

## A HOUSE DIVIDED

written October-December, 2003

### Chapter I

#### Destiny

Rohan, 2922

"Thengel!"

The king's drunken growl roared in my ears as I stormed down the corridor to my room, slamming the heavy wooden door behind me. For a moment in my rage I contemplated bolting it shut, then decided that no matter the circumstances, I would never hold myself captive within my own home. I did want to throw something, however, but as I quickly turned, my eyes scouring every surface, nothing seemed appropriate. Then I saw my desk. The ink pot. From within the fury, my more calm self knew I would regret this, but emotions won. It went flying through the room and shattered. Inky rivulets slowly coursed down the surface, joining small shards of glass on the floor, the juxtaposition of clear and black capturing my attention. Despite the thick walls of Meduseld, no doubt someone would be along soon, having heard the slammed door. Though my hasty exits from the dinner board were more common than not, many in the Golden Hall shared my displeasure of the King's activities. Displeasure which verged on loathing.

In that moment I decided that as soon as I was of age, only a half-year from then, I would leave him. I had been riding with the marshals of the Mark for a couple of years, spending as much time with them as I could to stay away from my liege. That evening, I began making plans. Over the next months, I had to take my older sisters into confidence, and though they were loath for me to leave, they concurred that for all concerned, it was probably the only course of action.

On the eve of my turning eighteen, I stood at the board and calmly told my father, the King, that I would be leaving for Gondor in the morn. He grew livid, his face red with fury and the several tankards of ale he had drunk rapidly through the short dinner. He made as though to strike me, but I caught his hand.

'This is not behaviour which suits a King of the Mark, Father,' I said through clenched teeth, then released him. Still furious, he waved at the guards to escort me from the room while he added to his already full platter. I knew from the looks on their faces that they did not wish to follow his commands, and I left so quickly that they did not need to take me by force. In the morning, with my squire Fultwine, I began the journey south to Mundburg, to serve the Steward Turgon, if he would have me.

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Anyone with gumption and a sharp mind will take the measure of two things: what's said and what's done.

~*Beowulf*, translation by Seamus Heaney

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Lossarnach, 2941

Most of the contents of my basket had scattered on the ground, soon to be crushed by horses' feet or stolen by quick-fingered boys. 'Swine's swill, Morwen!' I swore at myself under my breath as I began scurrying to salvage what I could, and it took me a moment to look up and see what it was that I had collided with to cause my recently-bartered goods to fall to the stoneway.

I caught my breath. It was a "him," not an "it." And he was clad in the livery of Minas Tirith. Green-hazel eyes met mine as he crouched down, joining me as I now attempted very quickly to retrieve my foodstuffs and make as dignified of a departure as I could. I lowered my gaze back to the ground and said hurriedly, 'You may leave me to this. It is nothing.'

Our hands brushed as he returned a rogue yam to my basket, and I bit down on my lower lip to try and stop a shudder of delight. He continued to rescue my acquisitions, even as he spoke in a surprisingly melodious baritone, 'Ah, but it is I who managed to run into you, and for that, my assistance is yours until your belongings have been saved.'

I chanced another fleeting look at his face, and saw that he had surprisingly long dark gold hair with a few strands of grey, though his beard was a reddish colour. He looked... foreign. Hastily reverting my eyes back to my basket, I replied, 'Thank you, my lord. I have close enough to what I should have to be able to return home without reprimand.'

I made a last glance around me, then slowly rose.

He still stood there. Apparently, he was not aware that his fellows were watching him, grins on their patrol-weary faces, and I was embarrassed for him. I was certainly abashed and I wished for him to go and join his comrades.

'May I be so bold as to ask your name, she of the heavy basket?'

I stood as regally as I could, given the circumstances, the familiar noises and scents of the marketplace giving me security. I had listened carefully this time, and knew that I heard the slightest undercurrent of an accent to his voice as he asked the question. Intrigued, I answered.

'Morwen.'

As he smiled, I brazenly asked, 'And you, Ranger of Ithilien?'

He stared almost confusedly for a few moments, then ran his hand through his straight hair.

'Thengel.'

From the corner of my eye I could see that the other Rangers had given up on their comrade in arms and were moving on to their intended destination, an often-visited public house a few roads away.

I tore my gaze away from him and looked down the busy cobbled way. 'You shall lose your fellows in a moment. I do thank you for your aid. You have been most generous in your attentions, but you will want to join the other Rangers.' I pointed to the group, their swords and quivers making them stand out among the more commonly-dressed citizens of Lossarnach.

He nodded slowly, then said, as though it would matter to me, 'I do not care for ale. But their company is indeed welcome.' Then he looked keenly at me. 'I am most pleased to have made your acquaintance, Morwen.'

He took my left hand, and kissed it.

There was nothing I could say in response, and so I stood, mute.

I watched him break into a jog to reach the other Rangers, and almost dropped my basket for a second time that day.

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The seasons continued on, as they always did; autumn, through mild winter, to oppressively warm spring. I grew a little older, and I thought of the odd red-bearded Ranger on occasion. I experienced some of the pleasures that life had to offer, though I was always careful. I did not think much of the future yet, as I was only partway through my nineteenth year, but my father had a constant eye out for a beneficial match for me. Or for himself. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference. Other corps of the defenders of Gondor came through our area to the southwest of Minas Tirith, but I didn't see the older foreigner in their ranks.

I knew the qualities which I possessed that were most of value: beauty (quite accidental) and common sense (another stroke of luck). I could not feign naivete that I did not have, but neither was I overly optimistic. So, in short, I carried on as I always had. The eldest of four siblings, my hands were never lacking in responsible pursuits, yet my mother also suggested that I try and use my looks to secure some appearances at the lower levels of the court in the White City. Father was a respected merchant, after all, and he was able to send some strategic correspondence to the right people which did indeed allow us entry to some of the occasional dances held in Minas Tirith.

And I, well, I was not so indifferent as not to glean a fair amount of satisfaction from the attentions I did receive at these events. 'Some hold out for love,' my father would whisper as we dutifully followed the choreographed dance set out for us in the hierarchy of such a regimented and insular society, holding stalwartly onto tradition. 'The wise hold out for diamonds.'

He would wink, and I would smirk, and ask as I always did, 'So what do you hold out in your hands?'

I hated asking the question, but it was as old a ritual as we had. I knew the answer, which bruised my heart every time I heard it, because somehow even from early youth I knew that I would be denied the inexplicably profound, complex, and yet tantalizingly unattainable simple joy that he and my mother shared.

'Dear daughter, I hold both.'

I resented them for it, even as I was literally swept away in his strong arms, the fruits of his labours clothing me in an almond-brown dress, the better to set off my eyes.

Which I invariably closed.

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2942

I found myself again in the streets of Lossarnach. Now that I was serving as the captain of our group of archers, I had been dispensed to this region for training for the next several months. Despite myself, I looked for the keen-eyed Morwen. She was not there, of course. Neither her nor her basket of yams.

Our entourage was in need of winter clothing, and from my predecessor, I knew of a particular woolen merchant who would do well by us, given the need to stretch funds as far as they could. Though we all wore vambraces bearing the white tree, we were many, and in several companies. Especially in more rustic areas away from the White City, coin and purse spoke much more loudly than livery depicting a dead plant in Minas Tirith.

As nonchalantly as I could, I dispensed with Tarangil and Dallben. Under normal circumstances they were very persuasive escorts, and, if I were true to myself, the two whose company I truly enjoyed beyond the usual banter. With a bit of coaxing, however, I sent them on their way to one of the more often-frequented public houses, knowing that they would not be lacking for entertainment.

Wandering the inner convoluted paths of Lossarnach, I shook my head, marveling at the years of serving with Ecthelion which now brought me to this place. He was only a few years my senior, and since my arrival on a blustery day nearly two decades ago, he had become a trusted companion and confidant. The line of Stewards remained strong and powerful, Turgon an honourable man worthy of serving, the realm worth protecting. It was not that I wished for ill to come to Rohan, nor her borders breached, but as long as my father continued to be held in the sway of his vices, he and the marshals would remain at odds. Thanks to my father, the prior generations of stability were quickly eroding.

I had sworn, time and time again, that I would never return to my homeland. The words that I had uttered to Turgon, in fact, often came to me as I paced on long marches: *Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of the realm, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end. So say I, Prince Thengel son*

*of King Fengel of Rohan.* Yet, for some reason I could not fathom, both Turgon and Ecthelion seemed to think that when it came to it, I would in fact leave Gondor, forswear my oath and take my place as King of Rohan. My words of denial met on deaf ears, year after year. And so, I found myself a captain, chasing down cloth.

I had now lived in Gondor and her surrounds for nigh on seventeen years. While I had gained the respect of those with whom I served, I knew that they still found me different. I was more direct in my speech, though I had picked up on and then adopted many of their word-plays and subtleties in commentary. I now spoke Westron almost without accent, though on those rare occasions when I did hear Rohirric around me, my head snapped in that direction. Usually I managed to recover myself quickly enough, but the instinct was still there, and I hated it. Gondor suited me. It was a land of rules, of understandings, both explicit and implicit, and I knew them all. Valour and integrity checked me, and in this I did not find myself lacking. I was skilled enough with sword and bow, and showed promise in regards to being the kind of leader of men whom they willingly will follow, and moved rapidly through the ranks to be a captain.

On occasion there were comments made about my heritage, that I was a "Ranger Prince," but I dissuaded such talk. One particularly dismal night spent in the pouring rain while on patrol near the Anduin, Tarangil asked, 'So! When will you go to reclaim your throne - before or after you turn to rust with the rest of us?'

I had found myself in particularly dark humour, both with the weather and because I honestly had not wanted to confront such a topic. Thankfully my wits rescued me from what would certainly have been a rather unpleasant interchange.

'There is a saying in Rohan,' I said, surprised by myself, as I usually tried to suppress all references of my former home. "'You will know the harvest by the birds.'"

Tarangil looked puzzled. Shaking my head to rid myself temporarily of the water that had clustered in my eyebrows and beard, I smiled.

'Until there is a sign, my friend, Rohan is as far away to me as the isles on the Western Sea to whom we turn and reverence at evening meals. If you are trying to rid yourself of my company, you had best speak to Turgon, for I am rather content here.'

He shook his head, and despite the constant downpour, there was a hint of mirth in his eyes.

'Thengel,' he said quite seriously. 'You are mad.'

I had shrugged, and kept walking.

'You do not know the madness that I left,' I said quietly, under my breath.

For a fleeting moment, however, I thought perhaps that he had a point.

Brought back to the present, I continued to walk. The sounds of children playing in the streets sounded melodious to my ears, the sun shone, and birds sang. My feet felt secure on the road. I was smugly content in my adopted land, which led to the inevitable.

Moments later, I bashed my head against a rather low-hanging awning. Stumbling backward, by instinct I both rubbed above my eyebrow and swore something most foul in Rohirric. The children stopped their playing, stared at me, then resumed their activities. For a moment I stood, dazed, then with a start realised that I was at the doorfront of the wool merchant that I was supposed to find. I shook my head, then immediately wished that I hadn't.

I readjusted my leather vest and ran my fingers through my hair and tried to look as presentable as possible, having just collided with a building. There was a rather ostentatious brass knocker on the door, which I held and then solidly knocked three times, as brazenly as seemed warranted. Then I stood back, and rubbed the growing knot on my forehead.

A child answered the door, and I caught my breath. She could have been the bright-eyed Morwen's twin, yet far younger. For a split second I wondered if all those in Lossarnach looked like her, but then I came to my senses. The youngling stood, unblinking and unafraid.

'Can I help you sir?' she asked.

I blinked. 'Yes, young maid. I am here to find a wool-merchant who has done a great service to the defenders of Gondor, located at this residence, I believe.'

She continued to stare, so I continued to babble.

'The captain who served before me had been here many times, and now that he has retired to his family, I am here in his place, and hope that I may do business here.'

Relinquishing her gaze, she turned and yelled behind her, 'There is a man here from the white palace who needs to speak with Father!'

I chuckled. *Palace, indeed!*

She turned back around, and with great aplomb, lowered her hand and head and said, 'Please come in.'

I raised an eyebrow, but entered nonetheless. I had never had such an entreaty for entry, and certainly not by one who could not have been more than nine years old. I carefully eyed the doorframe, and ducked slightly to ensure that I returned to my barracks with only one memento of the day's activities. She escorted me down a short wooden corridor and was about to turn me down another when I heard the rustle of skirts and an oddly familiar voice say, 'Ask him if he would like some brandy, Brianna.'

A small hand tugged at mine, and before she could get the words out, I shook my head in the negative to the already-asked question.

'Please thank your host, but I am not in need of refreshment.'

The child, Brianna, apparently, looked crestfallen.

'But you must be thirsty!'

She gazed intently at me as a slight shiver ran down my spine in anticipation of the approach of the other speaker.

'Brianna, why- '

Even without moving, I knew it was her. I turned nonetheless. Morwen stood in the doorway at the foot of some stairs, her face slowly losing colour.

'Ranger?'

She had forgotten my name. I was a fool to have continued to entertain the hope that she might have been as affected by our initial meeting as I had. I was too old, and now the headache that had been building since I ran into their storefront came raging forth. I looked at the young girl who had bid me entry.

'Brianna, is it?' I queried.

She nodded, then grinned, a wide mouth full of teeth now exposed.

'I think I will accept your kind offer of brandy after all.'

There was no further for her smile to go, and yet it did. She was gone in an instant.

'Thengel, how did you... why are you...'

Now it was my turn to lose face. She had remembered my name. I was still a fool. I was still too old.

'Are you here to buy something?'

Just at that moment, when I was ready to explain that yes, indeed, I was there to purchase several hundred yards of their densest cloth to be made into cloaks for the long-suffering archers of one of the companies of the Rangers, her father came bursting into the room.

In a few steps he was standing purposefully before me, pumping my hand, then saying that I must have heard about him from the captain of the archers who always came there to buy his cloth (the best in all of Gondor, always had been, I was very wise to visit him)... I nodded. Then Brianna reappeared, and I gratefully accepted the small glass, raised it to Morwen's father, and drained the contents.

An hour or so later when I left the home of Briagond, leagues of cloth were scheduled to be sent to the seamstresses at Minas Tirith, Brianna was loath to see me leave, and my injury now throbbed, but at least Morwen saw me to the door.

Feeling as though perhaps not all hope was lost in getting to spend more time with her, I said, 'There is yet another insufferable gathering on the Great Lawn at the eastern side of the Third Level in a fortnight. Would it be agreeable to you if we went together? I could arrange to have you taken there.'

She looked searchingly at me, and paused.

*Nicely done. I could have beaten myself. You sound like one of the pompous lords you try to avoid when in councils.*

'Yes,' she replied. 'As long as the company is not insufferable.'

I was about to say something when she continued, 'You had best put some chilled water or herbs to that knot. It will be sore for days by the look of it.'

I opened my mouth to thank her.

'Thengel is not a name heard in this area. You speak like one of Gondor, but that is not your heritage, is it?'

I shut my mouth, then slowly shook my head.

She raised her left hand and with a gentle thumb, caressed the large bump above my eyebrow.

'I look forward to seeing you again. You are most surprising.'

Then she was gone. The door was shut, my head ached, and my heart sang.

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#### **Author's Notes**

Thengel's quote is from *Return of the King*, "Minas Tirith," and are the words that Denethor bids Pippin say back to him as he pledges himself to Gondor.

## Chapter II

### Desire

And his spark took life in my hand and, mmh, yes,  
I said, mmh, yes,  
But not yet...

~ "The Sensual World," Kate Bush  
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When I thought back on it, the dance was as they usually were, with much of the same company. Except that on that occasion, for the first time in over a year, I was accompanied by someone other than my father. I had joined Thengel on Lampwrights' Street, and he escorted me up to the area where the festivities were being held.

It was stifling; the heat of summer. "Insufferable," he had said, though I doubt he had meant it in terms of hot or cold. As he took my arm to begin our ascent, again I found myself experiencing a shiver of unexpected pleasure, though I admonished myself not to make too much of things. He was presumably above my station, after all, and obviously far older, though it did appear that destiny had thrown our paths together in a rather unobvious manner. It had been disconcerting, but after his visit to our home I began waking only to discover that he had been in my dreams - and many mornings, as I remembered parts of my night visions,

I wished to return to sleep so they would not end.

As we danced, I took my time to more leisurely take in his features in the dim light. He was quite handsome, in his way. Longish tawny hair with some strands of grey, and thick facial hair tinged with red. He seemed rather strong, and doubtless the years of holding a bow and sword had led to the rough callouses which met my hands as our hands clasped during familiar choreographed motions. For all of his social ease, however, something seemed to ring contrary to him, though I could not place it. His dancing skills were admirable, and for once I did not change partners through the evening.

'You look exquisite,' he murmured into my ear early in the evening, and I glowed in appreciation. As the time went on, we both had some wine, then he asked if I would care to go outside for cooler air. I gratefully agreed.

We sat on a stone bench and spoke about common things for awhile. Thengel asked me about my family, my father's business, some travels we had made to Belfalas. I answered all in kind, though I was only half-attentive to my own words. The rest of my attentions were focused on him and the bewildering effects that his presence had on me. Certainly with no other suitors had my heart raced when a hand was placed at my back. Never before had I suffered goosebumps on my arms when a stray warm breath caressed my neck as he leaned in to comment on one of his fellows dancing nearby. Was it simply because he was so much older, more worldly than anyone I had met? As I realised that my imagination was taking rather explicit flights of fancy about his full lips, I suddenly knew that my feelings had gone beyond mere interest in his well-disguised exoticism. I had to know more about him, much more.

At an appropriate lull, I gathered my courage.

'You have obviously lived here for many years, Thengel, but if I may ask, what is your original homeland?'

He looked down, then took my hands.

'Does it matter?' he asked as a reply.

'No. I just find you so... interesting.'

He shook his head, and it took all of my self-control not to withdraw my hands so that I could run my fingers through his mane of hair.

'That word again.' He looked somewhat mournfully at me. 'I do not wish to be forward, lady, but I had hoped that perhaps you would feel something for me beyond interest.'

He stroked my fingers, and I held my breath, waiting for him to continue.

'Regardless, I am from Rohan. I left seventeen years ago and do not plan to return. The details of my past I would rather not discuss, at least not now.'

*Rohan!* I slowly exhaled, and gently grasped his hands.

'I have two older sisters, and we have exchanged correspondence over the years, though I have not travelled to see them. They both have several children of their own, now.'

He smiled, but I could see that if he regretted nothing else, he missed not knowing these nieces and nephews, growing up leagues away.

We sat in silence for a few moments, then I did something that surprised me for years to come. I spoke my mind without thinking first.

'Thengel, it matters not to me whether you are from Rohan or down the road. After our first unexpected meeting,' at that, he smiled wryly, and I found myself caught up in the sparkle of his eyes the colour of ripest olives, 'I thought of you on occasion. Since our second unexpected meeting, I have thought of nothing but you.'

And because my body would allow me to do nothing else after seeing the delight on his face, I leaned in and tasted his sweet mouth for the first time.

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The next few months were little more than a blur. I met with Thengel when he was able; we walked together through the nearby vinyards, we took my younger sisters on small picnics, he showed me around his barracks where his troop was stationed. He came by one afternoon on a particularly chilly autumn day to show my father the cape he wore - it was made of the cloth he had ordered from us after his rather painful introduction to our shop. Father beamed, then looked knowingly at me. I pretended not to notice.

And then, just as I had gotten complacent about seeing him almost as often as I wished, he was sent away. We were drinking hot cider with brandy, sitting in chairs I thought were overstuffed, when he told me. My parents also were there in the room, of course. Though I was of age, and they had become rather fond of Thengel, they still did not feel it appropriate for us to be alone in the evenings for any extended period of time. This angered me, for I felt that I was being treated like a child, but rules were rules.

He and the other Rangers under his command were to join with Prince Ecthelion on an extended patrol of the southern border of Gondor through South Ithilien along the Poros, and then return north to fortify Osgiliath. After he broke his news, my parents both exclaimed how much they would miss his company, and then, surprisingly, allowed us some time alone.

