playing field that had been set up near the city gates. Even the canopy that shaded the royal enclosure offered little in the way of relief from the midday heat.

Lothíriel found her place in the stands immediately behind Arwen and Aragorn. The queen turned around to greet her friend her cheeks flushed with excitement. With her bright eyes and silky fall of black hair, Arwen looked indeed to be the loveliest woman in all of Arda.

Their honored guests from Imladris and Lothlórien were seated, fair and bright, on both sides of the king and queen. Lothíriel nodded to Elrond, Galadriel, and Glorfindel greeting them in flawless High Elvish.

Lord Celeborn stood and took her hand, helping her maneuver into her place behind him next to Éowyn, as she spoke to him courteously in her native Sindarin, exaggerating her coastal accent slightly, which he had somewhat nostalgically revealed to her in Lorien reminded him of his years in the Belfalas area. She released a deep sigh. The sight of the silver-haired elf-lord's sculpted cheek bones and finely arched brows reminded her of Elladan, which made her think of her apprehension about Éomer, who had already left the house before she had awakened.

Arwen turned and took Lothíriel's hand pulling her down a bit closer, as though she sensed Lothíriel's anxiety, and said, "The colors of Dol Amroth suit you well. I knew that was the right dress to choose. Does not she look lovely, Estel?"

Aragorn was less covert in his concern for her emotional state. He stood and leaned toward her after Lothíriel had taken her seat. He squeezed her hand and gave her a light, brotherly kiss on the forehead, "You look very beautiful this morning."

"Thank you both," Lothíriel said. "I got little rest last night."
Arwen reached to stroke the top of her hand. "Arguing or making love?" she asked, with warm sympathy but a knowing glint in her eyes.

"Both," Lothíriel answered.

"If had been only one or the other, I would be more worried about the two of you. Were you as foolish as Lothíriel when you were a young woman?" Aragorn asked Arwen.

"No. I can't say that I was," Arwen responded. "But this is hardly the place to discuss that."

Lothíriel ignored their remarks. She wanted to leave the king and queen to their argument that promised to take their attention away from her, but she felt compelled to comment upon her personal situation again. "He came back to my room drunk."

"Did he?" Aragorn asked, more of statement than a question. He added unnecessarily, "He left the banquet hall drunk as well." Lothíriel did not hold back a chagrined laugh at the memory of Éomer's late return to her room.

"He wasn't the only one who had more than enough to drink last night," Arwen commented with a glance at her partner.

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Lothíriel was not sure how Éomer made it intact from the Merethrond to the Dol Amroth townhouse. No doubt with a great deal of assistance from his loyal guards. Although he had kissed her good night as she left the great hall, promising to follow, she had more than half-expected that he would end up sleeping somewhere else.

She had gone to bed and tried to sleep--a complete impossibility. When the downstairs door opened she heard him stumble and swear. The sounds resembled those that Amrothos had made but a short while earlier, except this time the cursing was in Rohirric, rather than the elegant Elvish of the upper classes of Dol Amroth. She had rolled over to her side and pulled the sheets up under her chin determined to feign sleeping. After a few more audible lurches on the staircase, then again in the upper hallway, the door to her room opened.

"Silly bitch," he swore under his breath. She flinched at his words. "Do not think you can pretend you are sleeping; I am not yet that far gone."

"Stinking drunk," she answered, unable to keep her relief out of her voice.

Éomer stumbled against the bedstead, rubbing his thigh, and looking at her appealingly with whipped-puppy-dog eyes. "Ow!"

Lothíriel jumped out of bed and pushed him down into a sitting position on its edge. "Let me help you with those," she said, beginning to pull his boots off while shaking her head like an irate, scolding wife.

"What this?" He clumsily fingered the gossamer-fine fabric of her summer nightgown. "Were you planning on going somewhere tonight, my lady?"

"Silly. It is a sleeping gown, Éomer."
"Usually don't wear such a thing."

"Well, how was I to know if you were coming home to me, or planned to stay all night, making an even bigger fool of yourself, saying more embarrassing things to Arwen about her being the fairest lady that ever lived and other such hyperbolic nonsense."

"Whoa, girl! Don't get carried away with yourself. As I recall, you are the villain of this piece." He grabbed her under the arms and lifted her to straddle his lap, pushing her gown up to her waist. "I only told the queen she was pretty and..."

"You said a good deal more than that."

"...I am not the one who slept with her brother." He laughed, though a flicker of pain crossed his face.

"Nor were you tempted. He is really not your type." She wished she had swallowed the words before she had spoken them but, as usual, too late.

"What is my type? Are you my type, you over-bred fine lady?" he asked, with a lopsided, inebriated grin. Éomer leaned forward and kissed her softly at first, increasing the pressure until his tongue pressed through her lips. He shifted a little sliding her body back away from him and reached to down to touch her, stroking gently. She responded with a surprised vocalization, more of an inelegant squeak. He laughed softly, pleased. Releasing her lips he kissed her on each eyelid. Lothíriel felt the panic that had gripped her tightly in the chest for the entire day and evening slowly begin to recede.

"Awfully sure of yourself aren't you?" he asked, his voice a dangerous growl, while his eyes crinkled around the edges threatening another big grin. "Or perhaps still hopeful?"

"Dreadfully, desperately hopeful," she said.

He stood up, lifting her effortlessly and throwing her into the middle of the bed before he collapsed across her body, eliciting a startled squeal.

"Shhh. Sorry. Careful. You'll wake up your 'da." His voice slurred again, as though the move to a prone position had addled him. Then in a clearer voice he asked, "How hopeful? How desperate?"

"As much as you want me to be."

"Oh, my love, I want you to be very, very desperate," he said, his crooked smile looking simultaneously wicked and boyish to her. "Do you want me little one? How much do you want me?" He gave her no opportunity to answer, only taunting, teasing, touching, with lips, fingers, tongue-interspersed with more questions to which he wanted no answers. "Did your elf-lord know how much you like this?" "Or this?" "Or how wild this can make you?" He finally entered her with long, slow movements, intended to torment as much as to fulfill. She had nearly forgotten his skill and endurance, had almost begun to think of those as Elven traits alone. In the end she forgot everything outside of the taste, the scent, the feel of him, until he cried out at his undoing. He rolled off of her and pulled her up against him, holding on much too tightly for comfort.

"It is not enough, what I asked you to give me of yourself. I lied. I want everything," he said.

"Éomer, I . . ."
"S'all right. Go to sleep now. Didn't mean to say that. I'm drunk, sweetheart. People stupidly tell the truth when they are drunk. Tell nice-sounding lies when they're sober."

He finally loosened his grip on her and she was able to fall asleep. When she woke up in the morning, he was gone.

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Éowyn's strong voice jolted Lothíriel from her rumination.

"I hope the archery and the sword work on foot is held before the events with the horses. The sun is much too hot for the horses right now."

"Do not worry, Éowyn. Your brother insisted," Aragorn answered. "Although it caused Legolas some anxiety."

"What? Lothíriel asked. "Legolas was worried about the archery?"

"Apparently, some prevaricating Lórien archers got to him with their alcohol-fed bragging last night," Glorfindel said, chuckling like a boy, breathtaking in the dazzling sun, golden hair resplendent against a dark red tunic of Elvish cut.

She saw for the first time the resemblance to the legendary elf-lord that the peredhil brothers had seen in Éomer. It lay not in the similar bright hair, height, strong build, or martial manner, but the openness of temperament and playful sense of humor. Neither the darkness of the Eastfold under the shadow of the Enemy nor the treachery of Grima Wormtongue in the Meduseld had taken it from Éomer. And Glorfindel had kept that lightness as well despite the fall of Gondolin, the fiery Balrog, and loss of his House and family. By the grace of the Valar, if I am granted another chance, I will do what I can to insure that Éomer never loses that warmth due to further careless stupidity on my part.

"With all respect, Lord Glorfindel, there are at least a half a dozen of my archers who will make Legolas work for his prize," said Celeborn, with a laugh. "And I saw the Lord Steward of Gondor and some of his Ithilien Rangers practicing. Shooting at a stationary target in plain view is child's play for them compared to aiming at a flickering movement through thick woods under the shadow of Mordor."

Éowyn nudged a sharp elbow into Lothíriel's ribs and mimed fanning herself in appreciation of the obvious charms of the golden and silver-haired elf-lords. Lothíriel grinned in agreement.

"Ah, but it is elven eyesight that will be a distinct advantage at the end," Aragorn said.

Gimli said, his gruff voice well heard along the entire row of seated dignitaries, "I beg your pardon, my lords, but Legolas will take them all barring malfunction of equipment. His nerves are evident only in the anticipation. In the moment he will have none."

"I think you are right, Gimli," said Aragorn, "but it will not be a rout."

"Humpf," grunted Gimli, earning him a smile from everyone within earshot.

Lothíriel twisted and squirmed in her seat, aware of her fidgety impatience but unable to control it, constantly looking down the field toward the entrance to the enclosed area. Éowyn heaved a hearty,
irritated-sounding sigh and whispered into her ear.

"It is a beautiful day. We are here to honor my uncle and enjoy ourselves. I am not in the mood for your foolery. Is there something you would tell me?"

"Shhh. Not here. Not now. But thank you for your ever gracious concern."

"I have not seen Éomer drink so much in months. And now you sit here behaving like a skittish horse that is ready to bolt. Something is up."

"I cannot speak about it now, Éowyn."

"Then settle down and watch games. Here they come now. Oh, my, who is that dark-haired elf?"

There was more than one elf with black or dark brown hair, but Lothíriel did not need to ask of whom she spoke. Both young women studied a broad-shouldered, tall elf, with powerfully expressive features in the Noldorin mold. Clad in a shirt of fine and intricately linked mail that Lothíriel was certain must be fashioned wholly of mithril, so brightly did it glitter in the sun, he held a red-plumed headpiece of ancient design under his arm. He turned to speak to Elrohir and a broad smile sharply illuminated his theretofore-serious face.

"Calm yourself, Éowyn. That is Erestor, chief counselor to Elrond, and surely as old as him or even older—but just wait until you see him up close. He has those Aman-lit eyes like Glorfindel and Galadriel. He is said to have fought alongside the sons of Fëanor in the great historic battles."

"And you traveled in the company of so many beautiful elves for weeks. It is a wonder you were not tempted," whispered Éowyn, before releasing an unladylike guffaw and saying aloud, "But look at Faramir. Your cousin is most comely even in comparison to all of these fair-faced elves."

Aragorn snorted in front of them and Arwen slapped him on the arm. Lothíriel desperately struggled for a way to distract Éowyn. She lowered her voice: "Discounting Faramir, of course, who I agree is handsome, even compared to these elves, which of them do you think is the most attractive? Erestor? Glorfindel?"

"Definitely Erestor. He has such a dangerous, troubled look. I am drawn to the dark, brooding type," Éowyn said, without a second of hesitation. Lothíriel laughed aloud. "So which one do you prefer, Princess? Glorfindel?"

"Shh, Éowyn. Your voice really carries. Elves have unnaturally good hearing."

"Don't be silly. They would know I am only teasing you. Anyway, look at everyone who has gathered on the field of front of the stand. Every elf and man below is looking over the ladies in the stand like they are thinking of buying one."

"That is an important convention of the games. Each of the participants must chose a lady to champion. Faramir will pick you. Then the lady must then give her champion a token of her acceptance. Like a veil or ribbon or scarf to tie onto his lance or helm or his arm. It's an honor to be chosen and a courtesy to accept. Each knight dedicates his performance at the tournament to honor his chosen lady."

"Oh, my, how courtly! What if some truly hideous, orc-like creature asks to be your champion?" Éowyn asked.
Lothíriel grunted and then snapped, "Ai, Éowyn, do you see anyone like that out there today?"

"No actually not. Although there are one or two of my countrymen that I am not overly fond of.... Well, I don't have to worry. Faramir will ask me first and do me proud," Éowyn said, lifting her chin and tossing her hair, utterly unaware of how girlish it made her look. "Oh, Lothíriel, look at Elladan now. He's staring at you like he'd like to rip your throat out."

"I see him. He likes drama, I've learned."

"Unlike you," Éowyn scoffed. "It's no wonder the two of you get along so well, or better I should say, put so much energy into choosing not to get along. Oh, here comes Éomer now."

Éomer looked well, Lothíriel observed, especially for someone who ought to have had a terrible headache. He shot her a brief glance before lowering his eyes to where Arwen and Aragorn sat directly in front of her.

Lothíriel concentrated on looking out onto the field beyond. In the first ranks of warriors who had arranged themselves directly in front of the stands, Legolas stood next to Elladan, who was still frowning but tried to arrange his features into a more placid mode when she in glanced their direction. Legolas grinned and gave her a wink, shrugging and nodding his head with an odd jerky movement. The blond archer was apparently trying to communicate something to Lothíriel but she had not the faintest idea of what it might be. He gave up with the useless head twitching and pointed to his chest. Lothíriel still hadn't a clue and pulled her eyebrows together, then raised her shoulders and widened her eyes to signal that she couldn't understand. Elladan looked at Legolas and scowled again.

At that precise moment, Éomer's voice rang out, with the resonance and volume that Lothíriel had come to associate with him giving a speech or greeting his troops. "Queen Arwen, the most beautiful, kind and gracious lady of all assembled here today, will you grant me the honor of acting as your champion in these games?" Lothíriel quickly straightened her shoulders and snapped her jaw shut. Of course, as the only king on the field today, he had to ask Arwen. Thank, Eru, I have Legolas. That was what he was trying to tell me.

Arwen stood and removed a white scarf, worked in silver, from her sleeve and extended it toward the handsome king. "The honor is mine, Éomer King of Rohan. I gladly accept your service." The crowd broke into cheers and Lothíriel tried to smile and clap appropriately, although her attention was drawn to a small commotion among Elladan, Legolas and Elrohir. Legolas, his eyes fixed forward, was muttering something to Elladan, while Elrohir on the other side held Elladan's arm in a tight grip. Elladan wrenched free of Elrohir's hand and stepped forward to replace Éomer, who had bowed to the queen and returned to the ranks of knights.

"Princess Lothíriel, I offer myself as your champion. Will you accept me?" Elladan asked, in a voice that carried throughout the assemblage.

Aragorn swore colorfully under his breath. Arwen, touching his arm, whispered, "Estel, watch your language or you will make yourself a greater spectacle than my foolish brother."

"Never mind," Galadriel said, patting Arwen in the hand. "I have seen so much worse. These are only games. No one is going to try to kill anyone else."

Lothíriel rose to her feet with every ounce of regality that she could summon under the
circumstances, extending a bright blue veil toward the now-blushing Elladan, from pique or embarrassment, she had no idea.

"I cannot refuse your offer, Elladan Elronnion."

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Many thanks to DarthFingon for corrections on this chapter (and a suggestion for a rewrite of the first paragraph that I took outright).
Lothíriel felt relieved and vindicated when the sections of the stands holding partisans of the city of Minas Tirith and visitors from Dol Amroth applauded. They were apparently pleased that the fiendishly handsome elf-lord had chosen to champion a princess of Gondor and the favorite daughter of the Belfalas region. She felt unable control her faithless, reckless heart at sight of those fuming storm-grey eyes.

Elladan stretched to take Lothíriel's scarf of Dol Amroth blue, his cheeks scarlet, but his chin held high and jaw clenched. Lothíriel melted at the sight. She pulled her scarf back, kissed it, and, leaning hard on Aragorn's shoulder to keep from toppling forward, extended it toward Elladan again. Aragorn grunted at Lothíriel's weight. Arwen sighed in exasperation as Elladan, eyes glittering, snatched the scrap of cloth.

Lothíriel loudly declaimed, "Good fortune, my champion." Elladan broke into a triumphant grin. He kissed the scarf and tied it on top of his armour on his upper right arm. The crowd applauded riotously again. The loudest cheers, accompanied by yelps and shrill whistles, came from the assembled Rohirrim. Lothíriel sought out Legolas and Elrohir to see their reaction. The Elven prince shook his head at her in gesture of aggravation, folding his arms across his chest. Elrohir's eyes, wary and resigned, remained fixed upon his brother.

Chuckling, Celeborn spoke in a loud stage whisper, "To think I thought the Second-born were stodgy and prudish. This is better than an Avarin spring festival."

"Or even worse, depending upon one's frame of reference, I suppose," Galadriel said, not sounding in the least dismayed. "But surely you note that it is your eldest grandson who behaves like a wronged barbarian chieftain." Lothíriel went red in the face, listening to the comments of the Lord and Lady of Lórien.

"Must you always be such a shameless attention grabber," Éowyn said, jabbing Lothíriel hard in the ribs.

"Don't poke me, Éowyn," Lothíriel said, rubbing her side as though it hurt. "You know I hate it when you do things like that. Anyway, I didn't ask him. Why did the Riders respond so strongly?"
Éowyn glanced at Lothíriel with haughty sniff. "Men. They like to tease Éomer and probably think he had it coming for choosing another lady, even the Queen of Gondor, over his promised bride. No disrespect intended, Queen Arwen. No doubt they also like the idea of a willful Queen of Rohan since they were no doubt afraid they were getting a prim and proper Gondorian princess. Heh! Little do they know."

"Could be worse, I guess," Lothíriel responded. Éomer was looking directly at her, not angry, as she had feared, but affectionate and beaming straight at her. She had no idea what his expression conveyed, which agitated her.

"I think something has addled your brains and Éomer's as well. Look at how he's smirking. Can it be that he admires your brazen behavior too? Ah, here comes my proper Gondorian prince," Éowyn said, with a self-satisfied snort.

Lothíriel turned to Éowyn, straightening her shoulders, wanting to give as good as she got, but feeling flustered and at a distinct verbal and moral disadvantage. "Oh. Don't be so sure of that, Éowyn. He drove Denethor scatty with his rebelliousness. And then he took up with likes of you, didn't he?"

Faramir approached the stand and stopped in front of Aragorn and Arwen. He gazed up at Éowyn, his foolish smile reminding of Lothíriel of a child looking at a bowlful of sweets.

"My fairest Éowyn, Lady of Rohan, will you accept me as your champion."

Éowyn stood and was greeted with cheers. Lothíriel wondered where the crowd was getting its energy. The punishing sun on the Pelennor and lack of sleep was giving her a headache. She was certain that the walls of White City were so hot that one could fry an egg on them. Éowyn reached forward to hand a gauzy white veil to Faramir. Not quite as tall or longed-armed as Lothíriel, she released the lacy cloth a moment too soon. The breeze nearly carried it away. Aragorn caught it.

Lothíriel could have kissed Aragorn, when he stood, clownishly sniffed the perfumed scarf, and, bowing, handed it to Faramir, who snatched it with a courtly, waist-deep bow, and grinned like a jester.

"Thank you, my King and liege lord," Faramir intoned in a mock-serious voice. The crowd went wild. Meanwhile Éowyn planted her fists on her hips and looked belligerently from Faramir to Aragorn, before throwing up her hands and laughing. The White Lady of Rohan, as they called her, could do no wrong before this crowd. Minas Tirith, all of Gondor, adored the young woman who had slain the Witch-king of Angmar and won the heart of their beloved Steward.

Lothíriel felt a moment of nostalgia for the time, not long ago, when she would have been the favored maiden in a gathering of this sort anywhere in Gondor, as the only daughter of the Prince of prosperous and romantic Dol Amroth. She thought to herself that with any luck she would soon be far from Minas Tirith, its politics, and fickle preferences. Betrothed to the King of Rohan, she had no intention of breaking that commitment. At least she could console herself at the loss of half of her heart with the memory of Elladan wearing her colors.

Ever the diplomat, Faramir bowed to Éowyn, "I shall not disappoint you, my lady." Faramir had told them earlier that he had no aspirations to place highly in the contest of swordsmanship, but was determined to do well in archery.

"A respectable showing will be more than good enough. I don't expect you to best Legolas, but do watch out for tow-headed Elven lad from Dwimordene. He is deadly accurate and full of himself," Éowyn said sweetly. Arwen nearly choked on the chilled wine she was sipping.
"Ah, yes," Celeborn said. "Young Feredir, our greatest hope today."

After Legolas had claimed the championship of the Lady Galadriel, the begging of favors of the ladies went quickly. While the Rohirrim and others singled out the prettiest girls and young women of Gondor, the rakishly attractive Erestor chose a handsome Lossarnach noblewoman of a certain age, who undoubtedly had been a rare beauty in her youth. Her portly husband looked at least as pleased with Erestor's choice as his delighted wife. Lothíriel mused, not for the first time, that if she had not been determined to marry Éomer or struggling with her determined attempts to squash her enchantment with Elladan, that she could have been drawn to the enigmatic charms of the ancient Noldo.

The swordsmen, tortured by the heat, made a valiant effort to provide some degree for satisfaction for the crowd. Many of the best, had chosen not to participate. Aragorn and Glorfindel had refused, stating they preferred to enjoy the games rather than compete. Lothíriel could not take her eyes off Éomer and Elladan, who stood not two paces apart from one another watching the contests. Éomer stood with his helm tucked under his arm, golden hair lighter than his tanned face. Intense and focused, he is completely engaged in observing the technique of the pair sparring immediately in front them.

Elladan had braided his dark hair in tight rows against his head on both sides, accentuating his high cheekbones. His grey eyes, the pupils narrowed to a pinpoint in the blinding sun, look lighter than Lothíriel had seen them. He wore a contained and serene expression until suddenly, causing her to startle, he yelled something at her brother Erchirion, who sparred with a large, burly Rider of Rohan. Lothíriel laughed aloud in relief. Her brother without looking at Elladan grinned, cocky and self-assured.

Éowyn's voice, her Rohirric accent particularly harsh in Elvish, grated on Lothíriel's abraded nerves. "Ai, Elladan is wrong. Erchirion knows what he is doing. He has already defeated his opponent. He may be strong, and fast despite his size, but Erchirion isn't even winded and easily outwits him."

Aragorn said, "The Swan Knights are incomparable swordsmen as a group. The best in Gondor."

Lothíriel felt a compulsion to defend Rohan, which despite the vigor, bulkiness, and skill of its representatives, was being soundly trounced in this competition by her countrymen. "Indeed. They have had the best, and most expensive, teachers and the leisure to practice untold hours. Something the Rohirrim have not had. Dol Amroth is the richest and most privileged province of Gondor." As she spoke, Erchirion genially accepted the congratulations of the rough, bearded blond, who pulled him into a hard embrace, slapping him on the back.

"Fascinating study in contrasts," Celeborn said. Lothíriel's attention was again drawn back to Elladan and Éomer.

Galadriel laughed. "Like a bear sparring with an wood-sprite. A very skilled and agile bear."

Lothíriel tried to follow the conversation, which would have fascinated her a few short weeks ago, but increasingly caused her head to throb. They must be talking about Erchirion and his Rohirric sparring partner, she thought.

"Wait until you see my brother's sword work, Lady Galadriel," Éowyn added. "He is no bear."

Éomer was certainly not a bear, Lothíriel thought, far too subtle and certainly too slim for a bear. His broad shoulders and golden hair could mislead one at first glance, but he strongly manifested the long-limbed litheness and spectacular height of his Númenórean ancestors over the shorter, stockier build of the children of the House of Éorl. Additionally, Éomer used to his advantage both the
pragmatism of the Rohirrim and the intellectual depth of the Númenóreans.

"I can well imagine. He reminds me of Glorfindel when he was young," Galadriel said.

That was an interesting observation, Lothíriel thought, if not the only time she had heard it. But she had a hard time seeing the similarity, distracted as she was by that unearthly glow about Glorfindel. The effect, however, was less obvious that day in the direct sunlight beating down on the Pelennor Fields.

"I'm flattered, my lady," Glorfindel answered. "A fine-looking fellow, the young Rohirric King."

Glorfindel's impudence with Galadriel never failed to amuse Lothíriel. She felt terribly intimated by the Lady of the Golden Wood herself.

"Oh, don't be too flattered. I spoke with the handsome King Êomer at length last night. Although he resembles you physically, he is far more pleasant and less vain," Galadriel replied, airily dismissive.

Lothíriel almost laughed at that. How could anyone be more pleasant than the ever-affable Glorfindel? She presumed she had missed a reference to some Age-old difference of opinion or dissimilarity in taste. In the case of these Noldor, it was more likely than not rooted in an all but forgotten family quarrel. For example, Galadriel was impatient in the company of Erestor, for example, for no other reason than that his family had aligned itself with Fëanor before any of them had left Valinor, although he had protected and served Elrond loyally for all of the last two Ages. She would have to ask Arwen later what, if any, history there was between Glorfindel and Galadriel.

Celeborn laughed and reached into a pocket, which hung from his belt, pulling out a silver flask.

"Can I offer you drink, Glorfindel? Best Imladris miruvor."

"Bit of waste on that one," Elrond added drily.

"I'd gladly accept one," Glorfindel said, reaching across Aragorn and Arwen to accept the flask from Celeborn. Aragorn watched the exchange longingly.

Celeborn laughed, reaching into the bag again and tossing another flask to Aragorn. "I brought another. Thought that Arwen's sparkling wine might not be to your taste."

Listening to the trivial banter of those around her helped Lothíriel to collect herself. She finally turned her attention to the progress of the games and away from comparing and contrasting Elladan and Êomer. Her father was seated under a smaller canopy on the playing field itself, at table whereupon were rows of medallions mounted on ribbons to be presented to the victors.