Once they left the room, I got up from my chair and hurried to his, seating myself in his lap. Though he had been shocked at my forwardness on the bench at our first dance, he had warmed to my newly discovered sensual nature, now surging forth against his more restrained affections. I ran my hands through his hair, then buried my face in it, smelling his very essence.

'I don't want you to leave. I am only just getting to know you!' The words rushed from me in a torrent of grief.



His strong fingers found each other as they embraced me, and I was held cradled there. He was quiet for several moments, his warm breath exhaling onto my collarbone.

'Dear Morwen, it is not my wish to leave. But duty is duty, and I cannot fail my fellow soldiers, Ecthelion, or Steward Turgon.'

He leaned back so that he could look at me. 'Do not think that your absence will be lightly felt, my eagle-eyed one. And it is not forever - it is simply that I do not know how long I will be gone.'

I took his hands, and kissed his fingers on the tips, one after the other. After each one, I asked, 'This long?' and he shook his head, smiling. When I had ministered to all ten digits, I sat morosely, looking at his sturdy hands in mine. Then I got defensive.

'Well,' I said, 'I will miss you too. But there is plenty to be done here. You will let me know when you have returned?'

He looked at me, stung. I hadn't meant to hurt him, but I was already aching at his absence, and I had nowhere else to throw the barbs that I wished rather to throw at whoever had commanded him to leave.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'You shall know when I have returned.'

Determined now not to act like a petulant child, I simply nodded.

'I will look forward to that day,' I replied, then removed myself from his lap. 'Is there anything else I can get you before you go?'

I watched as he slowly rose to full height from the deep chair, took his cup in his left hand, then drained the contents. Then he shook his head.

'Please thank your parents for me. I will correspond with you if I am able.'

He looked suddenly rather older to me as he continued, 'Do as your heart bids you. I would not ask you to wait for me unless it is your own desire to do so.'

Again, he took my left hand and kissed it.

I tried to be more constrained, but it simply wasn't in my nature. I raised my hands, held his face, and pulled him to me for a more intimate exchange. The warmth of his breath coursed through me, and I tried to put the sensation immediately into memory for the future, even as I tasted his mouth, and wished to cry at the familiarity of it, so soon to be absent.

Moments later, he was clad in his warm cloak, that same breath making clouds before him in the doorway. Then he was gone, his boots echoing on the cobbled street.

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2943

I had just begun to try and make him fade from my dreams as midsummer was coming on. With the season change came perspiration, a sensation I found deplorable. Due to the heat, I had on one my lightest linen gowns as I walked the marketplaces of Lossarnach with Iolande in tow, in search of the ripest oranges, now in season. She was only eight and tired easily, and my temper flared more quickly than normal, so we returned at mid-day after her complaining began to drive me mad. I posited our goods before the cook, then made my way to my room on the second floor in desperate search of a sturdy fan. After I opened my door, however, my feet stopped.

On the table near my bed was a basket with six pomegranates in it. Those were fruits that were both rare and rife with meaning, their complex red-berried centers traditionally a gift for those newly betrothed. As I stood staring, our front door knocker was rapped soundly three times, and despite

myself, my heart leapt in my throat. I rushed down the stairs, but Brianna beat me to the door. She performed her usual bow and invitation to entreaty, but no person entered. Instead she accepted a parchment, then with a look of disappointment, turned and handed it to me.

'For you,' she said, then walked with sturdy feet down the corridor to find Iolande to quiz her about the goings-on in the markets.

I took a shaky breath as I looked at the paper sealed with grey wax bearing the impression of the Tree of Gondor with its seven stars. It was not from the Stewards, whose wax was white, but rather that of her defenders.

Thengel.

Trying to calm myself, I took a quick detour by the kitchen, snatched up a bottle of wine and a small chalice, then took the parchment up to my room and closed the door. I poured myself a small bit of wine, drank it quickly, then picked up the correspondence. I broke the seal, and then read in surprisingly neat handwriting:

*I, Thengel of the Rangers of Gondor, request of you, Morwen, daughter of Briagond of Lossarnach, your company this evening. I shall arrive at dusk, and if it is your desire, we shall continue to the Lothan Inn to take dinner and then join the Midsummer's festivities. I am sorry that I have not been able to write prior to this; our extraneous provisions have been few while in the South, but please know that you have strayed often into my thoughts.*

*I very much look forward to seeing you this evening. If your affections are at all still turned toward me, I shall indeed be the most fortunate man in this world.*

*Yours,*

*Thengel*

I poured myself another splash of wine and re-read the invitation. So he had returned and would be here this evening. My heart began to race with the anticipation of being able to be held in his wide arms again.

Then I was haunted by the ages-old question: What should I wear?

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The street noises seemed to be especially loud, or perhaps it was simply that I felt that my nerves were exposed. I was almost jumpy, and for one who had served as a soldier for almost twenty years, I was unused to the sensation. After my earlier clandestine questioning of Brianna, I was almost certain that Morwen would be accompanying me to the dance this evening, but from what my fellows said, one could never be sure about the hearts of women. I sensed that she had remained true to me, but that could also have been simple wishful thinking on my part.

During our long marches, I had thought long and hard about her, about myself, and our future. I was certainly of an age to be married. In point of fact, I was the only one in our troop who remained unwed. There simply had not been anyone who had caught my eye for more than a brief moment, not that Gondor wasn't full of beautiful women. Many had been sent my way by well-meaning comrades, but there was an aura of fragility around many of them which was unappealing. I supposed, despite my years here, my upbringing continued to work on me in ways unexpected. I realised that I only wished to marry someone who was as strong in mind and character as my sisters, as well as (if I were fortunate) share their stark beauty.

I felt that person was Morwen.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I nearly ran into Briagond's awning for a second time. Before I could raise my hand to knock, Brianna had flung open the door and rushed to greet me.

'Thengel! You're back!' she squealed, playing her part to the fullest as she threw her arms around my waist. 'We've missed you!'

I smiled and rubbed her narrow back. 'And I you,' I replied. 'Is Morwen present?'

She nodded knowingly. 'Yes. She looks very pretty.'

'That's enough, Brianna!'

I heard her voice from inside the house, and I found that my hands became clammy. Morwen appeared from a stairwell and walked toward me, looking as I had remembered, and yet even more beautiful. For a few moments, at least, she was reserved in her demeanor, and I, too, found myself feeling slightly awkward after months apart and such a short courtship prior to our separation.

'It is good to see you again, Thengel,' Morwen said, then took my hand after her younger sister turned and walked a few paces away from us. 'As to your letter sent today, I am indeed most desirous of your company.' She spoke the words carefully even as she squeezed my hand.

I knew in that instant that she had waited faithfully for my return, and I was overcome by joy, but also intense longing, which I tried to suppress.

'I'm also famished!' she exclaimed. 'Let us go to the Inn before I faint.' She looked provocatively at me. 'Seeing you again has made me very hungry.'

I could not begin to reply to that comment. What physical sensations around her I had felt prior to now seemed muffled, and I was both shocked and embarrassed at myself as a very intense ache centered in my loins. It was time for us to leave.

We bid Brianna farewell and I asked Morwen about her parents, who she said were visiting another merchant for the evening. I closed the door, took her arm in mine, and allowed myself a few moments to admire her shining eyes before escorting her down the cobbled road.

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As we danced to one of the more slow and stately pieces, my mind worked its way into a fevered pitch of circling questions. Did I tell her my true heritage, that I was a prince who had abandoned his kingdom, before I asked for her hand, or did I wait? And would it matter? She had said that my background was not of interest to her, but I knew that it would matter greatly to Briagond, and Morwen was, in many ways that she would not admit, very similar in temperment to her father.

In the end, Morwen determined the course of things, as she so often did. After the dance, she took me by the hand and we went to get some wine.

'Dear captain,' she said, beaming, 'you would not happen to have any thoughts about pomegranates this evening, would you? Or baskets of them?'

I looked at her very seriously, and her smile dimmed.

'It was just -' she began. Throwing all caution to the wind, I knelt before her.

'Morwen.'

She stood silently, her hair blowing in the much-needed breeze.

'Morwen, I wish to ask you to consider being my wife. Your affections for me are honest, despite my being older, my being from Rohan, and that I will continue to have to leave on patrol...'

I got no further. She knelt before me, put her hands on my shoulders and asked, 'Do you love me?'

I nodded. 'With all that I am.'

She nodded. 'Then we are a good match.' Then she leaned in and kissed me, first softly, then passionately. I responded in kind, until we broke apart, breathless.

'You did put those pomegranates at my bedside, did you not?'

I laughed, stroking her fair face. 'Yes. Though I must admit that full guilt is not mine alone.' I rose, and pulled her up to me, holding her tightly so that I could feel her ribs against mine.

'Your sister Brianna had her hand in it as well.'

She leaned back, looking slyly. 'I should have known! She let you in, didn't she, while I was out with Iolande?'

Smiling, I nodded. Only then with a start did I realise that people were looking at us, and, in fact, a small circle of people now surrounded us. All of my sense of propriety came rushing back, and I was chagrined. I had planned for this to be a more private affair, and now a third of Lossarnach was privy to our news.

There was nothing else to be done- we needed to return to her parents. Morwen put her hand up to my face and turned it back to hers.

'Thengel,' she murmured, 'do not worry so. My family will be so pleased.'

Still somewhat dazed, I asked, 'And you? You are pleased? Am I truly who you want, though you are still so young, and could have any- '

'Hush.' She placed her fingers on my lips. 'It is you who I want.'

As we walked from the field back toward the main streets of the town, I gathered strength from her as she held my hand.

'Morwen?'

'Yes, beloved?'

'There is something yet I need to tell you.'

She stopped, then raised on her tiptoes to kiss me, vigorous and deep, then she stood back.

'Yes?'

I looked at her, a young woman of twenty-one, only three years older than I was when I had left Rohan, vowing never to return. My betrothed. My wife to be. There could no longer be any unknowns between us.

'Once I told you that I had left Rohan due to strife with my father.'

She nodded.

'The father that I left behind is the King of Rohan.'

Comprehension slowly made its way across her strong features.

'But you have sworn fealty to Gondor.'

'I have.'

She nodded again, brusquely this time.

'Then you are not changed to me.' She moved in and clasped my hand, holding it tightly to her chest. 'Someday you shall tell me the reasoning behind your actions. But not now.'

It was the last we spoke of it for several years. We made our way to her home, where Briagond and his wife, Brianna, Iolande and toddler Forlong greeted us, and rejoiced in our betrothal. Morwen's brown eyes were alight with happiness.

When I returned to my barracks that night, I found myself quite unable to sleep. The thought of Morwen's touch on my skin, of her insistent attentions in her kisses, made a restful night impossible. I tried to turn my mind to anything else, as there would still be several weeks before we could be wed. It would not have been proper for anyone to ask me, but if they had, I would have admitted that there had been no woman with whom I had shared myself. But now, with such certainties made eminent, and the very touch of my newly-pledged causing my most intimate senses to throb with anticipation, sleep came late, and laboured. At thirty-five, I was a man very ready to share in the joys of marriage. Sleep was infrequent, my dreams a torment. And yet, I was very happy.

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'Denethor, please get your mother. We must leave now if we are not to arrive late for our appointment at the Inn tonight in Lossarnach!'

My son rushed off. It certainly would not do for the Son of the Steward to be late for his Captain's wedding, especially since I was performing a role in the proceedings. I had responded to Thengel's question with great enthusiasm. 'Yes, by the Tree, I would be most honoured to be your second. What date has been set?'

We had all seen it coming, of course, though some eyebrows had been raised at their age difference. But in looking at this merchant's daughter who had caught Thengel's eye, we considered him to have done rather well for himself. She was young, to be sure, but beautiful in her own way. And rather astute. As I watched them interact together on occasion months prior as well as in the weeks leading up to their wedding, I noticed that there was nothing that escaped her clear brown eyes. Not a comment, not a phrase, not a glance. It was as though she had been born to be loyal to him. Although at first she seemed an unlikely companion for him, as I grew to know her, it seemed rather that she was made for him. She intuited his moods, yet the match was not one-sided. He knew how to pacify her in ways that were baffling, even to me, and I had been married for fifteen years. Not only that, but I was about to bring a thirteen-year-old to Thengel's celebrations. I hoped that my wife would keep Denethor on his best behaviour, not that he was an ill-mannered child, but I wished to do well by my dear companion.

I stood behind him at his wedding, my hand on his right shoulder while he recited the eloquent words that he had penned, a long-standing custom of our land. And there to his left, Morwen stood proudly, in a gown of almost scandalous scarlet, speaking back her part as clearly as a queen to her subjects. It was a bit hard to fathom, truly - she seemed but a child, and yet, the match was true. Who was I to argue about someone else's affairs of the heart? I had married at twenty-six, and had a sire by twenty-eight. In the past, others in our company and I had tried times uncountable to arrange meetings for this rogue from Rohan to find companionship, even if only for the evening, but he would have naught.

And now, seemingly, he had all.

I heartily congratulated the couple as they made their way around the back terrace of Morwen's home, multicoloured flags hanging somewhat limply in the late summer heat. It was a small gathering, but due to Thengel's rank as Captain, as well as being of the royal line of Rohan, the personages were of high position indeed, certainly faces not often seen in this less sophisticated area of Gondor. My father, always the diplomat, was speaking animatedly with Briagond, Morwen's father. If the one son in that family was anything like him, Lossarnach would not lack for leadership in the years ahead.

Thengel positively beamed. In all the years that I had known him, he had never looked so happy. It struck me that while he was well supported in this endeavour, no-one from his family was there to sanction his union, or to bestow good wishes on the newlyweds. It bothered me a little at the time, but I simply assumed that his father had been ill, and his sisters unable to travel with their own children. Only later did I find out that he had not even written to them to inform them of his own betrothal. His own father did not even know that his only son had married.

I looked around to get my bearings about my family's whereabouts. I was pleased to see that Denethor was creating a fort out of spare cloth and chairs drug out from the sitting room with the eldest of Morwen's younger siblings; my wife was enjoying some cordial while speaking with the wife of Dallben, one of Thengel's close companions in his troop. I took the opportunity while free from other familial responsibilities to speak with the bride and groom.

'Your new home is at the northern entrance of Lossarnach, so I hear?'

Morwen nodded, and held tightly to her husband's hand. 'We considered a home in Minas Tirith, but since the distance is so short, and my sisters and brother still young, and Windmane is still such a fine horse...'

Thengel turned to her and stroked her hair, then returned his gaze to mine. 'It seemed a good compromise since her family is here, it will be easier on her when I am away.'

I smiled knowingly at her even as she screwed up her face at him. 'Morwen, you have stolen the heart of a man most dear to me, but I am grateful. There were times when I feared he would spend the rest of his life alone, save for the company of his horse and other honourable soldiers. And while we are not the worst of companions, I will be bold and say that I am sure he is looking forward far more to evenings with you than exchanging old tales with us.'

Thengel held her tightly to him, the picture of contentment. 'The time of telling tales will come soon enough. I think now we should go to our house, if we are able to extract ourselves, even if only temporarily, from the loving embrace of family and friends.'

He looked out over the small crowd, and a brief look of sadness crossed his face. As he saw Denethor and his ever-expanding chair-fort, he smiled widely. 'You had best keep an eye on him, Ecthelion. That son of yours is already building his own empire!'

Excusing himself from Morwen, he strode to me and enfolded me in a warm embrace. For a moment I was taken aback, as I had not known him to be effusive in his affections. But then I returned the gesture, suddenly understanding the swift melancholy I had seen pass over him moments before. He had essentially been raised by his sisters, since his father had been a churlish drunkard. As a result, my father and I had become as father and brother to him in the years that had followed. His adoption and acceptance by my country was now complete, though it also meant that whatever ties he held to his homeland were now severed.

I stood back from him, hands still on his shoulders, and told him, quite sincerely, that he was a very lucky man.

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Memories of that first night in our small home will remain with me until my last breath. The scent of cedar is inextricably linked to that time, as she had arrayed our room with candles infused with that strong smell - it seemed a bower, as though the woods had been brought inside and we were two birds secluded away. Two falcons, perhaps. We were fierce in our union, though I must be honest and admit that our initial coupling was rather awkward. It had crossed my mind during my sleep-deprived nights prior to our wedding to go in search of helpful texts in the vast library of Minas Tirith, but then I decided that would be dishonourable. Years of vague dreams, then much more vivid ones, and occasional self-pleasuring left me woefully unprepared for the reality of a woman's unclothed body.

My wife's beautiful, luminous, very tangible flesh.

It would be most discourteous to speak in detail of that evening, but I had never felt so exposed, so loved, so utterly spent in all my days. After we were first joined and my heart ceased racing, I was almost able to tell Morwen how grateful I was, that the sun shone more brightly with her at my side...

Instead, without shame, I wept, and she mingled her tears of joy with mine, and we were complete.

### 3. Chapter III

#### Duty

2944  
Minas Tirith

'These stone floors have stood for thousands of years, but I swear that you are now cutting a path in them with your infernal pacing!'

I was temporarily up from the table which had our scouting maps stacked on it, warming my hands over a brazier set up in my office. It was February, and bitterly cold. The sky was an unforgiving steel grey, and my second in command would not sit still and concentrate.

'What is it, Thengel? You are no good to me, walking back and forth. We need to give serious consideration to the next patrols along the Poros! Your keen mind has never failed me yet, and I need your thoughts on how many men should go, and whether or not we should try, yet again, to make a peace with the Haradrim while the rumblings to the South are still only that.'

My entreaty apparently met on deaf ears, as he maddeningly continued to walk and did not reply.

'Thengel!'

He stopped, then looked at me as though I had only just begun speaking to him.

'Yes, Ecthelion?'

I controlled my ire.

'I need your attentions. Here.' I jabbed my thumb backward through the air toward the maps. 'What fog surrounds your mind that even the words of your commander cannot get through?'

This is not like you.'

He looked almost sheepish.

'Morwen,' he admitted. 'She has been... ill. Every morning. For days. It is most unpleasant, and rather worrisome.' He regained his composure, rubbed his eyes, and walked back to the table, taking the maps in his hand.

'My apologies, my liege,' he began. 'The lands south of the Poros have been rather quiet of late, but suspicion rather than security comes to my mind.'

He traced his left index finger along the familiar drawn lines of the river, stopping at its crossing with the Harad Road. Brows furrowed, he continued, speaking more clearly. 'If what our more discreet emissaries say is true, we would do well to fortify our ranks in South Ithilien. I do not suggest that we send more than a few dozen, but I do not doubt that, given their history, the Haradrim will wish to engage us with more than words, though that may be their first parley. And if so, someone should be there to counter their banter.'

Raising his head, he looked me in the eye. 'I will lead this entourage, if you feel it appropriate. It is land that I well know.'

I nodded approvingly.

'My one request, Ecthelion, is that you allow one of the Healers to visit Morwen before I depart.'

I stood up, weaning myself from the heat of the warm coals, then strode toward him. 'Of course. Would you feel better if one went with you, now?'



He looked as though he were a condemned man suddenly given reprieve.

I sighed. 'Let us go to the Healing Houses. Though some of Minas Tirith are struck down with coughing fits, I suspect that we can spare a Warden to make a visit to Lossarnach.'

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Later that day, a strong knock sounded on my door. Surprised, I put down my wine, gathered up the correspondence that I had been composing, and shoved it hastily in a drawer. I was not expecting my father, but I could not imagine who else would be visiting so unexpectedly. The deepening dusk was frigid, and newly engaged in activity, I found that I was very cold and rewrapped my cape around myself before opening the solid door.

Thengel almost fell in on top of me. In shock I leaned forward to catch him until I realized that he was pushing past me. He almost bounded into the room, his eyes alighting on my writing-table.

'Ah!' he exclaimed. 'You already have wine! I brought some as well!'

I was beginning to think that perhaps the Master Warden of Healers had slipped something rather serious into a tonic for him instead of his wife, when he blurted forth, 'Morwen is with child!'