Erestor bested Êomer in swordplay, but not without effort. The crowd appreciated the exceptionally well-matched pair. Erchirion took first place. He barely had been able to squeak by Erestor, who had not really recovered from the intensity of his bout with Êomer, a fact the young Swan Knight was anxious to explain to anyone who would listen. A flood of affection for her brother washed over Lothíriel and for Prince Imrahil as well. She noted how proud her father looked when he passed out the medallions to the top three competitors in swordplay. Êomer sprinted over to gift his third-place medallion to Arwen. He glanced up at Lothíriel and gave her a wink. The boyish blush suffusing his face while he apologized to Arwen for not being able to offer her a First indicated that he was not displeased with his result.

As the day progressed, a few cumulus clouds drifted overhead, which together with a breeze from the river at last alleviated the worst of the midday heat. The last preparations for the archery competition were being completed on the field.
Lord Celeborn ventured a comment that this was likely to be the most interesting contest of the day. Lothíriel, however, looked forward with ill-suppressed nervousness to the jousting which was the next event that would include both Elladan and Éomer.
Under the shelter of the royal canopy, Lothíriel had an excellent view of the archers and their targets. The opening of the contest saw the speedy elimination of the majority of the contestants. As she had expected, the field was soon missing most of the bright blue uniforms of the Knights of Dol Amroth. After more than a hour, only a few of the muted greens and browns of the Ithilien rangers remained, along with what seemed to be the entirety of the contingent of silver-grey clad archers of Lothlórien, and a handful of representatives of the black-liveried City Guard of Minas Tirith. At last the preliminary eliminations were complete.

The next round reduced the field to the three finalists: Legolas, Faramir and Ferendir of Lothlórien. The remaining archers waited while the games' attendants cleared the long row of targets and set new ones in place. Legolas, relaxed and untroubled, chatted with an equally sanguine Faramir. The white-haired youth, Ferendir, biting his lower lip and clenching his jaw, could not tear his eyes away from the two older men, revealing to anyone with half a wit that he viewed them as formidable competition.

Éowyn turned to Lothíriel and said, “He certainly is lovely.”

“Which one?” Lothíriel asked. “It is impossible to follow what you are talking about.”

“I saw you appraising the Elven boy. Faramir’s competition for second place.” Lothíriel laughed at Éowyn’s relentless candor about Faramir’s chances, despite her militant partisanship of her betrothed.

Celeborn followed with his own irresistible chortle. “Or Legolas’s competition for First.”

At her husband’s remark, Galadriel made herself heard in a tone of arch assurance. “Éowyn is absolutely right. I have no doubt your favored one might surpass Legolas someday, my love. But today is not that day. He is barely of age. And Faramir is a fully-grown man, an impressive archer, and at the height of his physical capabilities. Neither is Faramir anxious. He’d be pleased to take a third place, while your Ferendir, to the detriment of his nerves, is now determined to best Legolas.”

Celeborn snorted, “Young Ferendir has greater natural aptitude than anyone I have ever seen.” With that remark, off they went, each presenting further arguments to bolster their own opinion. As much as Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn’s bickering ordinarily amused Lothíriel, she had grown tired, hungry, and weary of fretting over Elladan and Éomer.

“I hope they intend to feed us soon,” Aragorn said, turning to Arwen, raising his eyebrows and widening his eyes, with a hopeful look. “Didn’t you say there would be food?”
“Any moment now,” Arwen answered. True to her words, servers approached the pavilion and began passing among its occupants with trays of small sandwich halves, delicate frosted cakes, and fresh fruit.

“From the looks of this fare, we will all heartily appreciate our dinner tonight,” Aragorn groused, gaining him a light shove from his lady.

“What is this?” Glorfindel complained, leaning across Celeborn to Arwen, holding a diminutive sandwich in his large hand and examining it with an expression of outraged suspicion.

“Cream cheese with chopped apples, walnuts, and cinnamon,” Arwen snapped.

“Seriously, Arwen? Don't any of these have meat in them?”

Arwen snatched two from Aragorn’s well-filled plate. “Here, big baby. These are roast beef with horseradish.”

“Hey!” Aragorn protested. “You gave him my only ones with meat.”

In quick defense, Éowyn rolled her eyes. “Argh! Men! Everything looks absolutely delicious.”

Arwen released a light, tinkling laugh. “Can you believe I was willing to wait more than forty years for him?”

Despite her own preoccupations, Lothíriel felt comforted at how well Arwen and Éowyn got along. Any fool could see that Éowyn’s enchantment with Faramir had far eclipsed anything she might ever have felt for Aragorn. Both of the younger women had been encouraged to find Arwen to be confident and outspoken with the ancient men of myth and legend who surrounded her, not to mention with Aragorn. While Glorfindel might argue at times, he listened to her opinions. Elrond had a habit of looking to his daughter for approval after he had spoken.

Arwen also shamelessly indulged Éowyn, having noticed how starved she was for feminine frippery. “Éowyn?” Arwen would often ask, with a smile that fell just short of flirtatiousness. “Shall we see what is in this big, old trunk? I still cannot believe the amount of superfluous clothing my handmaidens packed.” Éowyn had blossomed under Arwen’s interest and Faramir’s transparent respect, without any softening of her steely core.

“Attention,” Celeborn said. “Faramir is preparing to shoot.”

To Lothíriel, Faramir appeared exactly as relaxed as Galadriel had predicted he would be and Legolas could not have looked more at ease.

Faramir took his place, nocked his arrow, raised his bow, and then released it. The arrow landed slightly off center. Faramir smiled, not cocky, but certainly pleased with his form.

He would be permitted three shots, the best of which would be counted. The second hit the bull’s eye, although not perfectly centered. His final shot also hit the bull’s eye, appearing from a distance to have landed at dead center. The judges approached the target, conferred and made notes. At last, an attendant called out loud and clear: “Nineteen for Prince Faramir.” The best possible would have been a twenty. Faramir’s supporters cheered. Each of the final three competitors had scored both nineteens and twenties in the qualifying rounds.

Ferendir, nervy as young horse facing its first race, took his place next. Determined to present an outward appearance as self-possessed as that of Faramir, he loosed his three arrows with studied nonchalance. Each of them hit the bull’s eye, but noticeably off center, as he first overcorrected to
one side and then to the bottom. He could have been awarded a seventeen, but apparently the judges
did not intend to be miserly with his score. “Eighteen for Ferendir of Lothlórien,” the caller shouted.

Ferendir gave Celeborn an apologetic glance. Celeborn responded with an approving hand signal.
Blushing a painful red, Ferendir lifted his chin with some difficulty when the crowd, many of whom
had favored him for his obvious youth and skill, bestowed on him a lengthy, if somewhat sedate,
round of applause.

The wind had picked up by the time Legolas took his position, causing the flags and banners that
surrounded the tourney field to snap and crack sharply and stirring up dust on the field. Legolas
licked his finger and held it in the air, before shrugging in mock disappointment in the direction of a
group of young ladies of Minas Tirith. They squealed as though on cue, earning them a devastating
smile from their hero.

Faramir shook his head good-naturedly at Legolas, forcing the Elven prince to laugh. Playing to the
crowd, Legolas, with no apparent pause for preparation, nocked and shot with lighting speed.
Almost before his arrow touched the target, he shouted toward the judges, “I’ll take that one.”

Legolas strolled over to Faramir, who extended his hand and slapped him on the back. The judges
carefully examined the target, before speaking to their assistant who then called out: “Twenty for
Prince Legolas.” The entire crowd broke out in raucous cheering. They would have been pleased
with any of the finalists; the top three had been their favorites.

“Well, that was short and predictable,” said Éowyn. “I almost wish the Elf-lad had beaten Faramir.
The poor boy looked scared enough to piss himself. And he is so gifted.”

Lothíriel had to laugh at her language. Arwen said, with great seriousness, “You have a generous
heart, Éowyn.”

After receiving a quick hug from Faramir, Legolas approached Ferendir. He solemnly shook
Ferendir’s hand before pulling him into a comradely embrace. Then, keeping hold of the young Elf’s
shoulders, Legolas continued to speak to him, until the lad smiled and began to respond in an
animated manner. Fascinated, Lothíriel continued to watch the two, thinking that she had been the
recipient of the same beneficence on Legolas’s part numerous times in the past few months herself.

The archery contest distracted Êomer from his problems of the heart. After the first place winner had
been announced, he found himself shouting and banging on his helm well after the din of the crowd
had died down.

Êomer assumed Erestor had returned to stand next to him again, when he glimpsed from the corner
of his eye a silver breastplate reflecting the sun’s rays. Êomer had enjoyed the Noldo’s wry banter
until the archery competition diverted his attention. Erestor had then apparently wandered off to find
a more receptive audience.

Êomer laughed and said, “Well done! Legolas makes bow work look like sex. Just as easy and
natural, and almost as much fun.”

“I’m forced to agree with you on that,” Elladan said, his tone arrogant, but not dismissive. “And he is
well aware of it also. Quite the entertainer.”

“I didn’t realize that was you standing there,” Êomer answered, making an effort not to sound taken
aback. He refused to let the Elf-lord think he intimidated him.
“I have been watching you, Éomer. Curious. We’d probably get along if it weren’t for her. Please do not consider me competition for your lady any longer though. I took my chance and she’s made her choice. I offered to be her champion today only because of the look on her face when you asked my sister for her favor.”

Éomer speculated that he and Elladan might indeed have been friends under different circumstances. Such conjectures never were particularly useful, however. Théodred would have made an exemplary king. For that matter, Théoden had died with at least another ten good years of service in him.

“You looked pleased enough when she accepted your championship!”

“Never mind how I looked,” he said, his pale cheeks reddening faintly. “It made her feel better that I leapt into the breach. She is so very young.”

“Spare me your rationalization. You play the hero for her. And both of you are well aware that I had no choice. As King of Rohan, it would not have been seemly if I overlooked the new Queen of Gondor.”

Elladan gave skeptical shrug, and then a tight smile. “You are not typical. You will serve your people well in a new Age. You may thank your grandfather Thengel and grandmother Morwen for that.”

“I can thank them for a lot of things.” Éomer failed to hold back a snort. "My height, my brains, my mastery of Elvish grammar!"

“Ah, yes. I’ve heard it all from Lothíriel, not to mention from Estel. That you are young, smart, multi-lingual, well-read, not fettered by war weariness, and on and on,” Elladan said, shaking his head with a self-deprecating chuckle. "Give her a good life with purpose, horse lord. Or I will hold you accountable to me.” Elladan clapped him on the shoulder.

“You may count on me to take care of her and give her a purpose. What she does with that is her choice,” Éomer said, accepting the gesture and the remark as the peace offering it was, but not without a scowl. It was not easy to look at the unflappable Elf and not feel green and clumsy. “You are insufferable in your presumption. But it is good to clear the air. Jousting is far too dangerous a sport to undertake in anger. And it is too hot for the horses today as well.”

“Speak of your own stock. Legend has it that Oromë’s horses and the Noldorin mounts from Valinor come from same line, but yours have been bred bulkier than ours.”

“Ha! You never stop, do you?” Éomer asked, laughing. “There are many of my countrymen here today who would consider your criticism of our horse breeding practices offensive and call you out on it.”

“And I wouldn’t say it to them either, would I? You are brighter than they are. As well you should be. Shall we shake on it then?” Elladan extended his hand. “You won’t try to kill me today, only to unseat me.”

“Aye. I’ll agree to that.” Éomer squeezed the Peredhil’s hand, putting some muscle behind it.

Éomer turned to focus on those who would be participating in the joust. The Rohirrim riders formed a respectable part of the roster, although Éomer had not encouraged them to join. Their riding proficiency surpassed that of the other competitors. Their skill in handling a lance came up lacking compared to the Knights of Dol Amroth and no doubt to that of Erestor and the sons of Elrond as well.
Éomer considered jousting a sport of the privileged. He had some experience himself, although not recent. Théodred had taught him the basics in his youth, in an attempt to forge a bond with his orphaned younger cousin. After that, there had been little time for war as a game.

The sun shone as hot as it had all afternoon. With his helm tucked under his arm, Éomer felt the breeze from the river in his hair and on his face. But he was roasting beneath all the layers of his equipment. Whirlpools of dust swirled at his feet and an occasional gust of wind caused him to narrow his eyes. He could taste the grit in the air. Along the far end of the tournament field most of the riders who were to participate in the joust had already begun to assemble.

A trumpet sounded. Prince Imrahil presented a long parchment scroll to one of his assistants and raised a hand toward the elevated stands for silence. The aide began to read the pairings in the order in which the names had been drawn. More than three-quarters of the way down the list he called out: “Éomer, King of Rohan, will meet Elladan Elronnion of Rivendell.” This was the first set of opponents that had matched two of the better-known combatants. Predictably, the crowd exploded into applause and cheers at the noteworthy combination.

Éomer could not help but chuckle and shake his head. He glanced in the direction of the royal enclosure. Lothíriel was also shaking her head as though dismayed and speaking rapidly to Éowyn. He could see Aragorn looking back over his shoulder and mouthing something to the princess. Whatever he had said caused Lothíriel to flip her hair back over her shoulder and respond with spirit, furrowing her eyebrows and flushing. Éowyn nudged the younger woman laughing. The entire royal party began smiling and talking at once. He recalled that someone had mentioned to him, perhaps Aragorn or Legolas, that even the wisest and most ancient of elves loved gossip. No doubt they knew everything there was to know about his lady’s dalliance with Lord Elladan. No point in wasting any time feeling awkward. He had to prepare for his joust.

Déor, son of Éothain, the lad that Éomer had asked to act as his squire for the tournament, approached him, leading Firefoot. He knew that had Éothain not fallen in the Eastfold early in March, he surely would have insisted in riding in the joust. It comforted Éomer to give his friend’s young son a chance to be a part of the games, if only in a minor role.

“Éomer King!” Déor’s grin split his freckled face, as he dipped his head belatedly in a gesture of respect. Éomer had known him since he was an infant and the lad still struggled to bring familiarity into line with the requirements of protocol. “Firefoot is feeling restive. I thought it might calm him to walk forward to meet you.” Éomer observed the tall boy, well filled-out for only thirteen years of age, thinking he would be a large man one day, much like his big-boned, ruggedly handsome father had been.

“Restive, you say? I would reckon that is a generous description of Firefoot acting a royal pain in the arse.”

“Yes, my king. I don’t want to speak ill of him. But you could say that. I don’t think he likes this area. It is near where Théoden King fell?”

Éomer gestured generally to the north of them. “Not very close actually.”

“Aye, my lord. But Firefoot has a lot of Meara blood in him. They’re sensitive to such things.”

“You don’t have to defend Firefoot to me, lad. I am well aware of his virtues and his faults. I doubt if his behavior is caused by anything other than that he doesn’t like the heat and noise, nor care for play that looks far too much like work to him. But he’ll be fine when he senses there’s competition involved.”
Firefoot bumped his nose against Éomer, who 'tsk-tsked' at him in warning, yet patted him on the neck and stroked the great beast’s throat soothingly. Normally, the care of their master’s horse remained one of a squire’s primary tasks. Éomer had never had a squire before he became king. Although, even before he was appointed Marshall of the Eastfold, there had been plenty of youngsters who aspiring to ride with him hovered about wishing to assist him. Éomer had always preferred to attend to Firefoot himself.

The first two competing horsemen took their places at either end of jousting run. The other participants stood by with their squires observing, busily arming themselves, or fiddling with their horses’ tack. The ultimate aim was to unseat one's opponent with a lance. Éomer remained confident that he would do well. He had no fear of being unhorsed, which gave him confidence. He had probably eaten as much dirt as any man present. And it was unlikely there was a better-trained horse than Firefoot, and certainly none with reflexes nearly as good. Firefoot seemed anxious to play the game as well, shaking his long arched neck and shooting glances at Éomer with his large expressive eyes, as though he were trying to say, 'What are we waiting for? Let's get on with it.' The Swan knights’ elegant white or grey steeds knew what was expected of them, but despite the obvious strain of Rohirric horseflesh in the stock of Dol Amroth, none were a match for Firefoot in the height of their tail carriages or the refinement of their musculature. Firefoot's beautiful concave face showed his Meara blood as well.

The first joust took place between two Swan Knights. The taller man was pushed out of the saddle by his opponent’s lance. The victor jumped from his horse and extended a hand to his countryman, who took the proffered hand and stood without difficulty. Removing his helm and bowing in a most chivalrous manner, he conceded his defeat. The rules which had been decided upon stated that each man would joust once only. If neither of a pair conceded, the judges would declare a winner. The jousting seemed to pass more quickly than even the archery had.

Perhaps because the Riders of Rohan were shy of injuring their horses, they were overall faring marginally less well than the Knights of Dol Amroth despite surpassing the Swan Knights in horsemanship. Erestor of Imladris met Prince Erchirion of Dol Amroth, which caused a bit of flurry throughout the crowd, since Erchirion had narrowly beaten Erestor in swordplay.

Erestor’s steady lance and his secure seat on his deceptively delicate-looking Elven stallion, enabled him to execute a well-placed solid blow. The crack of his lance resounded throughout the stands as it splintered into hundreds of pieces. Erchirion's impact against his opponent was decently centered as well, but his lance remained unbroken. Erestor withstood the blow, but Erchirion flew off his horse. Pulling his horse up short, Erestor handed him over to the nearest squire and loped back to where Erchirion had hit the ground.

By the time Erestor reached Erchirion, the young prince of Dol Amroth had struggled to his feet. Both combatants removed their helmets. The front of Erestor's helm, crimson-plumed and glittering in the sun, was covered with scrollwork depicting the infamous star of Fëanor. Erchirion's helm was of standard Swan Knight issue, modern and simple but elegant in style, crowned by a non-standard costly blue and white plume. With their helms tucked under their arms and grinning at one another, they pulled off their gauntlets and shook hands. Tall, with ebony hair bound in warrior plaits, high and pale of brow, each presented the refined but handsome masculinity considered Elvish by many. Smiling at one another red-cheeked from the heat, the two competitors could have been mistaken for brothers. Éomer was impressed, not for the first time, by how true the Elven bloodline ran in Imrahil's children.

Liveried squires of the City Guard of Minas Tirith wearing the White Tree on a field of sable scurried from the sidelines to rake out the trampled earth between each joust.
One after another, the jousters met and clashed. Since there were to be no additional rounds, scoring of each winning participant was crucial to determine the final champion. Accustomed to wielding authority, Imrahil ruled quickly on each match, dictating the scores to a scribe standing at his elbow. The encounters proceeded swiftly.

Nonetheless, the waiting made Éomer fidgety and he wished that he had drunk far less the evening before—wretched Lothíriel and her outrageous antics—or chosen to have sat out the contest. He glanced enviously at Lord Glorfindel, relaxed and laughing in the royal pavilion. No point, he thought, in comparing myself to an ancient hero. A warrior of little more than quarter of a century in age might be forgiven for wanting to prove himself, even in such a preposterous manner. This will be my last time, he vowed. A king had no business risking life and limb for entertainment or foolish pride.

A splintering hit from yet another Dol Amroth knight with a polished, graceful style sent a stocky young Rohirric rider rolling head over heels in the dust. The lad sprang to his feet in an instant, seemingly unharmed. Jerking off his dented helmet with a torrent of creatively filthy curses, he freed a half-dozen wild blond braids to whip about in the wind, revealing a baby face. Éomer recalled that his name was Osberht and that he was not yet sixteen years of age. Yet another fatherless boy. Osberht bowed shortly to the Dol Amroth knight in concession, a comic stereotype of youthful disappointment, and stomped over to comfort his snorting, pawing stallion. The revelation of his tender age brought the crowd to their feet in sympathetic applause. Éomer laughed and shook his head in gratitude that blessedly few of the spectators knew the language of the Rohirrim.

Éomer wondered who had the poor judgment to permit Osberht to participate in the joust. There would be time enough to look into that on the ride back to Edoras. He glanced over to where a group of grizzled veteran Rohirric riders, non-participants, leaned against the side of the enclosure watching the scene play out.

“Fastred! Fastred!” Éomer shouted. The man he wanted jogged quickly over to him, although favoring his left leg.

“Yes, Éo...” He grinned before reddening in embarrassment. “Er. Yes, sire, I meant!”

“Please see to it that someone examines young Osberht for injuries. I doubt if he has enough sense to do so himself.”

“Consider it done, my lord,” the older man answered with alacrity.

“That will be all, Fastred.” Éomer nodded his head to the veteran. “And, thank you.”

Just then Imrahil's herald brought an abrupt end to the clapping and good-natured hooting at the disgruntled young rider by calling out, “For the next joust, King Éomer of Rohan will meet Lord Elladan of Rivendell!”

§ § §

Lothíriel looked to her side to see Faramir standing at the end of their row of seats and scooted over, leaving room between her and Éowyn.

“Please join us, cousin,” Lothíriel said, patting the bench beside her. “May we get you a cool drink?”

Faramir ducked his head and shrugged in a gesture of reluctance. “I’m afraid I am much too hot and sweaty.”

Éowyn harrumphed dismissively, pulling her voluminous white skirts to one side. “Sit down!” she
ordered.

Lothíriel jerked her head up at the herald’s call of, “King Êomer of Rohan will meet Lord Elladan of Rivendell! Please take your places, my lords.”

At one end of the jousting lanes, Elladan allowed an Elf of Imladris to give him a leg up onto his steed with the careless conceit of the entitled. At the other entrance, Êomer, despite his armour, vaulted effortlessly onto Firefoot, showing off. Lothíriel could not hold back a smile at the two of them--such boys--while expelling an indulgent sigh.

Frowning, Faramir said. “No wonder it’s a rout for the Rohirrim. Unlike the Swan Knights, their saddles do not have high cantles.”

“I noticed the cantles and the high pommels as well,” Éowyn said, her tone heavy with disapproval.

“The Elven saddles don’t have either,” Lothíriel remarked. To be perfectly honest, she had not considered those details earlier. “That makes Êomer and Elladan more evenly matched at least.”

“And your brother’s ignominious fall to Erestor that much worse.” Aragorn chuckled.

“I wonder if Erestor will receive additional points for overcoming that?” Arwen asked.

Celeborn answered, “He did. Although, I believe that was a subjective call on the part of the judges. There is nothing in the rules about granting points to acknowledge inequality of tack.”

Faramir reached for Lothíriel’s hand and squeezed in sympathy, as the two contestants took their places at each end of the list. Firefoot danced in place for a moment as though reluctant to enter the narrow gate. Êomer adjusted and readjusted his helm, its white horsetail crest lifting in the breeze. He positioned his lance and he and Firefoot exploded out of the gate, in a spray of dust and gravel. He dropped his lance across his body toward where he calculated the center of Elladan’s shield would be.

Lothíriel turned slightly to get a look at Elladan’s position as he hurtled the length of the list. The sound of their mounts' pounding hooves, the dense clouds of dust billowing upward and obscuring her vision, and the speed of it all intensified her anxiety. It seemed the riders had only just left their respective gates when Êomer's lance connected with the center of Elladan’s shield, but the hit glanced off and did not dislodge Elladan. Meanwhile, Elladan struck a perfect blow that cracked and shattered his lance and sent Êomer flying off Firefoot and landing flat on his back. He did not move.

As the swirling dust settled on the field, Lothíriel saw Elladan jump from his steed and race to where Êomer had landed, yanking off his helm and shouting as he ran, "Adar! Adar! Elrond!"

Elladan’s eyes were wild with panic. Everyone stared down at Êomer stunned. Elrond had all but leapt to his feet, shedding the gleaming maroon robe he wore over his tunic and leggings, as he clambered onto the wooden wall that separated the royal stand from the playing field. Tossing the robe to Glorfindel, who deftly caught it, Elrond dropped the four feet or so to the ground. Faramir followed him, turning to hold his arms up to Lothíriel, who found herself trying to scramble over the side of the enclosure. She ignored the sound of ripping cloth. Éowyn pushed her from behind, two strong hands firmly planted on her buttocks.

“He’ll be all right,” Faramir said in her ear as he took her weight upon his shoulders, before swinging her the rest of the way down to place her upon her feet. “It would take more than that tumble to seriously hurt him. Elladan is worked up because he has a guilty conscience.” He yanked free a good-sized piece of deep blue voile from Lothíriel’s train that had caught on the splinters of the
newly hewn wood of the enclosure wall. A sudden gust from the river picked up the diaphanous cloth and bore it aloft over the heads of the crowd. As it disappeared behind the royal pavilion, a shiver passed over Lothíriel. The sight felt portentous, as though the wind had blown away forever some flimsy and insubstantial part of herself.

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I want to thank the writers of the Lizard Council, especially Kymahalei, Russandol, Pandemonium, Jael, IgnobleBard, Elfscribe, SurgicalSteel, and Indy1776 for reading and picking at this chapter. (If there are any remaining errors after their careful reading, I ought to be ashamed.) Thank you again, friends.
Despite all of Lothíriel’s protestations, Elrond and Prince Imrahil had insisted that she return to the family townhouse to change out of her dusty, ripped dress while the healers examined Éomer. Éowyn had accompanied her, Lothíriel believed as much to demonstrate her ability to control her own apprehension and to set a good example as to extend solace for her friend.