It took everything in me not to laugh aloud.

I stared at Thengel as he busied himself in my study. His long-fingered hands fumbled about an infrequently-referenced bookshelf, thick with dust, which happened to have an equally long-unused chalice. Then he asked about my glass, proposed a toast, and drank his wine. I then found myself basking in his accusatory glare until I walked over and took my own glass and drank from it.

'She is with child!' he repeated, shaking his head. He began looking around for a chair, then after casting his eye on one sequestered in a corner, he found his way to it. In one fluid motion, he slumped into it, his long legs stretched forward.

'You probably find me ridiculous,' he said. 'But I have spent so many years with soldiers, how would I know? And Morwen, Morwen, Morwen...' he let the word trail off before continuing.

'Her mother was never ill. She thought that she was soon to perish! As did I!'

He shook his head, long hair covering his back.

*He should cut that before the next patrol, I thought quickly. Or at least pull it back.*

'We must seem so naive, Ecthelion! I am so sorry to trouble you.'

He made as though to leave, but his joy was so apparent that I kept him. I found another chair, which I dragged closer to him.

'Dear Thengel, life is a mysterious and wonderful thing. Please do not feel that you have troubled me. I am rather honoured that you have left your wife, now pregnant, to come and bear these tidings.'

He raised his glass and drank again, then looked at it, and then at me. A change came over his face.

'My apologies, my liege,' he spoke softly. 'It appears that some of the poorer attributes of my father stir within me yet.'

He handed me most of the contents of the bottle of wine. A rather exclusive vintage by the colour and shape of the bottle, I noted approvingly, but I put it on the floor near my chair since that appeared to be his wish.

I reached out my hands and he reciprocated. 'This is no small thing, Thengel,' I began, 'and I suspect that this babe shall not be the only of your line.'

Clutching at my fingers, he smiled, a bewildered look on his face. 'I must get back. But you are as a brother to me, I wanted you to know. This morning, I was so afraid...'

Thengel stood, and I stood with him. Surprising myself, I leaned in and embraced him.

'You will be a generous and meet father, Thengel of Rohan.'

His hands clasped my back.

'I only wish to do what is right.'

I nodded, then disengaged myself to be able to look at his face.

'You shall,' I said. 'Now get back to that beautiful wife of yours. Not that she needs watching over, to be sure.'

He smiled, then frowned.

'Cordial!' he exclaimed. 'She was craving a cordial. I must go in search of it.'

Then he was gone from my chamber, cape trailing behind him, boots pounding on stone.

I hoped that he had not forgotten that he was scheduled to be leading a patrol to the Poros in a few days' time, but I would be sure to remind him.

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There is not even silence in the mountains  
But dry sterile thunder without rain  
There is not even solitude in the mountains  
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
From doors of mudcracked houses  
~ from "What the Thunder Said," The Waste Land, T.S. Eliot  
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Gondor

Our troop had almost finished another day's uneventful march when, after passing a cluster of trees, we were charged. I was taken a bit off guard as the Haradrim had not ventured past the Rohirric mourning-mound since the large-scale attacks of my grandfather's day. There were not many of them, but they put up a surprisingly difficult fight. Several of my men were wounded by sharp scimitar-blades before the small party was defeated. In the midst of the noise, Tarangil shouted at me, his sword at the throat of one, and his face was grim.

'It's a woman, Captain!'

He looked as though he were trying to control a snake and that he wished very much to let it loose. She thrashed about, her arms held behind her, then spat at me when I approached.

*What can this mean?* my mind raced. I had never seen the women of Harad fighting with men.

'Hold her, but drop your sword,' I called out in response as I ran to him.

I stared at her, and black eyes filled with malice returned my gaze.

'This land is ours,' she growled. 'And we will take it back.' She bared her teeth which glittered menacingly against her dark skin. 'We do not fight alone.'

'Alone or no, I think that you and your message will return with us,' I replied angrily.

'I will be no usurper's hostage!' she yelled, then bit Tarangil. He cried out, but continued to hold her until she twisted around and kned him savagely in the groin. As he doubled over, quick as lightning she unsheathed a knife from her boot and made to escape, but the rest of my company had surrounded us.

With a look of wild pride, before I could even comprehend her action, she thrust the knife into her chest. She stood swaying for a moment, then fell forward.

I had seen men die before, some at my own hand, but this reckless act was beyond me. I was still captain, however, and I willed my personal thoughts away. Tarangil was helped to his feet, wincing as he rose.

A dozen or so dead Haradrim had fallen in battle, and custom dictated that we pile the bodies and cover them. The necessary proceedings were taken out with small talk, but no-one wished to deal with the body of the woman, so that task was left to me. Those of Gondor do not take the weapons of their enemies, so I rolled her body over and picked her up, knife-hilt still protruding from her ribcage. She was heavier than I expected, more muscular than any I had seen since leaving Rohan. I forced my mind to focus on the rest of our evening's proceedings as I carried her to the pile of the dead. We would not want to bivouac this close to those whom we had slain, so we needed to continue on for some time, then make camp for the night.

Despite myself, I found that I placed her body down more gently than I needed to. Those few soldiers with shovels dug up earth enough to cover them, and brush was also placed on top. And then we left, walking quickly northward to safer, higher ground on the Harad Road. By the time that small fires had been lit, and the wounds of the injured tended, the stars were glittering brightly overhead.

After ensuring that the company was eating well enough from what provisions we had, I took my leave briefly to walk around the perimeter of our camp. The high hill of Haudh in Gwanur rose nearby, and I felt drawn to it. I spent some time gazing at the tall mound, then raised my eyes into the inky blackness, generously spread with flickering lights of the heavens.

I heard steps behind me, and wheeled around, my hand on my sword-hilt.

"Tis Dallben, Captain.'

His voice was reassuring, familiar beyond words.

'How does Tarangil fare?' I asked, having witnessed his injuries as they occurred.

He raised an eyebrow. 'As well as can be. I suspect that he will be fully recovered by the morrow.'

I nodded, then turned my face back to the barrow.

A few moments went by, silent save a haunting owl-cry from the nearby woods.

'Captain, a question?'

I turned back around. 'Of course. Shall we sit?' I motioned to the thick grass, not yet soaking with night's dew, and after adjusting our swords, we rested on the ground.

'We have been here before,' Dallben began. 'Many times. It has crossed my mind before, but I had not thought to ask until now. Those buried here, are they kin to you?'

I pulled in my legs under my cloak, sheltering them from the cold.

'Yes, they are.'

I felt a strength, suddenly, of these long-ago slain ancestors, though I immediately pushed the thought away, finding it ridiculous. I looked at Dallben before continuing.

'I never knew them, of course. They were brothers to my grand-sire. Twins,' I chuckled. 'Seems that bearing children in pairs is far less uncommon in Rohan than Gondor. Must be the barley.'

He smiled benignly, then a look of dismay crossed his face.

'I have not yet congratulated you!' he exclaimed. 'Morwen! You!' He stood quickly. 'May the sturdy stone of the City long bear the happy footsteps of your children.'

I nodded in appreciation. 'Thanks, indeed, coming from one who can expect to hear an army of footfalls given the way you and Rolindis are going.'

He gave me a knowing look. 'You may rue what you have just said,' he spoke, mirth in his voice. 'Though late compared to some, you have only just begun, Captain.'

Now it was my turn to raise an eyebrow. At hearing sounds from the camp, Dallben begged to take his leave, and I agreed. I was again left to my thoughts, sitting at the base of the mound where my grand-uncles had been killed by the grand-sires of those whom we had slain that afternoon. Would it ever end? The shining dark eyes of the dead Harad woman bore into my skull, and my head ached. The rise of the barrow had filled me with pride in the past, but now

I was filled only with melancholy.

More than ever before, I wished to be home, at Morwen's side.

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2953  
Lossarnach

'Did you ever see a lassie, a lassie, a lassie,  
Did you ever see a lassie go this way and that?  
Go this way and that way, go this way and that way -  
Did you ever see a lassie go this way and that?'

There was something about washing my husband's and children's laundry that always put me in pleasant spirits. I sang to myself and swayed my hips to the song as with wooden pegs I hung up small socks, breeches, and frocks, and longer tunics, under-drawers and trousers. Thengel thought it absurd, the wife of a Captain of Gondor, much less the wife of the Prince of Rohan, though self-exiled, doing our washing. To be honest, I think he was embarrassed, but that did not matter to me. My father was a prominent figure in Lossarnach, and I had been raised with a cook and nursemaid. Despite such luxuries, loathing of pride had been driven into me from very early childhood. I was more than capable of keeping the clothing of my own family clean, and by my own hands.

Gwineth hummed along, lifting garments to me, every bit the helpful child at nine years of age. Théoden, five, was down the road visiting with another boy, and Brianna, not yet two years old, was within sight's distance in a tree-swing under the shade. We were all enjoying an unexpected warm day at the end of September, which doubtless had also lightened my own mood.

Considering what had happened in the prior two years, I felt exceedingly fortunate. Mordor, always a land of misery from legends uncounted, now appeared to have erupted with new hatred and malice. Most of the stalwart folk who had been dwelling in southern Ithilien, continuing to resist the incursions of the Haradrim, had fled, or died trying. My husband, who had known much calamity in his life, had been unwilling to tell me what he had seen, and so I had ceased asking. There was now said to be a roving, inscrutable eye beyond the Mountains of Shadow that could not be escaped, gazing relentlessly over the foul lands so close to Gondor's borders. I could not fathom it, and I was unwilling

to ask Thengel about it, though he had of course ridden to the mountains with the other Rangers as soon as the news had come to Steward Turgon and Ecthelion.

Steward and son. Both could still be named, though even those had changed suddenly. It was now Ecthelion and Denethor, Steward Turgon having died after a fortnight's battle with fever. Not two months had gone by since we had all dressed in mourning black to stand at the side of Ecthelion, his quiet wife, and silent son. For all the promise in Ecthelion's proud, yet anguish-ridden face, it seemed that there would be only one heir to the Stewards. Denethor bore now the visage of a young man at twenty-three, beard and all, and had no other siblings. I had held tightly to Thengel's hand walking down the Rath Dínen, the aptly named silent street. Once in the House of the Stewards, tears had run down his cheeks, and he did not check them. Our children were appropriately solemn, but I felt distanced from the ceremonies, not knowing Turgon as my husband had. I felt apprehensive of the portends of his untimely demise, but said nothing. Despite it all, we were still happy.

The noise of a fast-approaching rider brought me back to the present. At the loud knock on the door, Gwineth started and dropped a small tunic of Théoden's to the ground. I handed my daughter the peg-basket.

'Keep your eye on Brianna, please, while I answer the door.'

She nodded, her large olive-coloured eyes looking somewhat fearfully back at me. It was disconcerting, as the colour was so similar to Thengel's, but with other children had come other traits to be seen from both of our families. Or so I assumed - I had only Thengel to go by as representative of his line.

In haste, I walked around the side of the house to the front where Berestor, one of the men under Thengel's command, was dismounting from his horse. He seemed winded, but he did me the courtesy of bowing briefly before speaking.

'May I speak with Thengel?' he asked. 'It is most urgent.'

I looked intently at him before replying, 'He is in council with Ecthelion and some of the soldiers based at Henneth Annûn, at their lodgings. You may tell me whatever news is to be shared. I assure you that I will inform him as soon as he returns.'

Berestor's usually serious face was positively grim. 'I do not lack in faith of you, lady, but this news must be delivered immediately to him. I shall ride to Henneth Annûn.'

I grew alarmed, then angry, even as he got back astride his horse.

'What news is this which is so dire that you must fly north of the city to speak with my husband, yet you will not inform me?'

My voice sounded shrill in my ears, and he tarried, obviously very uncomfortable. Feeling somewhat desperate, I walked to him, held onto his horse's reins and succumbed to pleading.

'Please, Berestor. Thengel and I harbour no secrets. Must he leave to go to war?'

He relaxed his hands slightly, and shook his head.

'No, Morwen, we are already at war, as you well know.'

His face was an unexpected confusion of expressions. Finally he gave in, and sighed. 'I do not feel this is proper, but I expected Thengel to be here, not at an outpost.'

I nodded encouragingly.

'Fengel, King of Rohan, is dead.'

He stood in silence for a moment, then continued, 'There are two marshals of his guard at Minas Tirith. They entreat your husband to return with all haste and take his rightful role as ruler of the Riddermark and dwell in the seat of Meduseld.'

I met his words with incomprehension. Riddermark. Marshals. Meduseld. Foreign words. The language of my beloved's childhood. They planned to take him back.

I nodded to Berestor, knowing that Thengel had sworn an oath to Turgon, and by default, to Ecthelion. We were not going anywhere, not with this new menace in the black lands, and the cursed Haradrim.

'Thank you,' I said.

Relieved, the Ranger turned his horse and galloped away, off to tell my love that the father he had left nearly thirty years ago was dead.

It would be a difficult night.

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All three children were asleep, songs sung, small backs rubbed, words of gratitude spoken to those upon Western shores. Thanks to my gifted ability to make all seem well when things were far from such, I was sure that their dreams were sweet.

I, however, now sat in our drawing-room, well into my third glass of wine. Thengel had not yet returned. Berestor obviously had found him, told him of the happenings in Rohan, and now my dear conflicted husband was wrestling with how to tell these marshals to return without either them or him losing face. Diplomacy was a skill that came naturally to him, so that did not worry me. But for all that, the news was still shocking. It was astounding to me that I had never yet met my father-in-law. Now, apparently, I never would, though from what I had picked up from ten years of marriage, I was perhaps better off.

The door suddenly opened. I almost jumped out of the chair, having begun to half-doze.

Thengel entered, and I rushed to meet him, burying my head in his wide chest, holding him.

'I am so sorry,' I murmured. 'Berestor came by, and he was loath to tell me, but I made him. I just couldn't allow him to - '

'Morwen.' His voice and tone was what he used with his troop, not with me. I raised my head, confused, then I saw that there were others behind him.

He gently took my hands from behind his back, kissed them, then released me. Thengel looked exhausted.

'Lofgild, Onthéon - my wife, Morwen.'

I stared at the two men, still disoriented from my sudden waking, then nodded my head.

'Please come in,' I said at the same time that my mind willed them to go away.

They were tall, clad in similar leather riding gear, both wearing dark green capes. Large bronze disks with an image of a white horse clasped their cloaks. Evidently they had left their helmets outside, for long gold and honey-brown hair fell across their shoulders. I looked at them, then at Thengel, who suddenly appeared to me as he had when I first met him, a man from another land.

Though tired, Thengel smiled at me. 'These marshals and I will be in conference yet awhile. I suggest that you go to bed, my dear.'

*Go to bed?* My mind whirled. *Your father has died, there are strangers in my home, how can I sleep?*

'Have you eaten?' I battled for time, went back to his side, clasped his hand.

'Yes. We have been meeting with Ecthelion for several hours already, and eaten at his table.'

I felt my father's stubbornness building in me. 'If what you and - ' *Ai! Their names!* ' - the marshals are discussing is our future, I would prefer to be allowed to be here with you.' I couldn't be sure, but it seemed that I saw a flicker of approval in the face of one of the wild-haired men from Rohan. Or perhaps it was pity.

'Morwen.' His tone was again officious. 'You and I will need to talk about this turn of events tomorrow. The marshals, too, will need to return with all speed, so please, give us your leave and get the rest you will need.'

The words were gently ominous. Then, with instant clarity, the worn look on Thengel's face conveyed the message I had been unwilling to accept. We would not be travelling to Rohan only for the funeral of his father. We would go and not return.

'King.' I whispered the word. Solemnly, he nodded.

The Riders bowed their heads to me, then their voices, heavily accented, filled the room. 'Queen Morwen.'

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I was awake, but I willed my eyes shut, pretending still to be asleep. Breath in, breath out. His heavy, strong arm was draped familiarly across my naked ribcage. I had gone to bed, unclothed, stubborn, shivering. It had seemed only appropriate, mere hours ago. I had not roused when he joined me under the frigid bedcloths, but now his heat next to me seemed the last tether that held me to any sense in this world. The hair on his chest rustled against my back as some dream fragment caused him to mumble and turn slightly.

I wished for the abyss to take me. I wished never again to open my eyes. I knew that the children dearest to my heart would wake soon, and I would have to explain, somehow...

Then, with the unquestioning surety of the condemned, I fell back asleep.

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The day brought new losses.

'Why?' I asked sorrowfully. 'I do not wish to do this. Please do not make me do this.'

My resolve, regained so readily with warmth of morning and the pride I saw in my father's eyes as he spent a last few hours with his grandchildren, now seemed as intangible as the hues of a rainbow.

'I have meant to do so every year at my birth-memorial since I arrived in Gondor, Morwen. Now it is truly time.'

I was listening, biding time, completely unable to fulfill the task given me.

'It is not that profound a thing, my love. No other Ranger is so lax as to let his hair grow this long. All I ask is that you cut it to an appropriate length as you would see on Steward Ecthelion.'

Thengel forced the scissors into my hand, then unbearably, he turned and knelt before me on the ground of our yard.

'If I must go to Rohan,' his familiar voice said, 'then much of Gondor must go with me.' I hated myself. Duty pulled me in so many conflicting directions that I felt utterly inadequate to this seemingly simple command.

He turned back toward me for a moment, a look of distant serenity on his face. 'Within the Royal Hall, all shall speak the Common Tongue, so that you can understand what is being said. The children, as well.'

After he bowed his head again, I quickly pulled back the sleeve on my weaker arm, the right, and not even comprehending why, I held the blade-edge of the scissors above my skin. Then I shoved the sleeve back down. Even as my occasional tears fell to the earth, I began to cut the hair of my husband, his golden-grey locks intermingling with the dying grass of autumn.



## 4. Chapter IV

### Divergence

Edoras

Passion has brought me  
to this clearing of the ground,  
an ancient passion singing  
in my veins, beneath speech,  
unheard many years, yet  
leading me through cities,  
streets, and roads,  
gatherings, voices, speech,  
and again beyond speech,  
to stand in this hillside field  
in October wind, critical  
and solitary, like a horse dumbly  
approving of the grass,  
the world as clear as light,  
as dark as dark.

~ from "Passion," *Work Song*, Wendell Berry

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The inextricable hold that one's childhood home has on a man should never be underestimated. It was not so much the sight of things that peeled away nearly thirty years of disavowal; neither the vision of the massive stone walls around Edoras, nor the banner of white horse on its green field, flapping vigorously in the chill wind of mid-October. Seeing did not stir my challenged mind – it was all else. The scent of peat-fires, mingling heavily with that of horse's stalls; the residual tangy smell of ale in the mead-hall.

And touch. Once alone, I closed my eyes as my fingertips traced a black smear on cold stone, my old room mostly left unchanged from when I had left as a young man. Somehow I had thought I could forget the paradox of rock's strength I had always felt when roaming the halls of Meduseld, but also its inherent chill, even in summer. And the feel of fur on the neck, as a royal pelt had been lain on my shoulders during my crowning.

I had thought I had successfully locked away all of those sensory memories, and now, when confronted with them, I discovered how very wrong I was.

Such were my dark musings one evening while gazing from a hill behind the Golden Hall. It was not long after my return, my father now resting in his generations-ago appointed barrow, and the gold circlet of Rohan freezing into my forehead.

'The King thinks deeply,' I heard in Rohirric behind me, and I jolted from my reverie, spinning around to face the speaker.

I found myself looking into the keen, but heavily creased eyes of Gléauling, a cousin and one-time advisor to my father.

'I have been away a long time,' I replied in Westron, shrugging as I pulled my cape around me to block the wind whistling down from the snow-covered mountains.

'Do you have news?' I asked, 'or are you out for the brisk air of dusk?'

He looked sternly at me, and, wincing, I realised that I had spoken without due respect. I missed the

well-earned camaraderie of my own troop, a casual understanding only possible among men after years of spending time in marches, fighting, and tending to the quotidian necessities of horse, armour and provisions.

I bowed my head in acquiescence, then raised my gaze again. 'My apologies, Gléauling. I have been unsettled of late, as you well know, and my tongue can be unintentionally barbed.'