Lothíriel knew that Éowyn was annoyed with her, although probably not to the extent that she deserved. But the act of comradely succor provided comfort. Grateful for Éowyn’s attempt to support her, publicly at least, Lothíriel also knew that affection lay beneath the brusque demeanor. Spiky exterior aside, Éowyn had a warm heart and the ability to accept others complete with their faults and imperfections. Being young and female earned Lothíriel more sympathy still. A young man of her age could have committed a string of far greater indiscretions and received barely token disapproval. Apparently, Elvenkind and Éowyn granted a margin of error to young women that society at large gave only to those lads.

With a combination of his usual charm and a newly acquired stateliness, Faramir had managed to turn a portly noble out of his elegant two-horse carriage. The small conveyance was big enough to accommodate the three of them, along with its driver, and yet still small enough to maneuver its way through the narrow streets from the city gates to the level of the Dol Amroth townhouse.

If Éowyn feared for her brother, she managed to conceal her anxiety behind her habitual gesture of jerking her chin up a little to convey confidence and calm.

"Don’t turn into a silly girl now, Lothíriel, and start sniveling and wringing your hands,” Éowyn said. “I may not agree with you on a whole series of matters, but I have always admired your courage. The sooner you can wash your face and hands and change your dress, the sooner we can return to the Houses of Healing and see how my brother fares. Éomer has a hard head and enough natural intelligence to overshadow a loss of some brain function."

“Truly,” Faramir said, laughing, “Lord Elrond did not look worried. As the Master in charge of the tournament, your father has to err on the side of an excess of caution. And as the monarch of a sovereign nation, Éomer is required to submit to physical examination. He no longer has the luxury of playing a young headstrong horse lord, but must behave as the king of an important ally of Gondor."

In contrast to the ladies’ careful choice of clothing for the tournament and the extended toilette that had preceded donning it, they were able to shed their finery, wash up a little, and change into simpler garments in virtually no time at all. When Faramir escorted them back to the Houses of Healing, they entered the antechamber to the room where they King of Rohan rested to find Elrond and Glorfindel
engaged in an ancient board game of military strategy. Lothíriel recognized the room as the one where Faramir had spent his convalescence only a couple of months earlier.

She also identified the black-lacquered and amber-colored wooden pieces as comprising a set which had once belonged to her Uncle Denethor. She remembered how he always bested Boromir, but Faramir more often than not defeated his father. And yet still Denethor thought of himself as the strategist, Boromir the warrior, and insisted upon behaving as though Faramir was suited only for the library and scriptorium, while he grudgingly accepted—nay, demanded—his son's valuable service in Ithilien.

“Please be seated, ladies,” said Glorfindel rising to dip into an exaggerated flourish of a bow. “Elrond can tell you how King Éomer fares.”

The Lord of Rivendell’s handsome old-young face brightened at the sight of his visitors. Lothíriel consciously released the tightness of her chest. A twitch of a smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. Clearly, Lord Elrond intended to communicate good news to them. It was not the first time that she had noted that Elladan’s full tempting lips were a happy legacy from his father.

She could hear Éomer’s voice, earnest and solemn, projecting from behind the closed door leading into the inner chamber. She was, however, unable to understand anything of what he was saying or discern to whom belonged a quieter male voice responding to him.

Elrond spoke in his pleasantly resonate voice, also reminiscent of that of Elladan, reclaiming her full attention.

“The practiced healers of Minas Tirith agree with my humble assessment. King Éomer is unlikely to have sustained any serious injury, but he will need to be closely observed for another several hours. I have convinced him to postpone his departure for another day perhaps two. He should be awakened every hour throughout the night. I am happy to look after him, with my friend Glorfindel to keep me company.”

“Erestor met someone,” Glorfindel interjected, winking at the women. “So, Master Elrond is stuck with me.” He wiggled a tiny carved representation of a man in armor before his lord’s face. “I’m taking this soldier, Eärendilion.” Elrond snorted in mock umbrage.

Smiling flirtatiously at the golden warrior, Éowyn giggled with relief, while Faramir wrapped one arm around her shoulders in a possessive half-embrace. “Did I hear you say ‘humble,’ my Lord?” she asked Elrond. “Your reputation as a healer is legendary. Even the much praised healing powers of King Elessar are reputed to be largely due to your tutelage.”

“I won’t deny my gift, Lady Éowyn. But the healers of this city have had the unfortunate advantage of dealing with a stream of traumatic injuries in the recent period. Your brother could not be in more competent hands. Please make yourself comfortable.”

He gestured in the direction of two upholstered chairs and a settee. Beyond those a table in the corner of the room was covered with an assortment of cold meats, rolls, sauces, a huge fruit pie, recognizable by its lemony grapey scent, and silver pitchers of cold beverages sweating with condensation.

“You might as well take your ease and eat if you are hungry. Éomer is occupied with another guest at the moment,” Glorfindel added.

“Who might that be?” asked Éowyn, wide-eyed with curiosity.
Glorfindel caught Lothíriel’s glance, waggling his eyebrows at her and grinning with the obvious wicked intent. “Princess Lothíriel’s special friend his knightliness Elladan of Rivendell,” he said, with a wink. “He didn’t stay at the tournament to receive his prize.”

“You horrid man!” Lothíriel snapped. Clapping her hands over her mouth as soon as she had spoken, scarcely able to believe she had said the words aloud.

Glorfindel laughed. “Have you ever heard the expression, sweet Princess, ‘If you want to dance, you must pay the piper’?”

Elrond shook his head in mock disbelief at Glorfindel. “My dear young lady, it is not as bad as it could be. Your young man will forgive you and my son will indeed play the part of the noble knight and retreat strategically to nurse his broken heart, and write poetry, no doubt. You’ve done him a world of good. He may even be able to meet a more suitable maid now and fall in love again. You need not waste your time pitying Elladan. He’ll recover. Despite what the minstrels would have us believe, very few people die of a broken heart, and fewer still among the Eldar.”

“Thank you, Lord Elrond.” Lothíriel fought to restrain a flood of jealous regret. “Have you seen my father?” she asked, her voice quavering only a little.

“You should be happy to know that your father has returned to his duties at the tournament ground. He will reassure the crowds that their popular young hero is doing well and conclude the day’s festivities. You must take advantage of the fact that you will be left to settle your affairs without paternal interference.”

“Pay the piper,” Faramir snorted, smirking at Glorfindel.

Éowyn punched her sweetheart in the arm. “Leave her be. You were kind enough and generous in your appraisal of me under circumstances that were not so very different, except, perhaps, for my lack of opportunity.”

Faramir smiled with the good nature of a man who is secure in his prize. “My precious lady can always be counted upon to tell it like it is.”

At just that moment, Elladan opened the door to Éomer’s chamber slightly and popped his head around the edge. He drew in a deep breath and licked his lips. “Ah, Lady Éowyn, you are here now. Your brother would like to speak to you, please.” She stood up and walked to the door. Elladan bowed and held the door open for her. He turned to Lothíriel and bowed. “Would you consent to walk with me for a moment, my lady?”

Elladan’s face looked pale, almost translucent in the afternoon sunlight, more fey than Mortal. A scratch stood out deepest scarlet against his white forehead, beneath a fringe of tousled black curls. He was still clad in mud-streaked armor, although he was missing his gloves, gauntlets, and helm. Faint lavender shadows beneath his eyes and his grubby hands combined to create an aura of fragility about him. Nothing about him resembled the perfect Elf Lord who had so confidently and with such energy seduced her on the road to Lothlórien. Her heart clenched with the longing to touch him and for a chance to relive those few days of joy between them that had vanished like a morning haze before a midsummer sun. He did not wait for her to respond, but walked across the room and extended his arm to her.

She did not look back, but left with Elladan, filled with hope and dread, although she could not have told anyone for certain what she hoped for or dreaded most. The inner courtyard of the Houses of Healing glowed with the last rays of the afternoon sun filtering through a rose arbor extended above the far end of the wall. The air on the Sixth Level felt crisp and cool compared to the arid heat of the
recently denuded Pelennor Fields.

“I came to apologize to Éomer,” Elladan said. “He accepted that apology easily, but wanted to raise a whole series of other questions again. I am afraid we have to re-visit the same discussion more than once before everyone is willing to leave the past in peace. I told him that you had chosen him over me and that he could trust me not to press my suit any further.”

She dropped her hand from his arm and then reached out and took both of his hands in hers. “It will never be truly over for me. Oh, Elladan, I’ve told you that a dozen times. But it is something I need to put behind me now. Why are we talking again?” she whispered, annoyed at how rushed and defensive she sounded, as though Éomer were listening.

“I was wrong,” he said. “Wrong from beginning to end. But I’ll never be sorry, you know.”

“I know we were both wrong and I’m not really sorry either. The problem was that you were able to read me so easily. Why shouldn’t you have tried to seduce me when you could see how much I wanted you? You were free and I was not. Surely I am more at fault, aren’t I?”

He cast aside her questions with a dismissive shrug. The familiar gesture tugged at her heart. “Now, I am supposed to say that you are young and Mortal and I am of the Eldar. La, la, la, etc.” She giggled at him and he pretended to frown. “Éomer wants to talk to both of us together. He wants us to agree to certain conditions and said that he is willing offer a few concessions.”

“Is he mad?” Lothíriel raised her voice in surprise. “What are you talking about? What can he be thinking? I can’t see what kind of concessions Éomer could possibly consider.”

“You will have to ask him that, won’t you, my dearest Princess? He would not talk about it without you being present. Don’t look so sad. He wants you if you’re still willing. That is the kind of man he is. He can make you happy. He’ll give you children and a life of purpose. He has a point also. Think about me for a moment! If you and I had ever had children they would be strange creatures, as likely as not faced with stranger choices.”

She had never thought of children with Elladan, but his raising of the question nearly broke her heart. Arwen was willing to take that chance of strange and unknown fates. But Lothíriel had always known that she would never ask Elladan to abandon the opportunity to accompany his father to Elvenhome. And children, an heir and a spare at least, and perhaps a couple of lovely girls, that is what Éomer would want. That was what she had been schooled to want also.

Elladan took her chin nudged her chin with his knuckles, trying not to dirty her face, but wanting her to look into his eyes. “I thought I had killed your sweetheart, the idolized boy King of Rohan.”

“He’s not a boy. He’s past twenty-five years of age!”

“So old!” Elladan smirked. “Well, he looks like a boy and people love a handsome, brave, clever lad, so that is what they see when they look at him. I reckoned if I had hurt him badly that Aragorn might have to lock me up and throw away the key at best. At worst I might have earned myself a trip to the Halls of Mandos. I did feel very bad for you and him as well.” He managed a wan imitation of his mischievous smile on the last sentence, which caused Lothíriel tohiccup and giggle.

“That’s my girl! Do you think we have time for a quick kiss?”

Surely he was not serious. “You are a dreadful, dreadful man. Your father just finished telling me that you’d be noble. Noble my fanny,” she said with an arch tone of accusation, but unable still to quash her amusement at his cheek.
“And what a lovely fanny it is!”

“You and your insufferable arrogance! It was exactly that kind of wanton talk that made me love you in the first place!”

“That and my astonishing looks! But I fell in love with you not just because you’re pretty, but because you laughed at my bad jokes and showed me no respect that I had not earned. We had better walk back now or Adar will come looking for me and that would not be a good thing for either of us today.”

“One good thing is that the breeze from the river is tempering the heat,” she said. She did hate the entrapped summer heat of Minas Tirith.

“It’s only fair for me to remind you that might regret turning me down when he gets old and fat and snores and is more interested in ale than making love. Of course, I will still be young as springtime and even more beautiful by comparison.”

She gave him the giggle he wanted. True, it was a slightly hysterical one. He wanted to pull the cloak of humor over his wounds and she wanted to help if she could.

When he started to speak again, his voice sounded gruffer. “Well, you’re a romantic girl. You know all the twaddle bards sing of—love eternal despite all odds. One story after another about how illicit passion is the most powerful one of all, the spice of the forbidden, and so on and so forth. Or maybe I am getting confused? There are the stories also where the brave king gets the pretty princess and the kingdom grows in peace and harmony. Yet, seriously, in the real world, you and Éomer are perfect for one another, personally, politically, intellectually . . . .” Elladan’s words tumbled out, one after another. She could no longer tell if he was speaking for his own benefit or hers or even cared what he was saying. “Oh, I don’t know what I am talking about. Éomer wants a wife and a queen, and you want a kingdom and children. How many more times must we be forced to make the same choices?”

“You are supposed to be strong for me,” she said accusingly. “This is the first time since we returned to the city that I have heard you make a jest. Please don’t sound maudlin again now. I do still intend to marry Éomer.”

“I know you do. I promised him he could have you.”

“You actually believe it is within your prerogative to grant that? What insufferable presumption.” Tears streamed down her face. “How will I live without you?” She wanted to grab his biceps and squeeze them hard, but they were still covered with chain mail that would bite into her fingers. Frustrated, she let her arms drop, jerking her head up, lower lip trembling.

“In peace and comfort, I hope,” he said, his voice silky smooth and lightly sardonic. “A life filled with good works carried out in a spirit of womanly virtue and self-sacrifice!” He held the door open leading back into the main hallway with the deep bow to the waist of a courtier, which made her laugh through her snuffling.
The sheets smelled fresh and felt clean and cool beneath him. Whatever the concoction was that they had given him, it had taken away his headache. Éomer had to admit, despite his restlessness, it felt good to lie back, with a soft pillow beneath his battered skull.

Éowyn cocked an eyebrow at Éomer in a peevish way that made him laugh. “So, I’ve heard you are fine,” she said. “No matter though, you’ll not be moving tonight. Lord Elrond is intent on keeping you here until morning. Serves you right, you know.”

“What did I do now? You voiced no objections to the tournament before.”

“And if I had, laddie, would you have listened for a moment? Men will always insist on getting their heads broken in the name of entertainment.”

“Says the fine lady who pretended to be a boy in order to try to kill herself in battle?” Éomer patted the bed beside him. “Sit here, little sister, so I can see your shifty eyes. Is this when you tell me finally—I know you have been choking on it—that I also have only myself to blame for choosing a girl much too young and spoiled for me?”

“Aye! Béma, help us! What is wrong between the pair of you now? Did she sleep with the Elf finally? Or did she find out about another of your little hussies? The two of you deserve one another.”

“How do I put up with you? I have been nearly as chaste as a maiden aunt compared to my comrades and . . . “

“Is that the euphemism now for careful not to make any babies?”

“Never mind.” He loved his sister in her arch moods! ”Yes, Éowyn. She did sleep with Lord Elladan, but that’s over now. I had a talk with him privately, as well as with her yesterday, and I am talking to both of them together in a few minutes. We are going to settle it and move forward. And, nothing about this goes outside of this room. Well, I do assume you will be bursting to talk to Faramir. But surely the Lord Steward of Gondor knows how to keep his mouth shut. Understood?”
She sighed, with an exaggerated heave of her shoulders. “Despite myself, I like her. You just need to learn to be good to one another. She’s a flighty child and you are a very ignorant young man, who has never had a normal life. Surely you should have realized that as soon as you dragged her up onto the steps of the Meduseld and presented her to your people, it became political. It always has been, but that was the point when you made it hard for either of you to change your mind. But if it’s what you both want, then it is not too late for you to try again either. People have made marriages out of far less and died happy.”

“I don’t want to change anything.”

“And her? What does she want?”

“She loves me. Just because she is besotted with him does not mean she doesn’t love me. She wants to be a queen also. And I need someone with her background and connections. We’re doing it.”

“It’s late, but not too late, to change your mind.”

“You saw how our people loved her.”

“Admired you for winning her! They saw a remarkably attractive girl, who sits prettily on a horse, and who tried to speak their language with some measure of success. She looks like a proper prize for a hero. Right where they all could see, she fawned over their handsome young king, the apple of their eye, when they wanted and needed something to be happy about.”

He thought about what she was saying. “I think it was more than that.”

“Indeed. They knew also they were looking at a weak—barely existent—harvest, homeless families, and fatherless children. They figure you marrying a princess of Gondor will mean holding off famine this winter and negotiating trade favorable to both countries in the coming period.”

“They are right and we already have the beginnings of substantial aid in hand and the promise of more, with every reason to expect that our alliance will help build future prosperity for Rohan and Gondor, the likes of which has never been seen.”

He felt himself rallying his own spirits as he recounted to her the strategy that he and his young betrothed had discussed together countless times. He did not think that Éowyn realized how much Lothíriel lived and breathed politics. More than any of her brothers, even the heir to Dol Amroth. “She wants all of that as much as we do. And, with or without her as part of the bargain, so do the King of Gondor, his Steward, and the Prince of Dol Amroth.” He heard the enthusiasm creeping back into his voice. “She would be wasted on a Lord of Gondor. What use is there for another pretty young wife at court in Minas Tirith or Dol Amroth? I won’t waste her. She’ll be happy in Rohan. She’s already helped me.”

“And how do you feel about what she did?” Éowyn sounded skeptical and lifted her chin in that gesture of stubbornness he had always admired so much in their darkest days.

“Feel? Hurt. I was pretty angry. I’m over the wanting to get back at her though. She gave me her virginity and has given me hope. Sacrificing her dashing immortal Elf-lord is penance enough, I think. I’m willing to forgive her and to try to forget. I am not perfect either, Éowyn. You do not even begin to know everything. There are things about me that neither of you know. But she’ll be worth it, and more importantly I’ll make it worthwhile for her.”
“I might know more than you think I do. About you, I mean,” she said, tender and gentle in tone.

He studied her face, lifting up a hand to stroke her cheek. Éowyn looked lovelier every day. Faramir was older, which he thought would be right for her. He seemed instinctively to know how to court and treat a woman. Éomer was sure they would be happy. Rebuilding Ithilien the way they wanted would be a life’s work. Women needed that also, not just men.

“Maybe you do and maybe you don’t. Know about me, I mean,” he said, laughing softly. He saw no point in raising the question any lack of suitability as a husband on his part. It was better to leave that untouched. He was a king and he needed a queen and an heir. It was just that simple.

“It could be a disaster. Try to be nice to her, please.”

“I always have been! I told you I do love her. I’m happy about that.”

Shadows lengthened among the pillars, trees, and shrubbery of the garden of the Houses of Healing. The golden afternoon light had shifted into a rosy sunset. Lothíriel fought back her tears with a laugh and a sniff.

A serving boy, face sunburned from the tournament, moved with a lit taper from sconce to sconce that lined the far wall. The boy spotted the Princess and the Elf-lord and startled in surprise. Yet with that irritatingly endearing cheek of working lads of the city, he shot them a conspiratorial wink. It was as though he had caught them up to no good, but they could trust him to keep their secret. Lothíriel could not resist smiling back at him. Elladan, eyebrows drawn together and lower lip stuck out in a pout, seemed not to notice.

It was not even dark yet and the lad sought, doubtless under orders from his master, to chase away even a hint of the incipient darkness. Minas Tirith craved light these days.

She remembered the short, dark days of that past March when they guarded every drop of oil and every cheap stub of a tallow candle against the possibility of a drawn out siege. The thought put into sharp perspective the shallowness of the question of which she should choose of two noble valiant lovers. Her situation was not as tragic as she might try to make it in the dark hours of the night. But still the thought of losing either of them hurt so badly. A year ago she knew nothing of love or life and now, she might not be wise, but, oh, so much more experienced.

“I hope you are not going to be hysterical,” said Elladan with a haughty sniff. “I’d hate to watch you flip back and forth between tears and giggles the way any common young woman would do.” She even loved his arrogance.

“You flatter yourself that you made an excellent choice when you fell for me. Face it, Elladan, you bought the bold front I was trying to sell you. I am not much different from most young maids you might meet in Gondor, except younger and louder and somewhat higher born. Better read also.”

For the second time in as many minutes he had reached for her hand and then appeared to realize how filthy he was, looking down with a grimace at the dried blood and grime. “Oh, fuck it all!” he said. “Give me your hand. It might be my last chance ever.”

“Of course, my lord!” She tucked her small soft hand into the crook of his elbow and placed his
calloused dirty one over it. Not perfect like the rest of him, his hand was no less attractive for its imperfections, probably more so. She adored his beautiful long fingers that looked to be more suitable to playing a harp than plying his dirty trade. Perfectly imperfect, she thought, silly, besotted girl that she was.

“I’m not hysterical,” she added. “Just thinking of how many ways in which my horizons have been broadened. Just thinking about how free access to the libraries of Dol Amroth and Minas Tirith does not give a young girl any real life experience.”

“Travel broadens,” he said, giving her a wicked snort. She could not resist laughing at that. Her laugh turned agitated when she thought of silly romances, and how at this moment the young heroine puts the back of her hand against her forehead with a tortured sigh and says, nearly swooning, ‘last year this time, I was an innocent girl; today I am a woman.’ He looked at her and smiled indulgently again.

“Indeed,” she said. “Travel broadens and getting sweaty under the sheets with a randy, jaded Elf-lord does also.”

“I’m no lord. And apparently, I am not as jaded as I once thought,” he said in a bemused tone, which made her smile.

“You are Elrond’s heir. I heard your sister say it.”

“You’ve heard him also. He calls himself Master Elrond for a reason. He rejects the concept.”

‘High King!’ she thought, awed. That might have been his title. Elrond would have been Gil-galad’s heir.

What prescience he had more than an Age ago to have realized the Age of the Elves had ended—burning out with all of its glory and tragedy like an exploding star. It had taken the rest of the world another long Age to realize that his time had already passed. The world had entered the Ages of Men, but the likes of Elrond and Galadriel had only lingered to see it done properly. For whatever their flaws and those of their compatriots or ancestors, they were the Children of Starlight, and, even when the Valar fumbled, took seriously the responsibility of helping their younger brethren, the Second Born. Now their tasks had ended. Éomer and Aragorn would bring in a new Age of enlightened Men. It made her head hurt. She wished she’d been born earlier, even while realizing she should be very happy she had not.

No doubt about it, her horizons had been widened all around. She had pledged her troth to an attractive young King and sworn to turn her back on all others, without any past experience with love. Then quick as an unexpected lightning storm, she had betrayed him with the elder son of Elrond.

People called Elladan, as well as his father and his siblings Peredhil or Half-Elven. She thought herself to be nearly half-elven, since the Falas had been lousy with Elves since the Second Age and before. Intermarriages there had gone on largely unnoticed and little talked about, except among the nobles of Dol Amroth, who prided themselves on their mixed blood.

But she had known, long before she worked out the arithmetic, that Elladan was not simply a half-blood prince of the Eldar, whose father had turned his back on a crown. By her own calculations, which she done in her head during the more boring stretches of road between Rohan and Lothlorien, his lineage made him over seventy-eight percent Elven, some three percent and a little Maiarin, and
But no matter, as far as she was concerned he might as well be full Elven. There was no doubt in her mind that Elladan, along with his brother were not intended by the Powers to die and be buried on this side of the sea. He must sail West with their father when the time came for them to make that choice. Arwen had chosen for her brothers. After losing her, Elrond deserved to keep his sons.

She had conveniently set those considerations aside when she had wanted so badly to be made love to by Elladan. During the painful few days back in Minas Tirith, surrounded by uneasy concern, seeing the hurt on Éomer’s face just the day before, and faced with her inability to look her own father in the eyes, the consequences had come crashing down upon her. The mildness with which the circle of Elladan’s kinsman had treated their scandalous behavior caused her to shoulder the responsibility for it in a way that harsh rejection or scolding never would have.

Those childhood dreams of discovering or forging her personal connection to the Children of Starlight were the last among the fantasies that she had to let go. She had not known her mother and her brothers and father spoke of her little. There was something missing in the story of her parentage also. It was time to learn the truth she thought, to insist upon a straight answer, to give up the silly Children of Starlight nonsense.

Perhaps her mother had abandoned them. She had been allowed to believe that her mother had died in childbirth, or shortly enough thereafter that the assumption was that she might have perished of complications related to Lothíriel’s birth. Without the details, like little girls are wont to do, she invented a fairy story. Sometimes she had pretended that her mother was a full Elf, preferably someone of importance.

She also had not admitted it consciously, but the truth was she had barely suppressed fantasies of Elladan and herself being like Imrazôr and Mithrellas, or Beren and Lúthien, or even Aragorn and Arwen. She could take Elladan as her lover and refresh the bonds of Elf and Man in the Falas before the last of the Eldar had sailed.

She had never played make believe with other girls growing up; it had seemed so childish at the time. She had chased after her brothers and her tutors, seeking approval by mimicking adult behavior. But her denial of childish fantasies had come back to bite her long after it was time throw them off. The announcement of their betrothal in Edoras had made Éomer her liege lord. This had become the business of princes, states, and governance, not a game played by privileged little girls in a garden or sitting room with dolls with pretty porcelain heads dressed as Elf-lords and princesses.

Tomorrow she would talk to her father; no one could stop her. She would tell him her all her secrets and insist that she be told if he had any. Of course, she had loved Elladan; she still did, but she loved Éomer as well.

“Lothíriel, are you alright? You look sick.”

“I’m not sick I am just really, really tired. This is not easy!”

“But you are a tough little soldier. Let’s go.”

“Little?”

Walking back to Éomer’s chambers, clinging to Elladan’s arm, she allowed him to be strong for her. His body radiated warmth. He smelled of horses and armor, and sweat. True it was a fresher scent,
one that she normally associated with Elven perspiration. But it was still human and familiar. People had told her that her father smelled like an Elf. There were no Children of Starlight, likely never were. Waking under starlight always had sounded like a myth to her. There were only Elves and Men, both human and flawed, with a long history together and apart, so close and yet so distant in their fates. All of it made such heartbreakingly beautiful tales. But the reality was simpler and took more courage. She might be young, but she was a woman grown and should be beyond such nonsense.