He guffawed, then clapped a sturdy arm around my shoulder. 'You sound as though you are still in Mundburg, my liege!' he exclaimed, again in Rohirric. 'No need for apologies.' More seriously, he continued, 'I will say nothing of your late father's rule, as I am sure that your years in Gondor did not leave you ignorant of our affairs here. But I will say that we all are expecting a return to greater glory than we have had of late.'

I smiled ruefully. 'The marshals are not in a complete shambles, are they?'

'No - far from it. They were only impeded by contradictory and purposefully confusing orders.' Gléauling stopped, looking worried. 'Have I said something wrong, King?'

'Why?' I asked in genuine confusion.

'Why do you insist on not speaking your mother-tongue even when outside of your hall?'

I straightened my back a bit before answering. 'It is my wish that all speak the clear speech of Gondor, at least around me and my family. Morwen and the children shall learn Rohirric eventually, of course, but the language of Gondor is what they know, and I would not have my family listen without comprehension to what is being said around them.' I paused for a moment, then continued, 'Gondor has been my home for all of my adult years. After the example set by my father, I hope that you can appreciate why I would wish to extend some of the traditions of our comrades to the south.'

My father's ex-advisor's face was disturbed, but he nodded. 'As you wish, sire,' he said haltingly in Westron. 'But surely at home, on patrol, in private councils...' the words rushed forth in Rohirric.

'I did not return to force a second language on all of the farmers and shepherd-boys of the Mark,' I replied, in words tentatively unearthed from memory. 'But you must understand, I returned out of sense of duty, and I brought a family with me. My own honour dictates that I provide as much comfort to them in this new land as possible.'

He smiled at the reply, though he shook his head. 'From what little I have seen, between you and the affections of your sisters, those three children will be as spoiled as the feet of a smith's stallion!'

I found the comparison distasteful, but it was true that my elder sisters and their children had embraced Morwen and our flock as soon as they were able to throw arms around them. I returned his smile, and decided to share with him another bit of news which had probably influenced my more sombre mood; not that I was unhappy about it, but I was more than a bit afraid of how it would affect my wife's adjustment to Rohan.

'By early spring, there shall be four children.'

He beamed, and for a few moments, I felt much more at ease.

'We should have a toast!' he said, disengaging me from his one-armed embrace and turning to plunder my father's well-stocked ale cellar.

'Gléauling!' I called to him as he strode away, returning to the language of my recently abandoned home, 'The Queen and I have not told anyone else. Feel free to toast, if you will, but do not tell others. Yet.'

I could tell that he was disappointed, but he made a quick half-bow, then continued back toward the main sanctuary of the Hall. I had not intended to tell him such information, but Morwen would soon be

far enough along that I would not need to say anything. On a more personal level, however, I did not wish to partake of my father's ale, not even to celebrate such happy news as this, and with someone I had known to be trustworthy since my childhood.

It was cold, and I was alone again. I was yet the newly-crowned King of Rohan, exposed under the bright sparkling night sky. I missed the warm skin of my wife. Smiling, I drew my cloak around me once more, and followed Gléauling's path indoors. I could easily remedy my solitude.

With almost buoyant steps, I walked to our room, where Morwen was likely to be lying down before the fire, as she was always cold, enjoying the feel of soft fur under her back. I entered quietly, and saw that she was there, lying near the fire, her slightly swollen belly betraying her state under her heavy nightclothes.

She raised herself up to her elbows, and while not unhappy, she did look disappointed. 'You were gone all that time, and you did not bring my cordial?'

I had forgotten, of course. 'I am sorry, Morwen. I will return as quickly as possible.'

Smiling, she stretched out languorously by the fire, running her fingers through her hair. 'Thank you, Thengel,' she said. Suddenly attentive, she asked, 'Is all well? Have you heard from Gondor since you were crowned?'

I nodded, then shook my head. 'It has not been very long. I am sure that I will hear from the Steward soon, though he was the person with whom I spoke last before our departure.' I looked at her longingly. 'Is cordial the only thing you desire?'

'Yes, thank you,' she replied, then lay back down to curl up before the warm fire.

Hiding my disappointment, I left the room, in search of the pear liqueur that was a craving of hers each time she was pregnant. We had not brought vast amounts, but surely someone in the kitchen would know where it had been housed. I did not feel that it was appropriate for her to have so much of it, but I suspected that my aversion to the substance had much to do with my father's former behaviour, and Morwen was not like him.

Once in the kitchen, I wanted to swear at myself. I knew exactly where everything was in our home in Lossarnach, and now that we were in the cavernous estate where I had grown up, I could find nothing. My pride was saved by a young cook's assistant, but as I walked back through the stone corridors, I knew that it would take me a long time, if ever, before I felt at home again.

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'Nicely cantered, Gwineth! You shall rival our Riders at this rate!'

Fréathain's voice carried down the hill as I approached. *She is a good rider*, I thought, watching my eldest in the warm glow of beginning sunset. *So many aspects hidden in her have come to light since we left Lossarnach. Or perhaps I simply did not see them before.*

It was only as I approached Morwen, holding our youngest daughter, Fréawyn, in her arms, that I realized that the Horsemaster had spoken in Rohirric. I shook my head, refusing to feel discouraged at the slow speed of change. After dismounting, I patted Windmane on the flank, freeing him to graze nearby.

It had been months now since our arrival in Edoras, and yet my dreams were still a confusing cacophony of images, sounds, and words. Morwen had shaken me awake more than once, a look of worry on her face. Just three nights ago, I had found myself suddenly roused, my wife's hand pushing on my shoulder.

'I did not want to wake you, Thengel, but you were crying out.' She looked tiredly at me. 'I cannot sleep while you stir so, and I could not understand what you were saying.' After a brief yawn, she had continued, 'Your voice sounds different when you are dreaming. I almost would not recognise it.'

Then she had succumbed easily back to slumber, curled up in a ball next to my side. I could not return to sleep with such ease, and I wondered what I had said, evidently in the language of my childhood.

Morwen, for all of her understandable unwillingness to leave her home, had turned out to be rather adaptable when faced with the realities of my new position, and our new land. In fact, though we had not discussed it in words, I believed that she rather enjoyed her new title. Her affable personality had made her an instant friend to my sisters and all those of rank in Meduseld, and our well-behaved children also smoothed the way through what could have been a much more challenging time.

'Papa!' Gwineth's youthful timbre sounded across the grounds. 'Did you see?' Pride glowed in her face. 'Fréathain says that I am a natural rider.'

I nodded, smiling. 'From what I have seen, the Horsemaster is correct in his proclamations.'

Gwineth dismounted, shaking shaggy flaxen hair out of her eyes as she approached the fence. Morwen turned and gently handed Fréawyn to me, and I clutched our infant close, resting her heavy head full of red-gold curls on my shoulder. I watched as my wife ducked through the fence-posts to join Gwineth in the paddock, treating the already-spoiled filly to an apple she had hidden in a dress pocket.

I breathed in the heady scent of our fourth child, remembering how it had felt to hold Gwineth, afraid at the time that any of my awkward jostling would break the seemingly fragile creature. Now, thankfully, I knew better.

The sound of rapidly approaching hooves made me turn around and I was surprised to see Waldgrim, my Doorward, riding quickly toward us. Within moments, he neared, and dismounted from his horse Réodfel, aptly named for his striking russet coat.

Nodding brusquely, he said, 'King Thengel. News from Ecthelion, Steward of Gondor, has come in person. Is the name of Dallben one that you know to be true?'

My pulse quickened. 'Yes, verily.' I could not begin to fathom why Dallben had ridden here from Minas Tirith, and I doubted it was to bring good portends.

Waldgrim looked relieved. 'He awaits your council.'

Before I could even ask further questions, he continued, 'The Soldier of Mundburg has been treated with respect, though as is our custom, his arms are now in our care. His steed has been tended to and is now housed in the Royal Stables.' Almost as an afterthought, the Doorward added, 'He now sits in the forechamber to your office with a flagon of ale, and did not appear to look slighted. He did say that his visit was urgent, and he needed to travel further early in the morn.'

'I shall be there momentarily.'

Waldgrim nodded again. Though I had refocused my attentions on Fréawyn, from out of the corner of my eye I saw Gwineth wave to the Doorwarden, and I could have sworn that I saw him wink in return. By the time that he had resituated himself in the saddle, however, his face was void of expression.

Quickly I walked the few steps to the paddock fence as Waldgrim rode back to Meduseld.

'What brought the Warden?' Gwineth asked, happily scratching under her horse's chin.

'A message from Gondor,' I replied.

Morwen arched an eyebrow as she took Fréawyn back into her arms, her eyes questioning.

'Dallben is here,' I said quietly. 'Waldgrim did not bear his message, only that it was pressing.'

As she kissed the top of Fréawyn's rose-gold head, I strode to Windmane and mounted him, then hurried him back to the city. I had been surprised beyond measure at how comfortable the feeling was, to spend so much time riding. Only my wife knew of the soreness I had suffered as I had made my initial rounds of the Folds, but now the sensation of thighs and calves held close to warm flesh had become, as long before, second nature.

I swiftly rode back the short distance to my home, passed off Windmane to one of the ever-ready stableboys, then hastily climbed the imposing stone steps that led to the main hall. Moments later, I was facing Dallben, his face stern, but his eyes welcoming. I dispensed with all formality, continuing on to him, embracing him warmly before standing back, my hands on his shoulders.

'Gondor must face much grief if you are here to see me,' I said, forgoing small talk.

He nodded as he placed a hand on mine. 'You should sit,' he said authoritatively. Suddenly censored from somewhere within himself, he lowered his head. 'My apologies, your liege. I meant no disrespect.'

It was as though I had been doused with cold water. Of course. Captain no longer, I was King of Rohan.

I stepped back, attempting an appropriate distance between us, then waved to a nearby chair. 'Dallben, please. I am Thengel, as I always was. What has happened? Where are you racing in the morning?'

He sighed as he sank into the chair. I looked quickly around me. There was a platter with crumbs of wheat-bread on it, and an empty chalice. There was also a merrily crackling fire, and so I bought myself a bit of time.

'Before you answer, may I get you something a bit more fortifying? I have not eaten either.'

He nodded gratefully as I noticed him scraping his left heel with the right of his boot.

'Dallben?'

He looked blearily at me through reddened eyes. His news must be bad.

'You are in my home. Feel free to relieve yourself of your shoes. I shall have a proper hot bath drawn for you this evening, but we should speak first, over some stew, and some wine. You may be in Rohan, but I will have no guest feel ill-tended.'

He summoned a smile, and relaxed more into the high-backed chair.

'The news I bring will not change if it waits for another half-hour.'

This sounded more ominous than I was sure he meant, but with his words, I excused myself.

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Back in the forechamber, even as the sun fully set and we finished our supper, I reconciled myself to the portends of Gondor as expressed by Dallben. Barad-dûr, which Sauron had reclaimed even before I left, had suddenly burst into angry flame. Smoke and ash had covered the White City, making a mockery of her name and causing a great shadow to fall upon the hearts of all of her citizens. What few brave souls had been left south of Anduin were no longer; either making new homes in the Ringló Vale, or under protection of Imrahil, or dead. Per his descriptions, the Grey City was a much more apt description of Minas Tirith, both of the stone and the souls of its people. All forces in Gondor were now

strategising to figure out how to deal with this additional and much more terrifying threat. Ecthelion wished that I were still there with him, but knew that he might well be asking for aid from Rohan before the end, so it was all the more important that I strengthen my own marshals.

'News has also reached us that Saruman has taken our ancient refuge of Orthanc as his own. Have you heard aught of this?'

I shook my head. I had not even thought of the White Wizard and his residency in the westfold, so caught up in the daily affairs of Gondor as I had been, and now concerned with those of Rohan. Ridiculous discrepancy on my part, as King.

'No,' I admitted. 'But between Morwen having another child, and our resettling here, my personal knowledge of his whereabouts were perhaps not as pressing as they should have been.' I shifted in my seat, stretching out my legs. 'But Saruman has always been an ally to Rohan and Gondor. Why bring him up now?' I took a small sip of wine. 'What has he to do with the sully of Minas Tirith?'

My fellow soldier looked wearily at me. 'I know not, except that a message came from him to the Steward. He has proclaimed himself Lord of Isengard.' He downed his cup. 'Ecthelion, as you can imagine, demands an explanation. I am to see Saruman as soon as I can arrive there. I should be able to present you with a full report within a week's time.'

As though for the first time, I noticed how grey his beard had become and the silvery strands in his cropped dark hair. We were growing older, and I felt heavily the gold band of my ancestors laying on my brow.

'You shall not travel alone,' I stated. 'Two of my Riders will accompany you- as will I.'

He nodded, then said approvingly, 'Ecthelion had hoped that you would say that very thing.' Despite his fatigue, he sat up straighter in his chair. 'I will admit that I had hoped so as well.'

I smiled and leaned in, resting my elbows on my knees. 'I have missed you too, my friend.' I drank some more wine. 'Things here are different, at almost every level, and I know that I have injured the pride of some, as unintentional as it may have been.' I reclined back into the chair. 'At times I wonder if they rue bringing back Thengel, Fengel's son!'

He snorted. 'You are a born leader. Quit trying to humble yourself.'

I looked down at my cup and swirled the remaining contents. Unsure how to reply, I changed the subject.

'Before we leave in the morning, I will introduce you to all of the children that you so warned me of back at the barrows. It appears that your prediction was most astute.'

'I would indeed be most pleased to see them after a sound sleep.' He smiled in affirmation.

Pressing my hands down into the armrests, I pushed myself up, then extended an arm to Dallben. He took it gratefully, then stood, taller even than I was. He swayed for a moment, both with exhaustion and wine, then straightened his mailcoat and overtunic.

'Morwen!' he said, abashed at his oversight. 'Where is your lovely wife?'

'She rests,' I replied. 'Fréawyn, our fourth child, was born only a few months ago, in April. While my wife has adapted incredibly well to this land less sophisticated than her home, she finds frequent resting a boon to her situation.'

Dallben nodded with understanding.

'I shall show you to the bathing-room, though I believe a quick tour via the kitchen will allow us to find something sweet. The dishes here are more hearty than what I had become accustomed to, but

are quite satisfying.'

He praised the meal, and then I took him briefly by the kitchen to settle him into just a bit more food. I conferred with one of the house-servants and established that a hot bath could be drawn within moments, and made sure that I would be contacted once the water was heated.

After a bit more talk about those in his troop, I escorted Dallben to his bath, but did not linger. He would be well taken care of, and I wished to be in my own bedroom. Morwen was not there, as she was resting in the nursery with Fréawyn. I did not mean to be so affected by the news I had heard, but I was exhausted. Using what strength I had left, I shucked off my boots, stretched out, then fell into a restless sleep.

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'Papa!'

There were two small hands grasping at my right fingers, my left arm shielding my eyes from the dim light of morning.

'Papa!' The voice was urgent. 'Get up!'

I grunted, only to be assaulted by my son, who had now clambered onto me, his active horsey ride motions making me feel rather uncomfortable as they were taking place right above my bladder.

'I am awake, Théoden, gracious! Leave the poor horse alone.'

He flung himself down on my chest, burrowing his face into my nightshirt. 'Where is the guest, papa? I want to meet the man from the White City. Win told me.'

I ruffled his hair while I stretched out my legs. 'He is in the room I had as a boy, and is someone who used to soldier with me in Gondor. You may join me when I go to make sure that he has had a good night's rest. We are to leave soon.'

Suddenly I was confronted with the bright blue eyes of my son, staring at me from under his almost-white hair, half of which was sticking straight up. 'Where are you going?' he asked, confused. 'Are you going back home? Without us?'

The simplicity of the question wrenched my heart. 'No, Théoden. Papa is going to the tall tower where a very learned man, a wizard, lives. He has been someone who cared for Rohan since the time of Fréaláf, six kings and two hundred years ago now.'

He moved forward a little to play with my beard, tugging lightly on it. 'Two hundred years? He must be really old.'

I chuckled. 'Yes, he is old, and yet, he is different from men like you and me.'

What had Dallben said was the title he had taken? I thought quickly. Lord of Isengard...

'Because he is old and wise, I am to visit him. Do you remember our home in Lossarnach, the visits to the marketplace in the shining city of Minas Tirith?'

Théoden nodded eagerly. 'I do, Papa. There weren't as many horses there, but there were trained birds.' He scowled. 'I wish I could see them again. When will we go back?'

I laid his head down upon my chest, running my fingers through his shocking mess of hair. 'I do not know. And those were particular birds, falcons or kestrels. You did not see any trained seagulls, now did you?'

He shook his head.

'I am king of this land now, and bad things have happened to the land where you were born. That is why I will join my comrade from Gondor to go and speak with the wise man in his tower.'

Théoden seemed to mull over what I had said, then nodded his head. 'Does he have birds?'

I continued to stroke his head. 'I do not know, son. I have never met him.'

'Are you frightened?'

Keen eyes stared at mine.

'Well, no, I have no reason to be. And he does live in what is now my kingdom, and so I intend-'

I stopped when familiar footsteps approached the bed.

'Théoden! Who got you up? And who told you to bother your father after what I am sure was a late evening?' Morwen tried to scold him, but her affections carried the heavier weight.

'No one! Papa is telling me about the wizard he will see today.'

Morwen raised an eyebrow.

'Wizard?' she asked. 'The one in the black tower?'

'Yes. I will join Dallben, Hildeláf and Gramstred. We will leave as soon as we take in our morning meal.'

By this point Théoden had squirmed backward off of me to go and run to his mother, who enfolded him in her woolen robe.

I sat up in bed. 'There are tidings in Gondor that I need to speak to you of, but alone. My trip to Saruman at Orthanc will be but a quick journey. It is one that I should have made months ago.'

Morwen tousled our son's head. 'Théoden, go and rouse Gwineth.'

As he sped out of the room, pleased with his new task, she called out, 'Rouse her gently! No jumping on her bed. Her yelling would wake all of Eodoras!'

She shook her head and took a seat near the window. 'So. You are leaving to go on an adventure.'

I had no wish to bask in her displeasure. 'It is not an adventure, Morwen. Dallben was sent by Ecthelion to meet with this wise one in the Westmarch, and I feel that I should accompany him. Terrible things have happened in Gondor. Barad-dûr has erupted, covering the city in ash, all south of Anduin have fled, the Southrons...'

I trailed off. My wife's face was pale, but with a fire behind it. She pursed her lips together, mashing them so that they were drained of colour.

'I will take my toilet, and fill you in on the rest, but then I must go to Orthanc and ensure that the Wizard's loyalty is true.'

Somewhat reluctant to get out of the warm bed, I forced myself to rise and move to a more private room where I could rinse off, trim my beard, and tend to other matters. I was almost finished, my mind focused on what to have prepared for our fast-breaking and what I would pack for the short trip when she at last spoke.

'When were you going to tell me?'



In surprise at hearing her voice since I had been sure that she had left the room ages ago to check up on the children, I cut myself. I swore as I daubed at the blood with my hand. Quickly I peered at myself in the looking-glass and saw that the blade-mark was a mess, and would take days to heal.

'Tell you what?'

Her voice was icy. 'Tell me that my family could be dead. You knew a whole night and you did not come to me. How could you?'

Anger built in me as it had not since I had been far younger. 'Dear wife, if anything had happened to your family, you know that Ecthelion would have sent-'

'Ecthelion. Always Ecthelion,' she interrupted, now standing in the doorway, hands clenched on her gown. 'How can you possibly believe that he cares so much for you, you who were nothing but one of his Rangers, even though you were heir to the throne of Rohan?'

I tried to control my temper, but something within me snapped. 'I seem to remember a young woman who clasped the hand of her betrothed after hearing that he had revoked his kingship, and was most gratified. Perhaps she would have preferred to remain in Gondor and be the Mistress of Lossarnach rather than Queen of Rohan?'

Morwen's mouth fell open. I turned to face her, knowing full well that a thin trail of blood was now trickling down my chin, but I was beyond caring.

'The Steward Turgon, and his son after him, treated me as though I were an honourable son, or nephew, and my actions were valued. Here I was maligned and mistreated by my father, and I never regretted leaving this land. Once Ecthelion knew of my affections for you, I assure you that he did indeed care for your father, the high merchant, and his almost unnumbered brood of inheritors. If distress had befallen them, he would have sent one of his own personal couriers here with all haste to bring such a message. Should you not believe me, perhaps you should take the children and go and see them yourself while I am off having adventures, as you have suggested.'

My voice was calm, but my left hand which held my knife was shaking with barely controlled anger. *How can you be so ungrateful, like a petulant child, after all that has been given to you?* The question raged in me, but I willed myself to be still. I was a king now, after all, and under no circumstance would I act in such an undignified manner as my own father had.

Morwen stared at me, her brown eyes blazing. When she spoke, words more cold and distant than I had ever heard passed her lips.

'Please give my kindest regards to whatever form of man lives in that tower. And to Dallben. I shall be indisposed when you depart, I do believe, and will be unable to stand on the frozen steps of this soulless building you call home and wave a fond farewell to you into the wind.'

She waited for a moment, as though I would try to outmatch her in spiteful words, but I could not do so. Sensing her victory, she jutted out her chin, drew herself up to full height, and knowing that my eyes were on her, she ran her fingers through her long hair, making sure that it would then lie to its full length down her slender back as I watched.

Then she stormed out.

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It was an uneventful journey to Orthanc and back. Saruman was an intriguing complexity of obvious and subtle, but I felt as my forebears must have; for whatever reason, he held Rohan and Gondor in highest respect, and he was full of reassuring words. Though the building was made of an uncanny onyx colour which seemed to absorb light, the inside was most hospitable. The three of us dined well, and the Wizard answered all of Dallben's and my questions beyond satisfaction. His conversation was as scintillating as his wine, and though we preferred to camp on his lush grounds surrounding the ancient building, we all slept well.

Once back in Edoras, I found that it was grievous to bid my friend farewell. We did as we always had, and I sent him on his way with hearty food and another night of rest in my old room. My four children came out to say goodbye, and while he was thankful to meet all of them, he seemed to take a particular shine to Brianna.

'You are like my own Iolande when she was so young,' he grinned as he swung her in the air, holding on to her rugged four-year-old hands. He nuzzled her nose. 'Keep an eye on these others, will you? Your father's blood runs thick, and someone needs to ensure that you are all not as perfect as he is.'

At this, Gwineth rolled her eyes, Théoden turned glowingly to me as though I were beyond all reproach, and Fréawyn simply dozed in my arms.

'Dallben, you are going to curse this house.' I smiled as he walked a few steps toward me after depositing Brianna near Théoden.

He shook his head. 'That I shall never do. But I do solemnly swear that I will have correspondence coming to you regularly with the couriers. Rolindis would not forgive me otherwise. She misses you terribly.'

I nodded, then took his hand.

'Gondor is not so far away, you know,' he murmured, and I sighed.

'I brought Gondor here.'

He looked askance at me, then took his leave, his horse looking rather remorseful, if the beasts did indeed portray such emotions.

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Morwen and I were cautious around each other for a few weeks following our bitter exchange of words. Time moved on, and I had many affairs which needed my attentions, and Morwen attended to the children. Though Gondor was less safe than it had been, Morwen and I both decided it would be for the best if she made the journey to see her parents and her siblings' families at least once a year. We segued into a familiarity, which if not as close as it had been before, was sufficiently bearable.

Such was marriage.

## 5. Chapter V

### Deliverance

2962

'Mama! Mama! Come quickly!'

Brianna ran into my room, her forceful voice so unexpected that I pierced my finger with my needle. Instinctively I put the finger to my mouth, quickly double checking to make sure that no blood had stained my embroidery.

'What is it, child? Is something on fire?'

Her eyes were bloodshot, her braided brown hair unkempt. She shook her head, then held out her hands to me, every gesture one of pleading.

'It is- it is-' she struggled with the words as I put my project on the side table and rose from the chair. 'Go to the stables. Windmane is dying. Papa is with him.'

I grabbed a cloak and threw it across my shoulders as I rushed from the room, Brianna at my heels. We both raced through the mostly empty cavern of the Golden Hall, down the wide stone steps past the standing-guards and toward the stables. I paused for a moment at the entrance to get my bearings and for my eyes to adjust from the crisp autumn light of outdoors to the somewhat hazy dimness in the stalls.

About halfway to the back of the stables, Thengel was sitting on some straw, cradling his horse's head in his lap and murmuring something to him. Gwineth and Théoden were there as well, their expressions both sorrowful and also apprehensive. I suddenly realised that despite their ages of eighteen and fourteen, they had never seen their father cry before. Being confronted with Thengel, the King, weeping over his steed, they were unsure quite how to react.

All three of them looked at me. Brianna ran from behind me to clutch at Gwineth, who took her in her arms.

Thengel spoke, his voice thick. 'I know that he is old, and I should have expected this, but-'

He stopped. I looked at our children, then said gently, 'Please leave us. I will get you when it is time for the burial.'

They nodded, then walked silently away, Théoden taking a last look back when they were at the door.

I walked over to Thengel and sat down next to him. Windmane was breathing heavily, his tail moving almost imperceptibly as Thengel patted his neck. I did not know what to say, so I wrapped my arms around my husband's waist and leaned into his back. I breathed in the scent of hay and horse, and also Thengel's unique scent present in all of his clothes. At last the stalwart horse twitched, then lay completely still.

Thengel continued to stroke Windmane's neck, his own breathing now coming in shuddering gasps. I held on to him more tightly, rocking him as he wept. We stayed that way for a while, his anguished sounds the only noise in the room. Eventually he regained his composure, and turned his head to look at me, his eyes red.

'I need to be with you,' he whispered hoarsely. Surprised, I found myself nodding in assent. I loosed my arms from him so that I could stand up. With tender movements he moved Windmane's head from his lap, then reverently ran his hand down the horse's side.

'None shall be your equal, old friend,' he spoke softly, giving the horse a final reassuring pat.

Thengel pushed himself up from the floor, then stood before me, taking both of my hands in his, stroking my fingers. 'I was not half as emotional at my own father's burial,' he said, his voice husky. 'What does that say about me?' A wretched smile crossed his face. 'I am crying over my horse when I shed no tears for him. There is no escape from the place of one's birth, apparently.'

Despite the emotional distance that had formed between us in our recent past, I found that I mourned for him. 'Dear Thengel, do not judge yourself. From what you have told me, Windmane is worth the tears you weep for him, and I cannot say the same for Fengel.'

Then I raised my hands to his face and pulled him to me. We kissed deeply, and while there were not the sparks as we had known when younger, I was comforted, and found that I hungered for his touch as well. As my hands drew us together, I felt his body's ache for mine.

Throwing all caution and common sense to the wind which breezed through that early autumn day, I leaned back, caressing his cheeks with my fingers, then whispered, 'Shall we go to the back stall? I have my cape which can be placed on the hay.'

He looked astonished, then relieved. 'You are a woman of much foresight, dear wife.' Fingers calloused from years of soldiering gently brushed across my lips. 'I could not have chosen better, if I do say so.'

We walked together hand in hand to the last stall where Thengel took off my cape and laid it on a straw-pile, after checking for horse-droppings. In the dusty corner of the stables, I closed my eyes and embraced him, my desire enhanced by the sheer unexpectedness of our liaison. With familiarity that can only come from years of being together, we were soon joined and it was not long before he was spent. He had not been rough, by any means, only needy. I lay on my back for a few moments as his breathing slowed, feeling emotionally much more naked under his grateful gaze than I did in my own unclothed skin.

'I love you,' he said, then kissed me, a lone tear falling from his eye to my cheek.

I pulled his head down to nestle in my neck.

'I know,' I replied, closing my eyes.

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The scent of the food at table reinforced my famished feelings, though I could have been found in the kitchen only an hour or so ago, furtively eating some sweetbread from dinner the day before. As I walked - or waddled, rather - into the Golden Hall, Thengel and the few others at the well-laden board rose. I nodded, and they all resumed their seats and their conversation. All, except, I noted in surprise, a stranger who sat at the opposite end of the table. He did not mean to breach the courtesy of Thengel's generous hand, I am sure, but his eyes never left me, widened in surprise as I took my accustomed seat to Thengel's right. After being served and having a healthy swallow of some wine, I allowed myself to glance down at him again.

*Gondor*, I mused. His features were more refined than those of the Rohirrim, and his hair was quite dark. It was his eyes, however, which startled me; grey, the colour of shaded clouds in early dawn. They belied age beyond his youthful face and strong frame, such as I could notice. Before returning my gaze to well-tended plate, he shifted, and the torchlight caught on a silver medallion on his chest. It was a five-pointed star.

A gentle touch on my hand by Thengel's drew my attentions to him.

'Morwen,' he said, 'we have a new man who wishes to join our ranks. He is a Ranger from the North,

beyond the forests of Dwimordene.'

I raised my eyebrows, confused. *Northern?* I had not heard much about the northern Rangers, ancient ancestral relations to some who lived in Gondor. What I had heard had not been very positive, though the man at the end of the table bore an air of distinction. Thengel looked quite pleased.

'Ranger,' Thengel's voice carried down the table, 'my wife, Morwen.'

The man lowered his head and placed his hand above his heart before returning my gaze.

'I am most gratified to be allowed to serve under your husband, lady.'

His voice was a melodious tenor; accented, though it was obvious that he was used to speaking the Common Tongue.

'I am sure that my husband is most grateful for your intended service. A Northern Ranger you may be, but for lack of a proper name, I think we should call you Arthur, eagle eyes.' I paused for a moment, then added, 'All those who wish to pledge loyalty to Thengel are welcome here.'

In the unexpected quiet, with a solemn smile he said, 'I will be loyal to the King and his line,' looking directly at my very swollen belly.

*Ah, of course!* No wonder he had stared when I entered. He was probably unused to seeing women as far along in their pregnancies still participating in the everyday activities of the household, much less someone as old as Thengel still siring children. I raised my glass to the Ranger, then back to Thengel, his face suddenly seeming more lined than before, though it glowed with pleasure.

'To the King!' Onéon proposed, and all drank.

As the conversation around me resumed to talk of securing armour and accommodation for this Ranger, it came back to me how surprised even I was to be in this state. Our intimacies had become far less frequent, as desire waned with time and, if I were honest, sheer familiarity. So when I felt familiar stirrings and cravings nine months prior, I was astonished, though not displeased. I was forty-one, my husband fifty-eight. I had known of no-one from Lossarnach bearing children at my age. The other children were excited to have a new sibling, and Thengel was beside himself. He pampered me in ways he had not for years, and for that I was grateful. He would brush out my hair before bed, and often run his hands over my belly.

As for myself, I was ready to be done with being tired and sore. I needed to tend to the rest of our brood, currently with one of Thengel's sisters, and assist my husband in his ever-growing responsibilities. I was a queen now, after all, and was almost embarrassed at how our bodies had betrayed our fondness for each other, even if those meetings were more occasional.

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I was walking back to our room from the study, a favourite childhood book in my hand, when my water broke. While this was my fifth child, I was still surprised at the sudden sensation. With it came the portends that as of that moment, until the baby was born, it was all, rather ironically, out of my hands.

I had done this enough times not to panic. Instead, I gathered up comfortable clothing and a favoured cushion before trying to find Thengel, and then the midwives, such as they were. My husband had moved the remaining men from the long table to more comfortable chairs in the Golden Hall, still in an animated conversation with the Northern Ranger. Whether or not he would accept my naming gift, time would tell.

I approached Thengel and told him my news, which caused him to stand.

'Why did you come by here? I would have known momentarily!' Worry, as always, shadowed his eyes.

I shook my head, sighing. 'If you would but summon the women, I will see you again after this.' Then I smiled, as he looked so disconsolate. 'Another child, Thengel! Will not Dallben be self-satisfied at his predictions!'

His face brightened, and he hurried away to find the midwives.

The eagle-eyed Ranger had stood as well, looking at me in a disconcertingly familiar manner. While he was not unpleasant to gaze at, to be sure, I knew nothing of him except for his pledge to my husband. I returned his stare, and so we stood, until pain of contractions urged me on my way.

All went well until the very end, when I heard one of the midwives say something about a grey foot, and I struggled to comprehend what they meant. Then I heard one call to Stæfwis, a woman who seemed to have assisted with most of the births in Edoras, and she rushed over.

Without even a glance up at me, she she yelled, 'Bring over the water and cloths!'

I bellowed a string of profanity from pain and discomfort as she reached inside of me to pull the child out. Cloths were put under me as blood and fluids went everywhere. My baby - my baby girl - was ashen, and not just her foot. I was still gasping for air, trying to find words, struggling to raise myself even as I watched Stæfwis and Hilda, one of the younger ones, quickly rub her down with a steaming cloth, clutch her in a skin and rush her toward the window.

'Do not throw my child!' I screamed, completely disoriented and in shock.

The woman who had been mopping my sweating brow quickly handed me a cup of potent spirits, and soothingly said, 'No, no- they will not throw her! She needs air. Fresh air.'

'She will freeze!' I babbled, drinking so quickly that half of it missed my mouth and ran down my chin and neck.

Just then, Hilda walked toward me, a large smile on her face, the silver-haired midwife right behind her. She handed me a brown-haired, and now pink-faced infant, her mouth wide open and eyes firmly shut.

'She has breathed in the strong air of the Mark, Queen. She is now the colour she should be.'

More cushions were placed behind me, and weakly, I held my child. I was too weary to do much except stroke her fine hair, still damp, and reassure myself that she was not grey, and still breathing. My body ached, and I knew that it would pass, but I felt as though I had passed beyond every knowledge of exhausting I had known. I knew that I should signal to the midwives to let Thengel know of the safe birth, that I should lie down properly...

Consciousness left me.

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I had just stretched out, resting my head in my hands, when one of the King's attendants knocked on the door.

'Arthur!'

I heard, and eased myself up onto my elbow.

'Enter freely,' I replied.

Lofgild opened the door and stood in the doorway. 'The King would like for you to join him and the Queen for a day of hunting tomorrow.'

I looked into the lanky man's face, which betrayed nothing. Quickly my mind ran through the options for me. I was not scheduled to be on patrol for another few days, and it could do me no harm to spend the day with the man who had been willing to put me into his guard with no word other than my own, especially when that man was the King of Rohan.

While I did not bring myself to a standing position, I did rise to sit on the edge of my cot before answering.

'Please tell King Thengel that I would be honoured to take part in his activities.'

As the marshal brusquely nodded his head and turned to leave, I asked, 'When should I be expected, and where?'

Lofgild turned back around. 'At the steps of Meduseld, Northern Ranger. After our fast-breaking. Take your bow.'

Then it was my turn to nod. 'Please thank the King. I will see him shortly after sunrise.'

The door shut securely behind him. I laid back down onto my bed, wondering what the invitation meant, if anything. Hunting, for sport. Those in Elrond's house did not do such, and even my kindred in the Angle hunted for food only. I was rather unsure about the proceedings, but I had spent enough time around Thengel and the Rohirrim as a whole over the prior eighteen months to know that their intentions were honourable. Perhaps I had missed an undercurrent of something, being so caught up in the everyday activities of riding with a score of others in defense of one's land. Granted, the plains and mountains of Rohan were neither the grounds of my birth nor of my heart, but when I found myself on the edge of sleep, the words of Elrond came to the fore of my mind.

There were many lands in which I needed to prove myself before I could return.

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It was stunning, the amount of fog that swirled around my feet the next morning. I did not wish to convey any disrespect, however, so I stood at the base of the stairs which led up to the Golden Hall. On a morning such as that, however, even if I had been a statue coloured as bright as the sun, there would have been no hope in being found. I had seen nothing like it in my time in Rohan, nor anywhere else, for that matter. Thick as some of the stew I had been served, but milky.

A black shape emerged in front of me with a loud cawing sound. Startled, I stepped back and drew my cloak closer around me as the crow continued its chattering. Aw! Aw! Aw! Then it was silent, staring at me, beady eyes glittering as it turned its head right, then left.

A commotion of sturdy boots on the stone stairs caused the crow to look away. My eyes were drawn to a swirl of red dress as I heard the queen's voice say in annoyance, 'Shoo, you ugly thing!'

I smiled to myself as the rest of the entourage manifested themselves before me in the mist. The crow took to flight, squawking as it did.

'Good morning, King Thengel,' I said, bowing, then nodded to his left. 'Queen Morwen.' They both appeared to be in high spirits, and Morwen looked almost giddy.

'Good morning to you!' Thengel replied, stomping down the stairs to me and clapping my arm with a leather-covered hand.

Behind them was Gléuling, a man I had discovered had been one of the former king's closest advisors. He was easily in the eighties. Though he had lost an eye at some time in his youth, I had seen him overseeing some archery training and I knew that all of the Marshals held him in high esteem. We

exchanged some pleasantries, then Morwen took my arm.

'Come, Arthur. We have kept you so busy around our horses that you may not have known about another of our favourite animals.'

We walked away from the steps. The fog had begun to dissipate, though I still could not see far before my face.

'This was something new for Edoras, I believe,' she continued as we walked around to a walled garden back behind Meduseld. Its high perimeter protected the plants within from the winds which whistled more often than not, evidenced by my chapped face and hands.

Gléuling pulled open a grated door, and my gaze lingered for a moment on a spiderweb gleaming with jewelled dewdrops.

'Thengel brought two falcons from Gondor after Théoden made mention of them when he was but a child.' She looked at me, smiling, small wrinkles forming around her brown eyes. 'What he did not realise was how much I would take to them, more so than his son!'

We were now at the end of the gravel path, and I saw there were two large cages with thin metal bars crisscrossing across the fronts. Inside each one was a bird sitting atop a perch. Four eyes stared unblinkingly at me, while the sharp talons of one animal moved slightly as it sidled a bit down its bit of wood.

Morwen loosed my arm and retrieved from Gléuling a heavy leather glove similar in make to the king's, which she put on her right hand. After unlatching the door, she reached in and one of the birds, with dark grey and white feathers, hopped on to her glove. Leaning back, she stood then walked toward me so I could see the falcon, both woman and creature appearing to be quite comfortable and familiar with each other.

'Arthur, who also possesses keen sight, this is Sharp-eyes.'

She petted the bird's head, murmuring quiet nonsense to it in an intimate voice.

'Shall we take her out today, and perhaps Lovebite tomorrow?' Thengel asked.

I was more and more confused. Gléuling must have noticed, for he approached me and said, 'They are trained birds. They live for the hunt and can see hares even when they are soaring above the plains and trees.'

I noticed that Morwen's falcon had leather strips on its legs, and I was astonished when she pulled what could only be described as a leather helm over its head. What was its name? I wracked my mind. Sharp-eyes. Sharp claws, more likely.

'They get agitated when we ride if their vision is not covered,' Morwen explained.

The queen asked Gléuling to shut the front of the weathering while I continued to stand, mute. What Elrond or anyone in the Angle would think of all this I could not begin to guess, though I imagined they would find it all somewhat absurd. Horses were for training, not birds that could easily tear out one's eyes with either beak or claw! All the same, a day of riding for pleasure, with or without this animal was certainly not unwelcome, and I found my spirits buoyed by Morwen's enthusiasm.

The four of us rode north for an hour. The fog had lifted, but it was still overcast. Low-hanging shreds of dark grey clouds chased by the wind swiftly traversed the sky. Despite the lack of sun, it was very pleasant.

We stopped by a small glade of trees. After letting our horses graze to their satisfaction, both Morwen and Thengel monitored Sharp-eyes as she took turns flying high above us, making distant circles carried on the wind, then diving with deadly accuracy to the ground. She did this at least four times,



and before we sat down to some meat, cheese and wine, the king had tied the legs of four well-formed hares and put them in a leather bag.

In the interim I had shot a couple of quail in the woods. There were deer there to be found as well, but I had concluded that this journey was more for my benefit to see the feats of Sharp-eyes than much actual hunting.