She did not know if she felt crushed or lightened by once again choosing Éomer over Elladan. More accurately, she thought the feeling could be described as emotionally wrung out, like a wet cleaning rag, or a limp old petticoat washed too many times. The thought of those things made her snort—as though she might have known anything about either one before she had worked in the Houses of Healing during the Siege of the City.

“Remember me,” Elladan said, stopping as they drew closer to Éomer’s room.

How like a boy he could be, always wanting attention. Now that they had kicked over the traces and been slapped on the hands, and she had made her choice, she doubted Elladan would be alone for long. The thought called forward a sharp pang of jealousy and unwarranted resentment.

“How about Legolas?” she teased, starting to feel steadier again. Elladan would always be a true friend to her. The deed might have been less than worthy in the eyes of others, but the choice had been magnificent on her part. No regrets. “Can I cry in front of Legolas?”

“As a true friend to her. The deed might have been less than worthy in the eyes of others, but the choice had been magnificent on her part. No regrets. “Can I cry in front of Legolas?”

As they turned from the patio into the hallway, they saw Faramir approaching them walking quickly, smiling. Everyone looked happy, as though Éomer narrowly avoiding killing himself was a cause for a grand celebration.

“I was looking for you two.” Éowyn was the really lucky one. Faramir was a rock.

“It’s almost moonrise. Éowyn and I are starving. And Éomer wants to speak to both of you.” He looked at Elladan up and down, taking in the armor, the dried blood, and the dirt. “Ai. Look at you, my lord,” he said, suddenly formal and sweetly apologetic, but with a hint of grit and fortitude behind the silken voice of a diplomat, totally Faramir. “I am so sorry, Lord Elladan. There is no
reason you cannot shed your armor and wash up first. Let me find someone to assist you. I will tell King Éomer that you need a moment to clean up and something to eat and drink first.”

“I appreciate your consideration, Lord Faramir, but I am fine, really. I’m not hungry. Let’s get this over with now.”
As they walked in silence through the well-lit corridors to Éomer’s room, Lothíriel heard Glorfindel’s wholehearted laugh and the soft, mildly ironic voice of her father, colored by the lilt of the Elvish spoken in her native coastal area. She had tired recently to soften her own regional accent, while Imrahil flaunted his like a badge of honor. Another proof she thought of how young and stupid, unsure of herself that she could be.

“Ah, there you are,” Imrahil said as they rounded the last corner. “Faramir claimed he could find you. Thank you, Faramir.” He then bowed to Elladan. “Lord Elladan, you created quite a stir leaving the tournament when you did. Technically you were the champion, but your brother kept insisting, with passion, until we finally accepted his word, that you had verbally withdrawn as you left the field to follow King Éomer to the Houses of Healing.”

“I did. Well, I certainly meant to,” Elladan said, stopping in the antechamber to Éomer’s room. “I am almost sure I said so. I can’t exactly recall my words . . . “

At that moment, Éowyn emerged from Éomer’s room. “Lord Elladan is right. I heard him,” she said in her sweetest and most feminine voice, one that Lothíriel had learned almost always meant trouble. “I clearly recall his exact words as he walked by the judges’ table. He said, ‘Sod this bloody tournament. I want nothing more to do with it. I am finished here.’” Éowyn did know how to cut through tension, or raise it, depending upon her mood.

Elladan stopped in his tracks and turned to her. Smirking, he said, “Excellent, my lady. I hoped I had made myself clear, but wasn’t sure I had enough of my wits about me to carry through. Excellent. That means Éomer is your tourney champion. Small payment for a busted head . . .”

“Except, of course, he would never accept a championship by default,” Éowyn said laughing. “A rider of the Rohirrim especially could never claim a tournament prize when he had ended unhorsed in the dirt.”

“Well, then,” Elladan said. “I suppose my brother the King will have to decide.”

It made Lothíriel happy to see her father laugh as he watched Elladan and Éowyn, each so cocky and
confident, ribbing one another. “Our beneficent King Elessar wasted no time in doing exactly that,” Imrahil said. “He awarded the purse to the Rohirrim to help rebuild the Eastfold, which has been so devastated by the war.”

“That is generous and sorely needed,” Éowyn said, turning serious. “Éomer cannot refuse that.”

“Clever too,” Lothíriel added. “Not only will the aid to the Eastfold ease suffering for its outlying homesteads and villages throughout the coming winter, but it will stimulate the economy of Anórien, which, in turn, will speed the recovery of both Rohan and Gondor over the next period.”

Elladan grinned at her with a small nod. She appreciated his approval, despite still feeling more like a star pupil showing off than an equal in the discussion. If she and Éomer could get beyond their problems, she would prove herself in the future.

“Well put, darling,” said Imrahil, ever the supportive father. “Aragorn also said that the judges may consider any reasonable claims to the title of champion and rule on it at their leisure. Although, no one put themselves forward on field. Erestor relinquished his position to the young and valiant riders of Dol Amroth and Rohan. In light of that, I suppose, if Éomer refuses, my own son might have a claim to it.”

“Heh,” snorted Lothíriel. “I am surprised Erchirion has not raised the matter already. No one could ever accuse my brother of an overdeveloped sense of honor.”

“Shame on you,” her father scolded. “Even in jest that is nearly treasonous talk. Don’t let any of the Swan Knights hear you say such a thing.” Looking around at the company, he said, “Sibling rivalries die hard.” He put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to him and kissing her on the temple. “You looked tired and bedraggled, little one. I think your betrothed is waiting to speak to you. You should take care of that quickly before you collapse. I’ll wait for you if you like.”

“No, no, please do not. I may want to stay awhile,” she said. She intended to spend the night, unless Elrond forbade it.

“Then we can we talk tomorrow, sweetheart. I am happy to have another day with you before you leave. We’ve barely had any time together since you returned from your last trip. One might get the impression that you have been avoiding me.”

“Nonsense, Ada! You have been busy with business of the realm.” A slow flush crept up her face, betraying her.

Imrahil arched an eyebrow. “That has never stopped you before. I can tell when you are hiding something. But never mind that. I have secrets too, including a huge one that I am long overdue to share with you. So, will I see you for a late breakfast? You may bring Éomer with you if you wish. What I must tell you will concern him as well.”

A swift spike of fear pierced her. “Yes, ada,” she said in a pathetic bleat, lowering her eyes with a sinking heart, much to her embarrassment.

Her father responded quickly to relieve her. “It is nothing bad. Quite the contrary.” He kissed her on the forehead. “Until tomorrow, sweet girl. Do not stay up all night. The point of a day’s delay is that Éomer may be rested for the trip.”

“Shall we?” asked Elladan, gesturing in the direction of Éomer’s room, after Imrahil had bade everyone good evening and left.
“All right,” Lothíriel said with a shrug. I’d rather be flogged, she thought.

“Don’t you want to get rid of the rest of that armor first?” called Glorfindel, a hint of the old master of arms in his disapproving tone.

Elrond looked up from stroking his chin and studying the chessboard with a furrowed brow. “Don’t bother with him. Elladan likes to milk every drop of misery out of a situation before letting it go. Don’t you, son?”

His father’s words won a reluctant smirk from Elladan. “That is what you always say.” She hated how her heart flipped over in her chest at every one of Elladan’s smiles, smirks, or remembered mannerisms.

Lothíriel knew Éomer’s room as well as she knew the back of her hand. She had spent untold hours in it the previous spring when it had belonged to Faramir, with Faramir, and with Faramir and Éowyn as an unofficial chaperone. Faramir’s beautiful red and gold patterned rug from far Harad was missing along with his blue counterpane, with its border of Dol Amroth swans; otherwise it looked much the same.

An open window allowed cool night breezes to enter the chamber. The day’s heat had vanished with the setting of the sun and the air held a scent of the river and the promise of rain. Distant thunder rumbled from over the mountains. She glanced in the direction of the window, forgetting for an instant that it revealed only the view of a white-washed wall covered with ivy, visible in the light of the moon.

After looking for the last hour or so at Elladan’s begrimed face and blood-stained hands, Éomer looked fresh, clean, and boyish, propped up against huge pillows. His white shirt fell open halfway down his golden-brown chest revealing defined muscles, ever so slightly bulkier than those of Elladan. He shifted as though uncomfortable with greeting them from a bed. Éomer did not sit much as general rule, preferring to pace or lean against a mantelpiece when talking, even at his leisure.

He jerked upright suddenly at the sight of Elladan. “Oh, no. Look at you. It’s been hours now. You need to get rid of the rest of that armor before we can talk. Lothíriel can help you. She is an old hand at it. Three brothers and a father who have seen too many battles.”

“Fine,” grumbled Elladan. He looked at Lothíriel, holding his hands out from his sides. Up for the challenge, she wanted to show him how nimble and efficient she was at locating and unbuckling what seemed like a dozen fastenings, even hoisting the hefty breastplate and backplate off him and leaning them against the wall near the door. Elladan endured her ministrations with a prideful Elven stoicism.

“Thank you,” he said softly, looking down at himself. His shirt was stained with dirt, sweat, and blood, and a jagged rip started beneath one arm and extended onto his chest.

“I think they brought me an extra shirt or two. Look in that wardrobe at the end of the bed,” Éomer offered. “There is wine on the table also. For my guests they tell me.”

Elladan unceremoniously pulled his filthy shirt over his head and dropped it into the laundry basket next to the wardrobe, before he started rummaging for a shirt. Lothíriel winced at the mottled bruising on the left side of his upper body. She didn’t know if he had done it to himself when he had knocked Éomer off his horse, or if he had sustained a blow from Erestor or Erchirion earlier. It occurred to her that he might be flaunting his shirtlessness in front of Éomer, as though to make the point to him that there was no part of his body that she had not seen and enjoyed. Dirty and pale as he was, he did still look stunning. She shuttered that thought tightly within her, afraid she might
project it to one or both of them. It did not matter for what she needed to do that day that Elladan Elronnion looked incredible without a shirt. Quite the contrary, it made everything that much harder.

However, when Elladan spoke to Éomer, his manner was humble and gracious, without a hint of confrontation. He clearly had made his peace with their situation, or intended to appear as though he had. “Thank you, Éomer King,” he said, carefully using the Rohirric word order. “May I pour you a glass of wine?”

“Unfortunately, your father has restricted me to lemon water, not even sweetened enough to make it moderately palatable.” Shuddering, he wrinkled his nose at the beverage on his bedside table that resembled nothing as much as glass of dirty dish water. “But Lothíriel looks like she could use a drink.”

She thought, if she had a choice, something stronger than wine would be preferable. “You should wash your face and hands before putting on that nice clean shirt,” she snapped at Elladan. For some reason she could not comprehend, both Éomer and Elladan found that remark unbearably funny. “Go on. There is water in that pitcher and wash cloths in the top drawer.” They both laughed at her again. “I know how things are arranged here,” she said defensively. “All the private rooms are basically the same. I’ll pour myself some wine and some for you also, Elladan.”

“She will make you a good wife,” Elladan said, winking at Éomer. “She has mastered the tone already.”

After pouring the wine, despite her fear of provoking further teasing about fussing, she sidled close to the head of the bed and reached out a hand to gingerly touch Éomer’s brow.

“It’s fine really. I didn’t lose a hair. No stiches. It does not even throb anymore. Lord Elrond gave me something for the headache.”

“Athelas I’d imagine,” Elladan said.

“The very same,” said Éomer. “The Elven miracle herb. It works like magic.”

Lothíriel could not resist adding, “Númenórean, actually. I am so relieved that you were not hurt worse than you were. I blame myself.”

“As well you should,” Éomer scolded, obviously teasing. He took her hand and kissed it, patting the side of the bed for her to sit next to him. “You forced me to participate in the tournament today, as well as insisting that I drink too much last night, and to stay far too late at the celebration flirting with the Queen. She is mesmerizing.” He turned to Elladan. “Your sister, I mean.”

Lothíriel punched him in the arm. “Oi! My poor head,” he said.

“So I have been told,” Elladan answered, shifting from one foot to the other. “Do you want to tell Lothíriel your rules?”

“You make me sound like a harsh schoolmaster.”

“Something like that.” Elladan smiled, his tone gentle, although his eyes looked sad. “But not an unreasonable one.”

Éomer, put a hand on Lothíriel’s cheek, forcing her to look into his eyes. “If you still want to marry me . . .”

“I do. I really do,” she insisted in a frantic manner. “I have thought about it a lot and I know I do.”
Her voice cracked on the last few words. She looked up at Elladan again and released a heavy sigh.

“Don’t, Lothíriel, please. Don’t feel bad for me. I already explained to Êomer that everything that happened between us was entirely my fault. I would plead insanity, but I have never been more calculating and determined. I cannot explain how or why I did what I did. I know what I wanted. It was wrong of me.”