Gléuling took his leave of us after the meal bearing away the falcon and her prizes. As Morwen, Thengel and I remounted our horses, Thengel said, 'Ranger, there is an excellent view of this part of Rohan not far from here. Would you like to see it?'

I agreed.

We rode a ways to the base of a cliff which had a trail that switchbacked up to what appeared to be a flat area, though I could not be certain from my viewpoint. Thengel led, then Morwen, then me, up the road which was wide enough for a small wagon. We rode in silence, hearing nothing save the sound of horse's hooves on well-pounded dirt and the intimate sigh of leather as our boots nudged our animals upward. I glanced around as we made our way along the path, noticing small stone statues which stood at squat attention and appeared to be far older than any of the buildings in Edoras. *Remember to ask Thengel about those*, I admonished myself.

After climbing for some time, we emerged at the end of the pathway. A grassy flat plain awaited us, with a forest of dark trees half a league away, seeming oddly to be both shelter of the end of the trail and the growth itself sheltered by the mountain. I did not sense any malcontent, merely age. Even the air on this pleasant field seethed with knowing, of ages long past.

'Did you notice the figures?' Morwen asked, having dismounted from her horse, whose proper name I had not yet heard. She always called him "coal-biter," presumably due to his glossy dark colouring. 'They have lined the path for time immemorial, or so some would say.' She shook her head, her pale face shining like the full moon when seen at midday against blue sky. 'You are from an old line. What do you make of them?'

I was displeased at being asked such provocative questions, but I tried to respond in a way that would not make me look foolish.

'They do look rather weathered,' I replied. 'Perhaps this area once was a place of much significance to both Rohan and Gondor.' Quickly assessing the poor vagueness of my answer, I continued, 'Or even Arnor and Gondor. There have been folk in these regions for hundreds of generations. I will say that they do not resemble Elvish work.'

Thengel had freed his horse to graze on the lush grass. He turned his bright eyes to me as he said with the kind of quiet authority that makes the hairs on one's arms stand on end, 'You have not told us much of your home, or upbringing, Ranger. How is it that you know so much about Elves, since their kind has been unknown to us for many lives of men?'

I wracked my mind. What I could say would not necessarily be believed, and I had hoped to keep that part of my life to myself for rather a bit longer than only a few years. Strangely, it was the queen who rescued me.

'My dear, do not harass your unexpected recruit! Surely he will let us know more of his elusive childhood when he feels it is appropriate.' With an almost imperceptible wink to me, she continued, 'I have had Lofgild asking around, and those in his *éored* are sure almost to a man that he is no spy.'

The King shook his head in resignation, but took his wife's arm, and they went to gaze near the path where we had recently travelled. I followed them, and took my time, looking out over the valley and mountains beyond.

The view was glorious. Though still mostly clouded, the lands below us seemed nestled in their shading, the river Snowbourne gliding smoothly away, a faint glint on the front gilded woodworks of Meduseld visible even from this distance. My eyes were drawn to a distant eagle, wheeling in an ever-growing arc reflective of circles on a pond after a good stone has been skipped on its surface.

'It seems so small, does it not, compared to the vastness of Minas Tirith?' Morwen's voice was both reverent and matter-of-fact, and I knew that her question was rhetorical and most certainly not directed at me.

Thengel straightened himself, even to pulling himself away from her a bit before answering.

'Smaller, yes,' he acquiesced. 'Yet that is where we rule, and where we should return. Our children and Waldgrim will await us.'

The queen's brows furrowed. 'I did not mean to provoke you, it was merely observation.'

From much time spent watching the interplay of those in Rivendell, and overhearing conversations in the shadows of inns, it was obvious to me that this was an argument whose subtle thrusts and parries were well-practised by the participants. I had been rather enjoying the day, and did not wish to be a part of any conflagrations between Thengel and Morwen.

I walked around them for another look out over the vista, trying both to be unobtrusive and also to re-establish that I was there as a third party. 'Rohan is a most beautiful land,' I said. 'Looking on it from this height is a sight to stir the soul.'

And it was. The splendour was in a manner completely different from that in Elrond's hidden valley of trees and inhumanly beautiful architecture; before us stretched a more desolate and unfettered landscape, the waving grasses an ocean to soothe the eyes.

They both turned to me, Morwen first, and she briefly nodded her head.

'It is.' She looked intently at me, then asked, 'Have you ever smelled the Sea?'

I murmured in the negative as she shrewdly pursed her lips.

'You are young, and have much to see' she said.

Thengel had gone to retrieve their horses, and I walked over to mine, then brought her to join those of the king and queen. After taking in a heady breath of the ancient air, I looked to Morwen and saw that her expression was still kindly.

'My lady?' I asked, and she turned her dark brown eyes to me.

'Yes?' she answered.

'Before we left the Golden Hall I heard you addressed as Steelsheen. If you do not consider it improper, may I ask what it means?'

She considered the statement, then laughed lightly, slight crinkles around her lips.

'It is a Rohirric form of appreciation, I do believe. They have accepted me, an unknown woman from the South, who will never wield sword and spear as they do. The people of Edoras are pleased that I have filled the Hall with fair children who do them all honour. And,' she leaned in with a slight smirk, 'I do have very good posture.'

Although I could see that my old friend was holding up quite well, I suspected that, given the circumstances, he would not mind the offer of something stronger than wine for his cup. As the musicians played, their ebullient sounds carrying far within the stone walls of the Hall, I let my eyes rove through the room to find him. I smiled, seeing him sequestered in the entry hall, accepting compliments and good wishes from Tarangil and Dallben, the three of us having made the journey to Edoras from Minas Tirith together. Thengel seemed to be comfortable and well at ease, most likely unaware that he stood below a tapestry portraying his ancestor Eorl. I was amazed at two things, all of a sudden: how well-suited he seemed to be as ruler of the land he had forsaken in his youth, greeting his marshals and stable boys alike with unwavering attention; but also how his countenance so resembled those who had ruled before him. His long hair, now an even mixture of gold and silver, hung loose below his shoulders atop a regal tunic, blood red. Though I was not much one for spending time in front of a looking-glass, I suspected that were there a contest in looks, I would be the loser.

His first-born, Gwineth, danced with her new husband, Fultson, the reason for the revelry. The irony that she had married the son of her father's former squire was not lost on me, but it was obvious from the looks on their faces that it was a good match, even as that of Thengel and Morwen. I shook my head and stretched slightly as I roused myself from the carved stone pillar that had been my vantage point. For one who had married so late, he had managed to sire five children. I was very happy for him, but also, in some ways, grateful for my own situation. How Thengel bore up so well with children ranging from twenty-five to six, was a mystery to me. Even contemplating that thought I took out my flask and poured some of the liquor into my cup, and drank.

Moments later, I interrupted the King of Rohan and my Rangers.

'Thengel, former Ranger, boon to Gondor and greater boon to Rohan!'

He smiled, then walked to meet me, embracing me as warmly as he had the day he had told me of his wife's first pregnancy. Then he stood back a space, his hands still on my shoulders, his olive-coloured eyes full of contentment.

'Ecthelion,' he said. 'You honour me and all of this land with your presence. Thank you so much for attending the wedding of my daughter.'

I paused for a moment, only just hearing the Rohirric accent creeping in as he spoke, then produced my flask.

'A toast!' I offered, and Dallben and Tarangil readily put their cups forward. Thengel wavered, then raised his to me.

'Why not?' he replied, then finished the prior contents.

Moments later the four of us stood, sturdy stoneware cups touching rim to rim.

'Thengel, she is beautiful.'

He nodded, keeping my gaze.

'To happy children, and peace at the last,' I proposed.

'To happy children, and peace at the last,' the trio responded, then tossed back the fiery cordial.

Even as Thengel's eyes widened and he shook his head in response to the strong beverage, Morwen appeared.

'I should have known!' she said, a wicked gleam in her eye. 'Cannot trust a Ranger,' she stopped to glare defiantly at me, then continued, 'or a former Ranger, any further than I can throw him.' Her arms were soon around Thengel's waist, and then she smiled, her eyes shining even in the flickering

light.

'Steward Ecthelion, I know that you made this trip without your wife, but I will not stand for you hiding away with the father of the bride. Dance with me if you will have none other!'

I raised my eyebrows at Thengel, but he shooed me away, a wide grin on his face. Morwen escorted me into the main Hall, her arm in mine, and soon I was trying desperately to keep up with her quick steps. Despite the difficulties on my borders, it was good to be here on this night, sharing joy with my former advisor and his wife, her beauty belying her age.

As we turned and parted, adhering to well-known choreography, I noticed a tall youth helping himself to the plentiful food from the board. His bright hair was braided as appeared to be common among the warriors of Rohan, and he spoke with a slightly older man with dark hair. I would not have been so rude as to point at him, so at a brief lull, I leaned into Morwen and asked, 'Who of your company is that at your table?'

She turned to see where I indicated, then looked back at me, confused. 'Why, Théoden, of course!'

I was stunned. 'How can that be?'

She smiled knowingly. 'Dear Ecthelion, he is a child no longer, and patrols with the Rangers. I am somewhat surprised that you do not see his father's face in him, as fond of Thengel as you are!'

I took her in my arms as the dance dictated, and I could tell she found my discomfort amusing.

'Do not fret so.' She smiled warmly. 'It is not as though you visit us often, and as much as we rue it, it is our children whose faces change the fastest.'

*Were truer words said?* I wondered, and found myself nodding.

'Were I to set eyes on your Denethor, I am sure that I would not begin to recognise him, seeing as how he is now older than when I first ran into your Thengel.'

She paused for a moment, considering her next words, then said, 'He is taking his time to wed.'

Her gaze was kind, not accusatory. Had I not enjoyed quite so much of my cordial earlier, I might have felt improper, being so comfortable in her sights, speaking as though she were a confidante of mine, though she had never been. And yet, I felt that it was not shameful to express some of my anxiety about the unmarried state of my son, whose brilliance shone in all other aspects of his life, save this one.

We began a stately walk, our palms pressed together as I replied, 'Yes, he is, at much anxiety to his mother, who wishes for nothing, seemingly, save to be changing the underclothes of her yet unborn grandchildren.'

Morwen looked at me with pity and intertwined our fingers. 'I daresay that her waiting shall not be much longer. As is said, those with patience are given the greatest gifts.'

It was only now, as she formed a slow smile, tiny creases at her lips, that I could see some of the toll of years behind her youthful expression. 'Do not forget that Thengel was thirty-five when we wed, and the graces given us have been beyond reckoning.'

The music ceased, and we parted, then bowed toward one another.

All standing in the great hall applauded the musician's talent. Morwen shifted toward me, her pine-coloured dress dragging only slightly behind her.

'I have been remiss in answering your question fully.' The earnestness in her voice engaged me as she continued. 'The other speaking to my son was Arthur, a Ranger from the North. He has been serving

here for several years, and is a great healer.'

'So that is he!' I took a moment to look him over more thoroughly. He looked every inch a marshal, except for his face. Just before I turned away, he lifted his head and caught my gaze, and I was shocked to see how much he resembled my nephew Imrahil in countenance. His features were very much like the high-born of Gondor, yet he had come from the wilds of the North! Before reverting my glance to the host at my side, I briefly lowered my eyes, then continued to speak to Morwen.

'Thengel has mentioned him in some correspondence recently. His past seems a bit cloudy, but your husband has spoken admirably of his skill both in tracking and slaying the orcs who have been so troublesome of late.'

Morwen nodded. 'He seems to bring good will ere he goes,' she said, then shrugged as she clasped my hands. 'But I would prefer to entrust my faith in those who have paid their dues in this world, bearing up honourably with their scars and regal silver hair.'

I was just trying to figure out what I could say in reply to that when two of Thengel's daughters came up, the elder tapping on Morwen's shoulder, at least a head taller than her mother.

'Excuse me, dear Steward,' the queen murmured, before turning to her charges.

It was only thanks to my talent with names that I could have recalled each child. The elder, Brianna, seemed an apt namesake for Morwen's own younger sister, though ripe enough at eighteen that I found I needed quickly to avert my eyes from her closely-tied gown. The younger, Théodwyn, was the source of strife, holding her hand to her left ear.

'Is the music too loud, dearest?' I heard Morwen ask. Even as I saw the interchange unfold, I felt an outsider, and made motions to leave.

'Ecthelion!' I heard as I turned. Her eyes beckoned for a last gesture, and as Steward of Gondor, this was something I was bred to do.

I held out a hand to Morwen. She placed her dominant left hand in mine, a trait mirrored in Thengel which I had found oddly endearing, even though it had made it exceedingly challenging for finding a writing-desk to accommodate him. I kissed her above the wide gold band bearing a star-sapphire on her fourth finger, and nodded respectfully to Brianna.

'My lady,' I began, 'your daughter is the most beautiful-'

She cut me off, albeit gently. 'I have many daughters. I hope that the fortunes of Gondor will shine on us often enough that your affections for my husband will not run out before the other four weddings.'

I laughed.

She winked before turning her full attentions to her youngest daughter, now with both delicate hands clapped to her ears, tears streaming down her face. Brianna, her duty done, was now making surreptitious glances around the room at the available young men.

As I tried to find Thengel, I realised that Brianna could be the age of my own granddaughter, had not my own son not been so stubborn.

Under my breath, I cursed him, then feeling a bad omen on me, I went outside to find clearer air.

## 6. Chapter VI

### Damage

As I pounded the stone pestle into a sturdy bowl, for only the hundredth time I wished that I had even the smallest amount of herbs that I would have found easily in my former home. The King's youngest daughter was very ill, apparent to all who saw her, but I suspected that only I truly knew how dire her situation was. And her mother. Morwen, the queen, was keeping a vigil by her daughter's side, wiping her brow when fever made her shake. Mother cajoled, then forced her daughter to drink broth to give her frail body some strength to fight the infection.

Two days ago she had approached me. 'All of my children are strong,' she said, her dark brown eyes pleading with me to tell her that Théodwyn would be up and ready to ride within a day or two, a week at the most. 'She will recover, yes?'

There is not much in this world which can force me into silence, but that question was one which I could not answer.

'She will,' she murmured. Then, in an intimate gesture which was so unexpected that I was unable to move, she took both of her hands and placed them on my face, her thumbs caressing my cheekbones. 'You will heal her,' she whispered. 'It is your gift.'

And then she turned and left.

Now I found myself in the kitchen, making an infusion of steeped herbs. After pouring boiling water on it, I walked to the child's room, sitting on her bed, blowing away some of the steam from the hot herb tea I had brewed before raising it to her lips. Morwen had almost set the room ablaze with cedar-scented candles, some of which I had blown out for fear of too much heat on my patient and, quite honestly, to ensure that none of the nearby bedclothes would catch fire. The six year old's hair was somewhat matted; I had specifically requested that she not be bathed and risk a chill on top of whatever it was which raged in her ear, making her cry out in the night. After Théodwyn had a few sips of the tea, I removed my overshirt, feeling rather warm in the small chamber, and blew again on the tea.

'Song?'

I turned my head to the child. 'What, little one?' With my left hand I smoothed some hair out of her eyes, which were half-shut. 'Did you say something?'

'Song,' she said softly. 'Will you sing me a song? When I don't feel well, mother sings to me.'

My hands were cupped around the drink. I believed that it was still too hot for her to hold, but I felt she should have some more of the contents.

'Yes, there are some pretty tunes that I know. If you will drink some more of this, I will sing something that I suspect you have not heard before.'

Weakly she stretched an arm out for the cup, and had two swallows, coughed a bit, then had one more before returning it to me.

Satisfied, I placed the mug on the floor.

As a light autumn breeze came in through the window, I hummed for a moment, then sang a song about the stars dancing in the sky, of trees with leaves both silver and gold, waving in a night of soft darkness. It was not one that would have been often sung in the Hall of Fire, but it had been one that my mother loved, even before she could understand much Elvish. The pale child of Rohan would not understand the words either, but she seemed to relax, so I continued to sing. After a little while I sensed that I was being watched, but as I slowly turned my head to the doorway, I saw no one, and

the feeling passed.

I felt unburdened as I sang, so I continued on to another tune, and then another. From time to time Théodwyn stirred, and each time I gave her some more of the medicinal beverage. The stars glimmered slightly behind a mostly clouded sky, but even their hazy light gave me hope for this illness-ravaged daughter of the King.

Finally she slept, so I got up and went to the window, and spent some time looking out at the mountains and plains surrounding this isolated hall. I sang a bit more, enjoying the feeling of Elvish words in my mouth, lyrics of love and longing. Again the hair on my neck raised, as though someone were staring at me. I closed my lips so that I was humming as I turned around.

Morwen stood, hands clasped above her heart, tears running down her face. I walked quickly toward the doorway, troubled by her presence, but as soon as I had faced her, she disappeared from the entry.

I leaned out into the corridor, a hand still on the jamb, but there was no sight of the queen.

*Her stealth rivals that of the Rangers!* I thought, disconcerted.

A rustling of bedcovers returned my attentions to Théodwyn, and I went back to sit by her side. With the back of my hand, I felt her forehead, which now seemed almost normal, and silently I praised the Valar. I did not wish to presume, but after days of fever without change, this respite gave me hope for her recovery. It is grievous for any parent to lose a child, but I had seen how tender King Thengel was with his youngest daughter, and I suspected that had things gone poorly, the burden of his sorrows would have been weighty indeed.

Unwilling to leave the room in case the child's condition worsened suddenly, I sat down in a chair across the room and stretched out, resting my eyes for some time. I had certainly been forced to catch what slumber I could in far less comfortable surrounds than I currently found myself in, and soon I was in a light sleep.

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For the error bred in the bone  
Of each woman and each man  
Craves what it cannot have,  
Not universal love  
But to be loved alone.

~From "September 1, 1939," W. H. Auden

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'She is well, Thengel, it is only weakness that remains, and that shall soon pass. You are free to go, and you should, if you feel it is appropriate!'

He was pacing, his forehead creased as he debated what to do. I played with Théodwyn's hair as she lay on a blanket next to me, her feet outstretched near the clear water. She was still very fragile, weeks after her fever broke, but she enjoyed being outside, and so I took her out every day when it did not rain. Fréawyn and Brianna also assisted, acting like young mothers, even moving into their younger sister's room to make sure that she was not alone during the night.

'What if something should happen?' my husband asked, and it took everything in me not to laugh at the absurdity of the question.

'My dear, the potential for tragedy exists every day. You could not stop destiny whether you were here or no.'

His face was contemplative and focused on our daughter, not the words I had just spoken. I decided to speak freely.

'The Riders and Théoden would be most pleased if you were with them on patrol. Besides, it has been some time since you visited the Lord of Isengard, and I think that it would be good for you to see him and remind him of our goodwill. He is assisting in the protection of this land, after all, and appropriate homage is not uncalled for.'

He stopped walking, and with his left hand stroked his chin through his beard, a habit that I was sure would drive me mad well before age might rob me of my right mind. I forced my gaze down to the river instead.

'Yes, you are right,' I heard him say. 'We need to retain strong relations with our allies, and Saruman's loyalty has never been questionable.'

Pebbles shone near the white toes of my youngest child, the sparkling water chasing over the multicoloured rocks in warm midday light. I gazed at them, allowing my vision to soften, unfocused. *So that is all it took, I mused. A logical course of action, and then he will be absent for some time.*

Thengel came over and sat next to us, draping an arm over my shoulder. I looked at him for a few moments as he smiled, then traced a finger across Théodwyn's face, her eyes closed in sleep. He leaned in and our lips met with a bland familiarity that can only come after years of marriage. My pulse quickened after a few moments, however, as unbidden, I saw the Ranger's face in my mind. I sensed him responding to my insistent tongue as I deepened our kiss.

Perhaps it was wrong for me ever to have let my thoughts wander as they had, but imperfect I was born and imperfect I knew I would die. As we lingered by the waters, Thengel's fingers traced well-known paths from the back of my neck down to the front of my dress. We had been wed for twenty-six years, and such intimacies were far from frequent, not that I minded. But as we kissed and his hands caressed my breasts, no longer so firm after having nursed our five children, I felt a long-absent ache rekindled below my womb.

Though ashamed, I allowed my imagination to continue down its disloyal path, for the excitement I felt was not from kissing my husband. With my eyes closed, my body responded to another's touch, yearning to be known, every curve of flesh heretofore unseen, beheld as marble to a master sculptor.

For in the rebellious fancy of my mind, the eyes above the mouth I so hungrily sought were grey as iridescent fish scales, and the tongue which met mine sang in glorious words of haunting beauty, their meaning unknown to my ears. His very singing could heal those near death; I had heard, and I had wept. He of the keen eyes. He whom I had named.

Desire for him now consumed me, and I burned.

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My thoughts may have been traitorous, perhaps not. I knew that Arthur would remain in Edoras while the rest of those in his patrol were on leave, most of the Riders enjoying a well-earned reprieve with their families. I also knew that the northern Ranger was drawn to the evening, and to star-gazing.

It was not that I had sought such knowledge, but while I kept vigil by the side of the daughter whom I had already nearly lost once before at birth, his proclivities somehow became branded in my memory. Weeks ago I would not even have noticed, so caught up I was in Théodwyn's every breath, every fevered motion. Yet now I found that with each unexpected noise, every motion of curtains caught by the breeze, I turned, hoping to see his frame in the doorway. I was sure that all was not well with me, for in these moments of fancy he wore only his open shirt, the way I had chanced to see him as he treated Théodwyn; curling dark brown hair on his chest shining in candlelight, his cloak on the floor, his cheeks flushed with the warmth of the room.

I railed against myself. I could not be as a moth to fire; it was only that he had brought back my



darling from death, her inner burning sure to take her, and it was those abilities which forced my eyes back to him.

As much as I had wished, the lies I tried to swallow would not go down easily. No, they resisted being stomached at all. My marriage bed was so cold compared to the heat in that room where I had found I could not linger, but where I was still drawn as an innocent is fascinated by beautiful leaping flames.

At times the risk of burning seemed small price, though the yearning awakened in me knew that the gap between scalded fingers and whole immolation was as thin as a knife-blade.

I wondered if breath itself could be set alight.

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The next day at midmorning, standing on the steps of Meduseld, I poured the stirrup-cup for Thengel. He took it thankfully; drank, bowed his head, and returned the chalice. He would not be gone for long, but such demonstrations of historical propriety were met with much appreciation by his men and the citizens of Edoras. After they had departed and the thundering of hooves had quieted, the air was filled with the more common sounds of bleating sheep, common folk haggling for what was needed while filling the emerging absence of familiar souls, and dogs barking to hear themselves.

By the afternoon I had taken to my bedchamber.

The morning following the healers were desperate to see me. The Rohirrim are strong people, not taken to illness very often, and Théodwyn's near brush with death had put those in the healing arts on edge. They knew I was sturdy, so I asked merely for fortified broth and strong wine. Brianna ventured in after supper on her way to spend the evening with Théodwyn, and I reassured her that it was a passing vague malcontent, that I would be well shortly.

She sat, unconvinced, her sturdy brown brows knit together, running her fingers across my forehead.

'I will send for the Ranger,' she said earnestly.

I shook my head. 'He, too, must rest after spending so many weeks on the hard ground. This will pass.'

Her eyes darkened, troubled like autumn storm clouds. 'You trust him in his capabilities. I will send for him.'

My conjured protestations fell on deaf ears. As evening ventured on toward night, I shivered both with self-loathing and anticipation. It was wrong for me to do this. I was a young woman no longer. My head should not turn at the sight of those fair ones whose faces were pleasing, cloth sticking in summer heat to muscular frames untouched by weariness and responsibility. And yet, I waited. I yearned for him, hoping that my body would not be displeasing in his eyes.

Something in me knew he would come, as inescapably as a bird to the air. There were many things of which he had no need, longings I had seen in the visages of others in my husband's company, though they thought no one saw: loyalty, trust, confidences, adoration.

The only possible downfall in this man was pride. I did not wish to wring it from him; I hoped only that it would be enough to bring him to my room so that his hands would knead my flesh, that I would hear that clear voice singing in words from beyond this world...

It had been dark several hours when I heard a hesitant knock on the door. From deep within myself, a shudder bordering on delight raced down my spine, and I knew it was he.

'Enter,' I said.

He looked in and appraised both the room and me in an instant; ever the Ranger, ever attentive.

'I shall not bite, Arthur, and I keep no other company.'

He shut the door behind him. As he walked to my bed he lowered his head, but not before I saw a curious mix of expressions on his face. Worry, yes, but also something more conflicted. I noticed a bag of herbs knotted to his belt, and while I tried not to, I found myself unable to deny my eyes a surreptitious glance below his midsection.

His voice sounded of songs on the wind. 'Morwen.' He crouched on his haunches, looking concernedly at me, his eye roving across my face for evidence of sickness. 'What troubles the queen of Rohan?'

I suppressed a sigh of delight. 'My very bones ache, Arthur. I do not know what could have brought it on.' Raising up slightly to show that I was not an invalid, as well as reveal my lack of clothing, I gazed into his granite eyes. Earnestness radiated from him, mingled with caution. 'Would you mind rubbing some of this oil of Gondor into my skin?' I motioned to a flask on the bedside table. 'I believe that it would relieve the cold which resides there, and then I shall be as flighty as falcons by morning.'

He paused for a moment. He wished to aid me in removing the source of my pain, that was obvious. I knew that he was gratified that people now consulted him, the young Ranger from the North, for more complicated medical conflagrations. But I was also an unclothed woman, and the wife of his superior. Who was absent.

I smiled shyly. 'If you would but grant some of the strength of your hands while singing some of those lyric tunes which healed my daughter, I know that all that is wrong within me will be made right.'

He stood, his knees cracking slightly, eyes focused in thought, until from somewhere within himself he reached a conclusion. With a slight nod, he indicated his agreement. I made to turn over, and he averted his gaze, chucking as he did so. As I made myself comfortable, leaning my head into pillows of soft cloths brought from Dol Amroth, I asked him what was humorous.

'I assure you, it is not your condition that I laugh at, Queen Morwen. But I must admit I am grateful that you are not surrounded by the many candles you placed around young Théodwyn. One does not wish for one's patient to be set alight, especially before she has been tended!'

I turned to look at him, saw his cheekbones lit by small inoffensive tapers in wall sconces, his eyes twinkling merrily. He was at ease. Comfortable, even. Suddenly aware that I had licked my dry lips, I turned my head back around. In an instant, he was at the top of the bed.

'Do you need some water?'

I shook my head, then reconsidered. 'No. There is some wine near the window, however, and I would be glad of that.'

He poured some for me, brought it back, and raising up slightly so as not to spill the cup, I drank. Remembering that I was supposed to be ill, I sighed slightly, and lay down again on coarse sheets.

What he did next was perhaps to humour me. Or perhaps hem, being a man of uncanny insight, intuited to the needs of a woman with whom he somehow knew he would become familiar with in sense or another. There were some candles of cedar scent near the bed, and using one of the wall tapers, he lit a few of them. Within moments, the tangy breath of old trees wafted about the room.

He laid his strong hands on my shoulders, surprisingly narrow fingers slick with Gondorian oil, and began to hum. With what was left of my coherent mind, I recognized that the tune quietly issuing from his lips was not one that I had heard before. *Before*. When I had clutched to the doorframe as his heart-rending voice had sent his beautiful, incomprehensible song to the skies.

From within my most private heats, I throbbed, somehow able to remain lying prone, every sense aflame. When he at last began to sing, a melancholy line which seemed to carry burdens of sorrows unbearable, I was sure that I would be consumed; that I would burn and in doing so, possess him as a

flame does wood.

But as an ember glows in stillness, so did I. My heart joined in his tale of exquisite woe, as a slow wave of passionate release pulsed through me, making my very fingers tingle. I grasped at the bed with a soft moan, and he stopped.

'Have I hurt you?' he asked, his voice near my ear.

'No, no,' I murmured, reaching out a hand to place on his knee. 'All is well. Please continue.'

He massaged my back, from my neck down even to my upper buttocks, singing quietly. After time uncountable, but yet far too short of forever, he stopped. Assuming that I was asleep since I had not moved in so long, he pulled my blanket to my shoulders, then caressed my head for a time, his sturdy hands delicately fingering my scalp and hair. Leaning down, he lightly placed a kiss on my head, then smoothly got up from the bed. I heard him blow out the candles, open the door, then stop.

He spoke something which I could not understand, but which felt like a blessing, then the door was shut.

Like the coals in the smiths' fires smoulder long after the fire has gone out, I lay, breathing heavily, my skin still warm from where his fingers had traversed. Would the radiance he had brought to the surface be there for all to see, or would it be visible to myself alone? Could I douse such light? Dare I?

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Brianna came to my chamber midmorning, and once she saw me, her face brightened.

'Mama!' she exclaimed. 'I knew that Arthur needed to tend to you. Your very eyes are shining.'

As she left, I supposed that my own daughter had unwittingly answered one of the questions which had assaulted me the night before.

\*\*\*

The afternoon was especially golden as we returned to Meduseld. *Ripe*, I thought. It would soon be time for harvesting, and for the breeding of the sheep. The rains had been kind through the summer, and it appeared that the people of Edoras would be far from starving, even if autumn was followed by a bitter winter.

I dismounted from Theostrung and after patting down his blue-black coat, strode up the steps, nodding to the Doorward and guards. Though tired, I was in good spirits. Inside the high-ceilinged hall it was a comforting mixture of stony cool and peatfire warmth. Rather than go straight to my study, I decided to find Morwen.

The smell of something sweet drifted from the kitchen and I found myself drawn to the large room despite my prior intentions. It was not the cook whom I found there, however.

'Father!' both girls cried out. Brianna and Fréawyn had donned aprons and were scrubbing down the stone counter. As they rinsed out their cloths, I marveled at how affectionate they continued to remain with each other, their age difference being three years. I embraced them both warmly, Brianna's dark head reaching almost to my chin, and Fréawyn's red-gold temporarily tamed curls not much shorter.

'What are you baking? I found I could not resist a detour to the kitchen!'

They grinned in tandem.

'Blackberry tarts. You shall have them after supper!' Fréawyn explained, squeezing my hand.

'Ah, I replied. 'You are very kind to an old king.'

'Old king?' Brianna said, indignant, then looking at my face, she saw that I was teasing her.

'Yes, frightfully old.'

Fréawyn shook her head in response.

'Where is your mother?' I asked.

The young women shrugged. 'Sorry Father, but we have been busy, and I do not know,' Fréawyn apologized, then reached out to wipe some stray wheat flour from her sister's cheek.

I released them. 'Very well. I will see you at supper.'

As I left the kitchen, I decided to go back outside and ask one of the guards to the hall as to Morwen's whereabouts, as nothing escaped their attentive eyes. I found myself again in the glowing light of late afternoon, and turning to the left, saw Frithmund, one of the younger guards I had appointed in the past year. He stood to attention and faced me.

'Frithmund, do you know where the Queen is?'

Keen eyes the colour of mossy rock looked levelly at me. 'Yes, my lord. She and the Ranger went riding some hours ago.'

Surprise showered through me, but I kept my composure. Surely I could not expect Morwen to spend all of her time alone working on one of her needlework masterpieces, or with the children, and yet I was displeased.

'Thank you, Frithmund.'

He bowed in reply, but before resuming his stance, he continued, 'She took ill after you left, my liege, but she seems to have recovered swiftly.' He turned back to face the main road which led down to the gates and then out to the plains. I stood for a few moments as well, wondering at this news.

It is nothing, I resolved, then returned to the Hall and then into my study to have a glass of wine.

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The next morning I was at a council with Arthur and Gramstred when Morwen chanced to walk by. She stopped briefly and nodded at us, but I saw she took a moment to smile at Arthur, who bowed his head. I looked again at Morwen as she continued on, noticing with a sudden shock how young she still appeared, how the curves of her body were displayed pleasingly in her dress, a faint flush in her cheeks. I continued to lead the discussion though my mind was now only half focused on what I was saying. Surely the noble-blooded man at the table across from me who had proven to act beyond reproach in all things had not been recently improper; perhaps I had only imagined my wife's dawdling in the front of the doorway. Arthur was a handsome man, however, and young...

I decided that I was being ridiculous.

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Later that evening, I gazed at myself in the looking-glass in our bedroom. Morwen was asleep, and I felt wretched. She had been in a most passionate ardor, and though I had wished to please her, I had found for the first time in my life that I had been unable to do so. My body had betrayed me.

Her soothing insistence that it did not matter, that she was sure I was only tired, made me feel all the worse.

As though for the first time I acknowledged that my age was now revealed on my face and in the grey of my hair, and apparently in the rest of my form as well. I was sixty-four years old, and still hale, but as I stood, listening to my wife's quiet breathing, an unfamiliar sensation coursed through me.

It was jealousy.

I resolved to send Arthur to Gondor within the week. He would have my full commendations, which were well-founded, and I knew that Ecthelion would be pleased beyond words. I had written to him of this unexpected Ranger who had proven himself so well in battle and in strategy, and I knew that he would prove himself a valuable boon to my friend and the land I had left behind.

I would not suffer a rival, even if imagined, in my own house.

## 7. Chapter VII

### Death

I heard a steady clinking sound for several moments before my mind recognised that it was I, myself, making the noise. Irritated, I put the chalice down, stopping the racket by not tapping the glass against my own teeth. *Where was Penick?* I mused angrily, my thoughts on edge. *He should have been here for council ages ago--*

A loud rapping on my door caused me to whirl around and fumble with my cup, which almost fell from its precarious perch on the windowsill.

'Yes?!' I exclaimed, testy.

Surprisingly, it was not the chief messenger from Imrahil. It was Kelsolan, my aide.

'Lord Steward?' he asked, dark eyebrows furrowed, then he mastered any emotions on his face. 'A letter, sir, bearing the seal of Rohan.'

I walked to the door, and took the parchment, looking at it quickly before nodding brusquely.

'My thanks.' Mind racing, I turned and asked, 'Did the bearer say that he had met anyone on the way?'

Hazel eyes focused on mine.

'Yes, Lord Steward. He met Denethor and Gwindor two day's ride outside of Gondor, but they did not speak of their individual messages.'

I stood for a moment, handling the paper, then realised that I needed to make a reply.

'That is all, Kelsolan. Thank you for bringing this to me immediately.'

He bowed, then said, 'I assume that you will wish to extend the common courtesies...'

I waved my hand. 'Yes, yes. Please see that the messenger is fed, housed, and of course, that his horse is shown to a Rohirric groom.'

The seal had broken under my thumbs.

'If there is one still left, anyway,' I muttered. 'Why they pick fights with those youths from the coast I will never--'

'Steward Ecthelion?'

I cleared my throat. 'Yes?'

'Are you in need of anything?' He eyed my glass and the empty bottle standing on my desk.

Chuckling ruefully, I replied, 'Nothing misses those astute eyes, do they, son of Dallben?'

His lips curled. 'Precious little if I can help it, Lord Steward.' He bowed, and backed away to the door. 'Wine will be brought to you shortly.'

As the solid wood shut behind him, I sank into my chair, dread hanging on me as intimately as my tunic used to after a thirty-days' march. I sat down at my desk to read what had been sent from Thengel, my heart still groaning from the horrendous news I had sent to his family only days before; this only a few months after telling him of Tarangil's death from an infection incurred from an orc-arrow wound.

*Dear Ecthelion,*

*Things here go ill. I feel obliged to ride out to the Eastfold with my son and those of his eored who can be spared. Either the ancient Easterlings are starving or they have become less afeared of us, for they have been harassing the folk on their borders, burning some homes and stealing sheep and cows. I would have sent him alone, for Théoden is his own man, but I have not been out on patrol in a while.*

*How is Arthur doing amongst your company? He is a good man; complex, and for all of his skills, I do admit to a wariness about him, if only because I do not know his heritage beyond what he chose to tell me. Still, if what you have written is true, you are in need of all men of strength, and I hope that he is the boon to you as he was to Rohan.*

*Morwen and the children send their love to you, your dear wife, and to Denethor. Can it really have been already over a year since you were for Gwineth's wedding? I look forward to an invitation to celebrations of your own house. Surely that clear-sighted son of yours will not try to out-last me in his wedding age by much longer.*

*Yours fondly,*

*Thengel*

I released the paper and let it roll back into its former shape. I let in the wine steward, gratefully accepted a new pitcher recently imported wine from my wife's family on the sea, and poured a full glass as the youth left.

My son would be arriving at Edoras within the day, and I could not imagine how Morwen would take the news that I had been obliged to send to her, especially with her husband and only son out on patrol. I took a healthy swig of wine.

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Seven days later, Morwen was shown in to see me. She looked as composed as she could, having had several days to absorb the news I had sent.

'Dear Ecthelion,' she began, not even shedding her travelling coat as she stood in the doorway. 'Thengel would have sent his kindest regards, you know that...'

Her voice trailed off as her left hand played with a cape-clasp even as I walked quickly toward her.

'My dear,' I spoke gently, then deciding it was not inappropriate, I embraced her wholly. 'I am so sorry. I had wished to see you again under much more pleasant tidings.'

She rested against me for a time, then looked up, her cavernous eyes not conveying any emotion.

'Where shall I stay, since my home is burned?'

I looked incredulously at her for a moment, then answered, 'Here, of course. In Minas Tirith. On the sixth level. I will have my aide take you to your lodging.'

She nodded. 'It is still light. May I be so bold as to ask to borrow a fresh horse to journey to Lossarnach? I do not wish to do you any disservice, but since they are already buried, I would like at least to cast my eyes on what remains.'

Saying no to such a request was impossible, and so I let her go, asking only for her attendance at dinner. I knew what she would see at her home; rubble and ash. The house had burned to the ground, and though her parents were not young, they should have seen many more years. That all of her siblings save Forlong had also perished in the fire was tragedy upon itself. I rubbed at my forehead, wishing that Thengel had not been away, that he could have been here with her during her grief. Not

that she was a weak woman, for I knew that not to be the case. But to lose almost all of her family in one sweep of fate, especially when she lived so far away, I was sure it was taking a heavier toll on her than she cared to reveal to me. I sighed. We would converse at dinner, and perhaps I would be able to get some sense of how she truly fared from either Gwindor or my son, who had escorted her here.

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He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes;  
My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is...  
~ Lamentations 3:16-17

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There was a quiet knock on the door. I continued to hold the small knife above my skin, drawing tentative lines. I expected no-one, and so I ignored the sounds. I now had a small yellow bird in a cage for company, unhappily tittering at me, hopping from floor to bars to perch and back. Forlong had found him in a nearby tree, weeping openly as he said that it had been Brianna's daughter's finch, Máthmæht. I had had no choice but to take it. Forlong and I spoke the words we were supposed to say to commemorate our loved ones, bidding them farewell while standing on the ground which had long since ceased to smoulder. I had lost my composure, and grabbing his arm, I begged, 'Tell me that there was someone who did this! A spurned suitor, something! Father was never so careless...'

He clutched at my hand, and his wife made a move to rush toward us, then stopped herself after my brother waved his hand in some motion of patience.

'It was an accident, Morwen. Iolande was sought by many, it is true, but none would have tried to set the house ablaze. It was simply...'

'Fate.' I snapped in reply. 'Curse fate. Curse flames and fire and cloth and men from Rohan who run into you in the street. It is all for naught. I do not see the meaning to life anymore. It is all folly.'

Forlong stepped away from me, obviously upset. 'Morwen! Don't say such things! Look at what you have become!'

Now I knelt on the floor of my cold room, the fire unlit. *Yes, I thought, look at what I have become. The Queen of Rohan, my family speaking a language that others do not, my parents and my sisters and their families dead. And my inconstant heart somehow swayed by a man from yet another land. I am a disgrace. My children would fare far better without me.*

Ecthelion had been a very gracious host, and I had drunk most of the wine he had sent. The knocking continued, more assertive this time. I swore at the door, and was surprised to realise that it had been in Rohirric, rather than Westron.