Before Elladan could say anything more, Êomer interjected, “What I would ask of both of you is very simple. I know I asked you . . .” He paused and looked embarrassed. “ . . . never to see or speak to him again.” He shot Lothíriel an apologetic grin. “That was stupid. And not even feasible. I admit to injured vanity. But really, I need to think of Rohan. I love you, Lothíriel. I am not sure I could find another woman I could love so well.”

“I am sure you could, but I don’t want you to!” Could he possibly be serious? Women swooned over him from Gondor to Rohan and everywhere in between.

“Just listen before you agree. Obviously, you will see one another. But I would prefer a measure of external hypocrisy—no loving glances, no attempts at secret meetings. You cannot make love to one another. A King marries for heirs and I am no exception. I want a real Queen as well. Rohan has suffered without one. Lothíriel can help me and not just by her connections—to Gondor, to Minas Tirith and Dol Amroth. We understand one another and agree about what we want to see in the new world we will be building. Rohan needs a strong leader at home and this new world needs a strong Rohan. I need her by my side.”

He stopped to take a breath and Lothíriel blurted out with stubborn determination, “Yes. I agree.” She looked at Elladan with reluctance, afraid of what she might or might not see in his face and her own reaction to him.

“I already agreed,” Elladan said, his pride showed in the lift of his chin and his set jaw, longing and vulnerability in his eyes. “I will follow your rules, sire. Allow me to take my leave now. You don’t need me here any longer.”

He bowed from the waist, a courtier’s formal and distant politeness in his movement, as he inched backwards toward the door. At that, Êomer flung off the sheets and jumped up and strode to stand in front of him. Barefoot and in light sleeping pants, he nonetheless looked every inch a warrior king. “Let us shake on it then.” He extended his hand to Elladan, who clasped it double-handed. Unexpectedly, Êomer pulled him into an embrace and kissed him on the cheek.

“I have no idea if we can ever be friends, but I would wish it could be so. I do trust that, should anything ever happen to me, my lady will have a staunch protector. I am told that Elves are constant in their affections.”

Elladan’s rigid control broke again and he smiled at Êomer, not looking in Lothíriel’s direction. “Constant as the sun, sire. More so even. Until the end of Arda.”

“Beloved!” the word was not spoken, but came to Lothíriel through the gentle but firm, unmistakable touch of Elladan upon her mind. The arrangement they had agreed to would change everything and nothing between them. It did not mean that he would stop loving her.

“Will you agree to keep this promise until death shall part us?” Êomer asked Lothíriel again, with that young and hopeful expression that never failed to take her breath away.

At that moment, it felt to her like the choice she had made was a silly and unbearably romantic one, but then she was a silly, romantic girl. Elladan, on the other hand, lived completely above the pulls of
mortality or any hard sense of the shortness of a mortal life. He grieved for his sister, but she thought he did not yet fully comprehend the nature of his family’s coming loss, with any luck it would not arrive until many, many happy years had passed.

His father understood mortality because he had lost his only brother and dearest friend. Elladan had lost comrades and friends to death, some he would see again and others lost forever, but still he seemed not to comprehend her mortality. Lothíriel’s promise of supporting Éomer until death meant something different to her than it could ever mean to Elladan. She undoubtedly would, absent ill chance or foul mischief, outlive her brave and generous Éomer. Elladan’s transmission of the endearment “Beloved,” meant that he could make this promise and still wait for her. But she feared he did not understand that she would no longer be the lively girl with whom he had fallen in love.

“I promise,” she said, clearly and louder than was necessary within the small enclosed room.

“Yes,” Éomer said and pulled her into a hard, fierce kiss. He had torn her gaze away from Elladan, who, arms crossed over his chest, looked upon them, Elven grave and inscrutable again.

When Lothíriel finally broke free from the kiss, Éomer said without looking away from her, “Thank you, Elladan.” He had not noticed that the Elf lord had already slipped out of the room.
Notes on canon and other speculation

Musing on Language Use
In his letters, Tolkien indicates that Common Speech was widely known in Rohan. The fact that the language of the Rohirrim is not a written language does not in any way imply that Éomer and Éowyn would be illiterate and/or not be fluent in other languages. In my opinion, both are common misconceptions that have popped up as fanon and then taken on a life of their own. I posit in my story that Éomer can speak fluent Sindarin (assuming it would have been his third language).

In relation to usage of Sindarin by men at the time of the War of the Rings, in addition to Appendix F, of Lord of the Rings, I relied heavily on linguist David Salo's scholarly Gateway to Sindarin, A Grammar of an Elvish Language from J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings (University of Utah Press), "History of Sindarin" chapter. "The Noble families of Gondor usually used some Sindarin, but only a few used it as a daily speech."

He goes on to note that native Sindarin speakers were largely limited to Minas Tirith and the surrounding area, the Dúnedain of the North and Dol Amroth. He claims that it was most persistently used among Men as a first language in Dol Amroth. He goes on to say "In the last years of the Third Age as a result of the marriage (2943) of Thengel of Rohan to Morwen of Lossanarch (whose family was from Belfalas), Sindarin came to be spoken also by the Kings of Rohan." (He references Peoples of Middle Earth, Return of the King, and Unfinished Tales. I also found references to that effect in Tolkien's letters.)

Despite a resurgence of the use of Rohirric in the court of Rohan during the reign of Théoden, I think that since Théoden fostered Éomer, and raised him as he raised his own son, he would have received the best education available.

Osanwe-Kenta or Communication by Thought
When posting the first chapters in which I introduced plot elements that touched on communication by thought, I received a mini-storm of protest in private communications from some of my most discriminating readers that I had gone too far. Not true, I insisted, but then it took me some weeks to marshal my resources in defense of my assertion that the Dol Amroth heirs and Faramir possessed this gift and, secondarily, that Éomer could share in this skill. Rather than comb through Lord of the Rings and cite chapter and verse for every reference to this gift or skill, I would refer skeptical readers to an article on the subject penned by Tolkien, available in Vinyar Tengwar, Volume 39, July 1998, published by the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship.

According to Tolkien, among the peoples of Arda, the openness and/or accessibility to the communicating with the minds of others is strongest among the Eldar, but is also available to Men. At the risk of oversimplification: the above article states that those who are most warm of heart and strong of fëa, would be among those likely to possess the necessary openness to give them access to this gift. In the context of my story, this would certainly describe Faramir, the Dol Amroth family and Éomer.

On the the Elvish strain among men
There are numerous references to the Elvish strain among men in Unfinished Tales. Christopher Tolkien says in one note:

"...among the last writings of my father's on the subject of Middle-earth, there is a discussion of the Elvish strain in Men, as to its being observable in the beardlessness of those who were so descended (it was a characteristic of all Elves to be beardless); and it
is here noted in connection with the princely house of Dol Amroth that "this line had a special Elvish strain, according to its own legends."

There are two well-known references to the subject in *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, both of which issued from Legolas. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Legolas sings the song of Amroth and Nimrodel and then speaks of "the Bay of Belfalas, whence the Elves of Lórien set sail." Later there is the much-quoted one in *The Return of the King*, where when Legolas first encounters Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth, he comments that:

"At length they came to the Prince Imrahil, and Legolas looked at him and bowed low; for he saw that here indeed was one who had elven-blood in his veins. 'Hail, lord!' he said. 'It is long since the people of Nimrodel left the woodlands of Lórien, and yet still one may see that not all sailed from Amroth's haven west over water.'

'So it is said in the lore of my land,' said the Prince…"

Meanwhile, my current AU speculation, subject to change as the storyline unfolds: I find Legolas' reaction to his first encounter with Imrahil extreme if the prince had only one Elven ancestor, 22 generations back. Meanwhile the adjacent woods and shores of that entire Belfalas area had been crawling with Elves for at least an age. These would not have been the largely cloistered Elves of Imladris and Lothlorien of the late Third Age, nor the beleaguered, besieged Elves of Mirkwood. It does not seem unreasonable to me that: 1) there could have been a small, but significant, amount of intermarriage; 2) that the status of half-Elven would likely have been a high one among the Númenoreans of the area; and 3) that, consequently, the heirs of Dol Amroth might have picked up numerous infusions of Elven blood over the centuries.

**The Two Glorfindels**

I take the position that Glorfindel of Gondolin and Glorfindel of Imladris are the one and the same. I had originally thought to footnote, but then I decided that it was not necessary and that this was, indeed, finally a dead debate. Then when I first posted my chapter "A Betrothal," I received a note from a reader questioning this. In light of that I prepared this note. There is a lengthy article defending this position in *History of Middle Earth*, Volume 12. Christopher Tolkien comments on his father's position that there is one Glorfindel question as well. Glorfindel is even given a "backstory" in *Fellowship of the Ring*, "Many Meetings," which, in my opinion, supports the position that they are one.

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As I understand it, the name duplication (the use of the name Glorfindel first in the *Silmarillion* and then in *Lord of the Rings*) was originally an oversight. But JRRT decided he liked the idea of linking the two in the end.

I refer the reader to my own character biographies on The Silmarillion Writers Guild of Glorfindel of Gondolin and Glorfindel of Rivendell, [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

**Acknowledgements:**
More people have helped with this story over the years that I can easily list here. Primarily I owe a
debt of gratitude to two different writers groups, first, the Garden of Ithilien and later to the
participants of the Lizard Council writers' circle. I owe special thanks to Suriel for her generosity and
advice on horses and horse behavior reflected in the chapter "Éomer and the Mearas." I think
IgnobleBard alone has Beta read all of these chapters. Most of all I appreciate the readers who have
continued to read it when updates slowed almost to a stop. I am trying now again to finish this epic.
(I am sitting on far too much unpublished material written for future chapters to of this story to ever
abandon it.)
Character list:

Chapter Summary

This list is probably in need of an update. Hope to get to that sooner rather than later (along with the next chapter).

List of Characters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amrothos</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Third son of Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth, Swan Knight of Dol Amroth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aragorn</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Son of Arathorn, Heir of Isildur son of Elendil, 16th Chieftain of the Dûnedain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arwen Undómiel</td>
<td>2,778</td>
<td>Daughter of Half-Elven Elrond Lord of Imladris and Celebrian daughter of Galadriel and Celeborn of Lothlorien, sister of Elrohir and Elladan, betrothed to Aragorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elladan</td>
<td>2,889</td>
<td>Son of Half-Elven Elrond Lord of Imladris and Celebrian daughter of Galadriel and Celeborn of Lothlorien, twin of Elrohir and brother of Arwen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elphir</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Son and heir of Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth, Swan Knight of Dol Amroth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elrohir</td>
<td>2,889</td>
<td>See Elladan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Éomer</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>King of Rohan, son of Eomund chief Marshal of the Mark and Théodwyn, daughter of King Thengel of Rohan and Morwen of Lossarnach (Gondor). After the loss of his parents at age 11, Éomer was raised by Théoden King of Rohan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Éowyn</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Lady of Rohan, sister of Éomer King, daughter of Eomund chief Marshal of the Mark and Théodwyn daughter of King Thengel of Rohan and Morwen of Lossarnach (Gondor). After the loss of her parents at age 7, was raised by Théoden King of Rohan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Erchirion</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Second son of Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth, Swan Knight of Dol Amroth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faramir</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Steward of Gondor, son of Denethor II Ruling Steward of Gondor and Finduilas Princess of Dol Amroth and sister of Prince Imrahil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frodo Baggins</strong></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Hobbit of the shire, Ringbearer; heir of his cousin Bilbo Baggins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gimli</strong></td>
<td>140</td>
<td>Son of Gloin of the line of Durin; Dwarven representative in the Fellowship of the Ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Haldir</strong></td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Elf, Marchwarden of Lothlórien.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imrahil</strong></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>22nd Prince of Dol Amroth, Belfalas, wealthy coastal liege state of Gondor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legolas</strong></td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Son of Thranduil King of Mirkwood, Elven representative in the Fellowship of the Ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lothíriel</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Youngest child and only daughter of Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Melliel (OC)</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Daughter of Húrin of Minas Tirith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meriadoc Brandybuck</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Hobbit of the shire, member of the Fellowship; made Esquire to King Theoden; made a Knight of the Riddermark by King Éomer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mithrandir</strong></td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Maiar, one of the Istari sent Middle Earth by the Valar in the Third Age to assist in their struggle against Sauron. Also know as Gandalf, Olorin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nimrodel (OC)</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Kinswoman of the Dol Amroth princes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This story begins two days after the Battle of the Pelennor Fields (March 17, 3019). Age and descriptions of these characters are as of the beginning of this story.

[1] I have based my characterization of Legolas in this story as being young among Elvenkind upon speculation borrowed from the articles "Legolas of Mirkwood, Prince Among Equals" by Ellen Brundige and Michael Martinez's "Speaking of Legolas."

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