*You are hopeless,* I mused, drawing the blade harder.

The door opened.

'Arthur!' I said, rather surprised.

He was at my side in moments, and took the knife.

'That was mine,' I murmured, but then resigned to my caretaking, shaking my head.

He crouched by me, holding my hands in his.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

I shrugged. 'Mourning. Is that not what I should be doing? If there had been more ash I would have covered myself in it. But the fire was days ago.' I jerked my head in the direction of the agitated finch.



'Would you like a bird? My brother found it. It belonged to my sister-daughter. He does not appear to be happy around me.'

His grey eyes looked at me sternly. 'Stop this.'

I looked back evenly. 'Gondor suits you. All lands seem to suit you.'

He sat ungracefully, the first time I had seen him do anything that did not have an aura of dignity to it.

'Morwen.'

'Arthur.'

He cleared his throat. 'They call me Thorongil, now.' His eyes looked at me gravely as he massaged my fingers, still caged in his hands. 'What is odd is that the meaning is similar to the one you gave me.'

I retrieved a hand to move some hair out of my face. 'I am in need of a reason to live, Ranger.'

His gaze was clouded, worry and disquiet battling while he sat in silence.

'There is a woman, isn't there?'

He nodded, continuing to caress my chilled fingers. 'She is one of the immortals. I have to trust that fate will not cause our paths to sunder completely. I may have keen sight, but the future is something I am unable to see.'

I picked up my glass and drank what was left. 'I have never wished to know what will come, and I do not want that burden now.' I breathed deeply. 'I am cold, Arthur.'

'You should be warmed,' he said gently, then leaned in and placed his soft lips on mine.

I kissed back, hungrily, rather uncertain that he was really there, wondering if I were merely in a dreaming stupor. I am sure that I left bite marks all over his skin, desperate for visual evidence that I had been physically on him, tasting, my hands grasping at coarse hair on his chest, on his face. I had been so close to the land of the spirits that I found myself drowning in the sensual. His scent! I wished only to burrow under his skin, then realised that for once, just that one time, much more was there as gift for me.

All further details of that night are mine alone. We were awkward together; whatever they may say of men, whether they be kings or peasants, they are still very much human, and all couplings as we had only become graceful with practise, which we did not have.

And yet, as I dressed and took my toilet the next morning, sore as I was both from intimacies long-inexperienced and our ardours which had unintentionally bruised my back, I no longer wished to die.

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Máthmæht and I had a safe journey back to Rohan. Denethor asked me several questions about Arthur which I felt were inappropriate, but then I looked at the Steward's son, at his attractive profile, and his queries disturbed me no more. The two men were not so different in age, and Denethor perhaps rightfully felt that a rival had stepped unexpectedly into their ranks.

We housed the Steward's Son and Gwindor for two nights upon our arrival to Meduseld. Thengel was beside himself in mourning for my family, and wept in our bedchamber as I spoke to him of the details. It was only as our guests left, and Thengel went with Théodwyn for a ride to the orchards and I was left alone, that I allowed myself to grieve as I knew I must.

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2978

'Papa!'

The cry ripped from my son's throat. The situation must have been exceptionally poor else he would have called me by any of my usual names, this being one I had not heard in years.

I had two chalices at the ready to toast his child's birth, whether male or female, it did not so much matter to me, having sired four daughters and one son. But his wretched face told me more than I was willing to accept at that moment.

'Théoden!' I replied, striding toward him. 'Whatever is the matter? Is Elfhild ill?'

'Ill, father?'

He crumpled. He sank to his knees, forehead on his legs, his hands above his matted hair, unwashed for days over his caretaking of his expectant wife. He rocked back and forth for a few moments as the comprehension of what had happened tried to reach out a fierce arm to me, but I was unwilling to tend to the parlay.

Handing my drink to a servant, I rather noisily lowered myself to his level on the floor. 'The best healers in all of Rohan, my son, they are here- you know how they saved Théodwyn...'

I found that I was stroking his hair, then Morwen burst into my study, her eyes red. I raised my glance to her, and then lowered it, unable to withstand the honest brutality of what was conveyed in her visage.

She ran to our son, covered him with her thin arms, and held him as he pounded at the floor. He beat at the boards for a good amount of time while I ran my fingers through his hair, Morwen and I sharing a cloth which an aide had been good enough to retrieve and hand to me. I raised my son from the floor and pulled him to my chest, where he clutched at me, raging and sobbing, alternately.

He had been so loud that we had not heard Fréawyn enter, her eyes as bloodshot as the rest, but holding a tidily bound bundle.

'He needs a name,' she said, quietly, still rocking the newborn even as his tiny fingers grasped at the cloths put around him. 'Théoden, you must name him.'

I raised my eyes to her, this stalwart daughter of mine whose strength I had not yet understood.

'Théoden!' Her glacier-blue eyes were pleading, begging for someone to hear her. 'I know you do not wish to, but you must, he is part of both of you...'

An anguished muffled sound came from him, since he was speaking into my tunic.

Just then, one of the midwives walked in slowly.

'Elfhild,' she began, but seeing my face, she stopped, as it was obvious that I knew her message.

Théoden slowly uncurled from my cradled arms, and stood. 'She is dead.'

The midwife nodded. 'There was too much blood, but we did all that we could.'

Morwen made a gesture of thanks, and the midwife left, dignity intact. Suddenly the babe began to

wail, and Fréawyn rocked the child from side to side, but nothing would appease him. Théoden walked toward her, then ran his thumbs over the infant's face, making near-silent cooing noises as he did.

'Théodred, you shall be,' he said, running his lips over his son, caressing eyes, nose, lips, then standing back from Fréawyn.

With a distanced look, he took us in: his mother and I still kneeling on the floor, his sister holding his child, then he shut his eyes for a moment, drawing himself inward as once I had seen a fern leaf do at sunset when a finger had been run along it.

'I need to see to my wife.'

He left the room, leaving Fréawyn, who had begun crying again. I motioned her to the door. 'There are wet nurses. Please go find the midwife and guide Théodred to one. If you cannot find the midwife, come back here.'

She nodded vigorously, the child now opening and closing its mouth, wailing when its mouth was open.

After Fréawyn stepped gingerly from the room, we were shrouded in silence.

Morwen had drawn her knees into her chest, and sat as still as one of the pillars in the Hall.

'Morwen,' I breathed, desperate for her touch.

She took my hand, and nestled it within her knees, her own fingers surrounding it. Then she turned her brown eyes at me, and with them alone, bade me to rest my head in her lap. After she lowered her legs, I did, gratefully.

She stroked my hair, and for a fleeting moment I wondered what she saw: an old man; her husband; her lover; one caught up in the troubles of a country she had never wished to see; the father of her children, [and grandchildren;] one who tried to console his son's heartbreak.

We did not need words, though she began to speak. I drifted in and out, my body and mind exhausted. It was enough only to be there, before the lit fire, my head free of the Rohirric crown, my wife's words burbling over me like the Anduin over ancient rocks, a mournful lullaby of my manhood.

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The hush which had settled over our home was stifling. I found that I was purposefully breathing more deeply, the sense of being suffocated hanging about as inescapably as mist over a waterfall. I went looking for Théoden after rising and finding my bed empty. I assumed that Morwen was with him, preparing for such rites as were to be done.

I had not been much for fast-breaking that day, drinking only some hot bitter beverage. Realising that I needed to go to my study to find the books that would contain the appropriate words I would need to speak that day, I walked to that room from the Great Hall. My whole body felt bruised, as though I had been thrown from my horse and rolled in the dust down a hill. And my heart... in many ways, it was like seeing my own son die. Théoden's anguish bit at me like wolves' teeth; his free-flowing tears had marked me forever. For a brief moment I imagined what it would be like to bury Morwen, her fair skin bloodied, flesh cold to the touch, and I shuddered.

In the study, I went straight to the tome which had the text I required. After a cursory glance, I tucked it under my arm, then went to find my wife.

It was outside in the shelter of the garden where I found Morwen, my only son kneeling before her. She held sharp shears, and with dull resistance, she cut his hair to a length barely below his ears, in a show of mourning. Golden strands fell to the ground, surrounding his legs in a mockery of sunrays.

Her left hand wielded the blades, and even as I saw her from the gateway, I could see that though she was standing perfectly still, tracks of new tears stained her face.

*So much death*, I thought, my breath caught in my throat. *Whatever will be said of Thengel's line?*

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2980

I cleared my throat, then sang. The vowels no longer foreign, they bled from me even as the words were torn rapaciously from me by the wind.

*Out of doubt, out of dark to the day's rising  
He sang to the sun, sword unsheathing  
To hope's end he rode, to white gates shining  
Then back to his homeland, the Mark o'er ruling*

*O flowered bier, sheltering mound of soil  
Guard well the form of Thengel, whose toil  
Now lamented, rests with others' spirits loyal  
In golden light shall forever lie his dear body royal*

The king was dead. My husband, after so many years of soldiering and ruling, of occasional great happiness, of catastrophic happenstance, had chanced to drop dead to the ground while we were out taking a tour of the orchards. His heart must have simply given out; it was all the healers could assume. At seventy-five, it was not unexpected that he would die, but his passing was sudden nonetheless.

I could not say that we had always been happy, nor that bliss had ever been our combined pursuit, save in the earliest years in our marriage. He was noble, he was tender, he was driven by obligation. After thirty-seven years spent together, we had much in common in time shared, and our children.

I would miss him, very much.

Ecthelion had been, as always, gracious and kind. He came within days of the news to attend Thengel's funeral, and spoke to the people of Edoras at length of the gratitude of Gondor for his service, as well as his personal thanks, and his sharing in our loss.

We sat in Thengel's study, drinking some wine, a fire lit despite the warm evening air.

'How is young Boromir?' I asked, and the Steward's eyes glowed with pleasure.

'Well, being only a toddler, I have no true sense of what he will become, but he is sturdy enough, and brings both Denethor and Finduilas great delight.'

I smiled, then lifted my cup to my lips and drank. 'You have had a long wait of it, but it appears that being a grandfather pleases you.'

He nodded. 'The Steward's line continues,' he said, looking carefully at me, knowing of Elfhild's tragic death two years prior, 'as does that of Rohan.'

'Yes, it does,' I affirmed, leaning back into my chair and rubbing at my chilled arms. 'I hope that Théoden will remarry; it does not seem right that he should rule alone. He is only thirty-two years old, after all, and others who look on him without privilege of his mother's eyes acknowledge that he is handsome.'

The Steward's mouth twitched. 'Morwen, with you as their mother, no child could be anything other.' His gaze turned serious. 'I do hope that the new King will be able to find future happiness, though I fear that the powers of dark will continue to trouble our children's rule.'

I closed my eyes briefly, thinking back to the stories told by those who had fled to Lossarnach, then reached out to pour Ecthelion and myself more wine. 'Should Gondor ever need the aid of Rohan, you know that she will be tend the call as soon as it is issued. We are two divisions of one house, would you not say?'

With a contemplative smile, he concurred. 'There was a time, once, when Thengel said rather seriously that he had brought Gondor to Rohan.'

I thought about that for a moment, then replied, 'That sounds very much like something he would say.'

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The stone walls of Meduseld seemed to wick heat away from me after Thengel's death, and even the warmth of Théodwyn in my bed, ensuring that I was not alone, did not remedy the chill in my bones. I was still a foreigner; this was her home, her birthplace. Shameless, I held my youngest daughter close to me and breathed in deeply of her hair, always smelling of field and horse.

At times, I needed simply to be left alone to wander the corridors, to look through his books, to look Théoden in the face and have the unspoken words burrow through me in their understanding, even as he walked alone, the circlet of Rohan above his brows.

*We are abandoned.*

\*\*\*

2995

The sapphire sky was as bright and clear as the stone on my finger. We walked together and I murmured soft undercurrents of "this is this, and that is that" in Westron to my granddaughter, knowing full well that whether I were speaking in my native tongue or in Rohirric, none of it would make sense to her. 'Come see my old bird-cages!' I chirped, and took her to my garden, past the untended flowers, the stone path littered with weeds. Gingerly I sat down on a nearby stone bench, nestling my delightful Éowyn in my lap, and pointed to the now-empty weatherings, speaking the language of my home, though fewer spoke it now in the Golden Hall.

'You would have laughed at him, my sweet darling. Though he was a ferocious one, that Lovebite.' I showed her a scar on my right index finger. 'He was given that name for a reason, but his heart was pure.' The babe squirmed in her swaddling, and I continued on after moving some hair out of her eyes. 'But it was Sharp-eyes whom your grandfather and I were especially fond of. We took her out when we showed Arthur,' at this I leaned in conspiratorially, as though she knew what I was saying, 'and I know that our Ranger from the North assumed we were mad.'

I smiled at the memory, and readjusted Éowyn so that I could cradle her against my face, feeling her impossibly soft skin against my ageing wrinkles. 'He might have been right. But Sharp-eyes was an excellent hunting bird. Were it not for your uncle, he would never have lived the rather pampered life he had here.'

She cooed as babies will, and I vowed never to forget that moment.

## **Chapter VIII**

### **Denouement, Part I**

3019, March, Edoras

'Hail Aragorn son of Arathorn!'

My heart had almost stopped in shock upon seeing her, this woman who carried herself like Morwen. She had not her eyes, being grey, and was stronger in build, but the mark was indelible. Her granddaughter, it must be, though it seemed impossible that so much time had already passed.

Pale fingers had touched mine before pouring some stout Rohirric wine into my cup, and she shivered. What it was in that line of women whose surprisingly stalwart and strong spirits rivaled the tension-strength of Elvish rope bridges, I would never know.

But it was disconcerting.

'Hail Lady of Rohan!' I replied, which was proper.

Pupils the colour of clouds before summer storms bored into me.

*You cannot know me*, I thought, and was comforted, if that is the proper description for feeling as though one is completely naked under the glaring moon.

And then she had passed down the table.

## **Denouement, Part II**

3019, August, Edoras

The clouds were only just tinged with lilac when I went in search of the King.

The King. Over All. He had united Gondor and Arnor, the long-lost Northern land, and even those verdant grounds of the hobbits, which made me think of Meriadoc, and I smiled. Though our oddly intimate days together were now long past, a part of me still missed his scent of foreign manhood, and of determination which wafted to me as we rode, day after day toward smoky ground...

Aragorn's title was still slightly grating. Trying to say it made me feel as though I had accidentally drunk of the Snowbourne and its sandy residue lingered on my teeth. Then I snorted, thinking fondly of what words my contemplative betrothed would have to say of that image. I drank some of the wine in my cup, and continued on into the garden to see if our exalted guest was there.

Éomer had sent me, since I was, after all, the highest-ranking woman in Rohan.

*No*, I chided myself, *that is not true*. Arwen the Evenstar, Queen of Gondor, was somehow no longer an immortal, but unless someone shot an arrow into her and she managed to rise from the ground without harm, I was not sure that I could tell the difference.

Such was the swirling of my thoughts that I almost ran into King Elessar in the untidy garden outside of Meduseld.

'Dragon's breath, Aragorn!'

I promptly blushed, my improper words beating on my senses even as I uttered them.

'King Elessar, Aragorn, your pardon, I beg!'

I quickly raised my eyes to the barely glistening stars and thanked them for their cover, as I knew my face was scarlet, though I tried valiantly to rein in my emotions.

There was a polite chuckle from the corner.

'Éowyn, your spirit need never be pardoned, especially by me.'

He raised himself from his sequestered, crouching stance, and waved to a stone bench that I was rather sure I had never sat upon. His familiarity with this area mostly unknown to me had put me on edge, as though one of those who claimed to see futures in horse droppings had suddenly stared at me and told me I was to die on the morn.

We both sat on the cold seat, the autumnal air warmed by our presence. I drank another swallow of my wine, then asked him a question before I lost my nerve, yet again.

'How is it that you seem to know Edoras so well?'

The sun patiently continued its inexorable settling into the earth, spreading pale, fiery shadows on stone and plant alike. Aragorn, after a glance, took my glass, drained it of its contents, then returned it to me.

'Do you mind?' he asked, retrieving a hidden pipe from his elegant overcloak.

I shook my head, as I placed the empty chalice on the ground.

He took out a tinder box, lit a match on the sole of his boot, and puffed contentedly a few times before speaking again.

'I am of the Dúnedan, as you know, and my lifespan is longer than many. After I left Rivendell, when I was still rather young, I came to Rohan and served under your grandfather Thengel.'

At this I turned to stare at him, for I knew that I had been named somewhat for my grandmother Morwen, and yet knew nothing about her.

'Did you know Morwen Steelsheen, my mother's mother?' The words rushed forth, an unregulated torrent, but all diplomatic necessity had left me. This man knew. Only he, of all people, could tell me about her, and, perhaps, my mother.

He did not speak, but a wide smile crossed his face, his teeth comfortably clenched about his pipe. Turning to look at me, he said gently, 'Yes, I did.' The ages seemed to skip kindly across his features, like sheep on new spring grass, and I discovered that from within my heart, I did not need to inquire further.

My attentions were recaptured by the emerging constellations. As I gazed, I heard him speak again.

'Though you will miss the straightforwardness of the ways of Rohan, you alone will be able to nurture such plants and growing things in your kingdom that will reflect the singularity of purpose of you and Faramir, the Steward's son.'

All of a sudden his years with the Elves seemed as obvious as the smoke rising from his pipe. No usual man would speak that way. Familiar, and yet as though I had been addressed by Béma himself. Goosebumps flared on my skin.

Just then we heard Faramir's tender voice, beckoning for the both of us. Aragorn took his pipe out of his mouth and tapped its tobacco out on the bench.

'You have her backbone.'

I scowled for a moment, perplexed. 'What?' I asked.

He stood up from the cold stone, and took my hands, and I found that I was facing him, our feet firmly planted on the ground. His grey eyes looked at mine. I knew that I had loved a shadow of him, once; not truly loving him, the mortal man before me, yet I felt bathed in compassion, and was not ashamed. And then I understood.

'As straight and faithful as the pine tree,' I began, and he nodded, before releasing my hands, my beloved's feet making soothing sounds of leather against pebble on the path under his feet.

'Westu hál, Éowyn Steelsheen,' Aragorn said quietly.

## Author's Notes

***"Well-wrought this wall: Wierds broke it. The stronghold burst..."***

and the torrent of words creating this story rushed forth.

Morwen and Thengel appear only in Appendix A of *Lord of the Rings*, though Gandalf occasionally invokes him when addressing Theoden as "son of Thengel."

I have taken the liberty of having the youngest sibling of Morwen be Forlong, who shows up in "Minas Tirith" as 'old Forlong the Fat, the Lord of Lossarnach.' If he was a toddler, say 18 months in 2943, he would be 77 or so, and worthy of the comments expressed by Bergil, who quoted the above line, and further description of him is this: 'on it [a horse] sat a man of wide shoulders and huge girth, but old and grey-bearded.'

My apologies to Lloyd Alexander; both Dallben and Taran[gil] are character names from his "Book of Three" stories, but they sounded suitably Gondorian.

All names for the Rohirrim are either hybrids using Tolkien's listed names and their respective meanings or are simply from my imagination and Anglo-Saxon list that I carry around with me.

Two months after I finished writing this, I discovered that according to two paragraphs in *Unfinished Tales*, Morwen is supposed to be tall and of Numenorean descent. So my story is canon as far as what little information is given in the Appendix of LotR, and personally, I like the idea of her coming from more common stock.

Rohirric-sized hugs to Jen, fearless beta reader extraordinaire. My works constantly improve under your keen eyes!

To Amy, whose support and willingness to listen to me go on and on about my stories and fanfiction in general, thank you. Without Tolkien, without your class, without your unflagging generosity of time, none of this would have come to pass.

The quote at the top is from *The Ruin*, a piece of "anonymous" 8th-century Anglo-Saxon poetry, as translated by Michael Alexander. It reflects how I felt after reading Altariel's story, "A Game of Chess," whose beautifully-written narrative was the inspiration for this story.