

DAUGHTERS OF OROMĚ

written March-September, 2003

1. Boar and Steward

Eastfold Settlement
Spring/Summer, 3001

"Ready or not, here I come!"

Fréalas crouched underneath the brush, trying with all her might to silence her breathing. The sound of whistling cut through the bright air, clear as birdsong.

He always tries to find me first, it's not fair! she thought, and flattened herself to the ground, more wormlike with each movement. It was at this most important moment, when stillness and silence were key if one did not want to be tagged, that she noticed the stone digging into her left knee. But she dare not move for fear of discovery. Ignoring the unexpected discomfort, she held her breath.

The whistling drew nearer. Under the shelter of the tall grass and shrubs on the edge of the forest, she who would not be found tried to be as quiet as a shadow. Glancing sideways, the eight year old gauged how far she had to run to get to the safe haven of the sheep-pen and then she could hide again for yet another round of Boar and Mouse.

That brief movement was enough. The glint of sunlight on red hair gave her away, and she heard an "Aha!" and knew that her hiding place was not what she had hoped for. Before jumping up and dashing to the sheep-pen and her freedom, she grasped at the bit of stone that had so rudely found its way into her hiding place. Only with a most brief glance did she look at the smooth disc before shoving it into her dress pocket. Springing up, she took in the decreasing distance of her brother's feet. All hope lost, she ran as fast as her legs could carry her, trying to make an arc away from him and toward the nearby pen.

"Gotcha!"

She was utterly dismayed to see the fence-post in front of her, tantalisingly within grasp, when at that moment her feet betrayed her and down she went.

"Frithlíc!" she cried, even as she knew she was losing, seeing her friends run to the fence post in surety now that someone had gotten caught in their stead. But he wouldn't win without a fight...

"Ow! Fréalas, why'd you have to go and do that, eh?" He stood on one leg, rubbing his ankle with his other bare foot where his younger sister's fist had found its mark. Catching her breath, she and her brother and friends heard the horn blowing that meant the end of their game for today.

"Well!" a snaggle-toothed boy said, grinning widely, "guess you'll be the Boar tomorrow!"

In response, she stuck out her tongue. "Halma, son of Halmwine, I know all of your hiding places. Don't think you'll be a mouse for long!"

The sun was setting as they walked near the soothing gurgles of the Mering Stream, back to their cluster of homes, the White Mountains glowing as though lit with inner fire. Above them, the clouds blazed with colour, orange and scarlet, and even streaks of lilac. Fréalas stopped, appreciative of the splendour of colours on display and said, "The sky is so fiery!"

One of the other children, in a singsong voice, said,

"Red sky at night, rider's delight...
Red sky at morning, Eorlingas take warning..."

Fréalas thought it was one of the most beautiful sunsets she had ever seen. It was true that she had an almost unnatural fondness for the time of the sun's setting, and dusk in general, but she couldn't help it! *Why else have eyes*, she thought, if not to appreciate the hues in the skies, the blues of day, turning to reds and violets and the twinkling of stars, whose patterns she was beginning to learn. Her heart leapt and she thanked the mostly nameless ones who ruled fate and time for placing her in the plains of grasses that she called home. She was sure that there was nowhere in Middle Earth more beautiful than the land of the Riddermark, especially her land by the Firien woods. Who else could possibly know the joys of wading on the banks of the clear waters of the Mering Stream (and who else could possess as many smooth skipping stones as she had?), and...

The stone! She quickly stuck her hand in her pocket to see if the mysterious rock had escaped during her dash to the sheep-pen. It was still there, and she drew it out. Clumps of dirt clung to it, so she unceremoniously wiped it on her woven skirt, and was amazed to see that it had markings. The indentions were dirt-filled, so she ran over to the stream to rinse it off.

"Where are you going?" Frithlíc asked.

"My business is my own."

"I'll have it out of you," he warned, with a half-smile.

Squatting by the stream, Fréalas submerged rock and herself to the forearms, bracing at the water's chill. With a half-bitten fingernail she scraped out the dirt until she could see the designs clearly. It wasn't runes, she decided, seeing the three curvy lines and three stars above them. But what did it mean? What did it say? Her mother was unique in that she knew her letters, but Fréalas had been unable as of yet to convince her mother to teach her as well.

"Well, we're going to be late! What have you there?"

Fréalas almost fell in, shocked by the voice right behind her.

"Frithlíc, you startled me. Oromë's horn!"

"Fréalas! Who taught you that? You had best watch your tongue, little one, before you get in trouble. Now what is that?"

She turned, and was about to say that she really didn't know and wanted to get his opinion on it, but knew that they needed to go back to safety of home with their warm fire, and cosy wooden tables. It was well within community memory of fine people in the Mark being killed by Orcs, hence the extra precaution of blowing the horn at the end of the day for any children who may have strayed away and not realized how soon the sun would set. Fréalas, like all children her age, was learning to shoot with bow and arrow, as well as basic swordsmanship. She hoped that she never had to use those skills, but the alternative could be far worse, if what she had heard about Orcs was true.

Frithlíc raised an eyebrow.

"Not a secret, I hope?"

They were of very different temperament, but they shared a trait that was as obvious within their community of tall, fair-haired folk as a lone tree standing on the grassy plains. Through the workings of which horse-lord or horse-lady Fréalas was quite unsure, but she and her brother had red hair. Not simply sun-kissed, which was not infrequent, but truly blazing, the colour of coals Fréalas saw at the smiths as they hammered the metal shoes for their beloved steeds. Hair that shade was unusual, though not considered unnatural, and neighbours simply attributed it to the fact that Fréawyn, their mother, was said to be of distant lineage from the ancient line of Northmen, now few and scattered.

She passed the newly-cleaned rock to her brother.

He grunted. "Not runes. But what it says, I am unsure."

He looked it over carefully, turning it over and again in his hands, gazing at it over his freckled nose with hazel eyes.

"Doesn't look like it was made by Elves, if you ask me," he continued.

"I didn't, but how would you know? You've never seen an Elf! Doesn't look Dwarvish either; it's too plain. Their work is more delicate, somehow, though that doesn't mean what I mean..."

She stopped speaking, brows furrowed.

"Think of that knife that Mother uses for her chopping and..."

Here her voice faltered. This was her mother's sharpest knife, used both for household chores and more delicate surgical purposes, when needed, as when Fréalas had gotten a skin infection of sorts. She hadn't known how it all happened, but then her mother had used the knife to make an incision in the reddened flesh to let out the poison. It hurt like fire, and she had wailed, especially after her mother put witch hazel to it, but it had done the trick, and there was but a half-moon scar on her leg as evidence of what had happened.

"Yes, I know," Frithlíc intervened. "What of it?"

"Well, we don't often see the Dwarves. But still, this doesn't look like their handiwork. Here, say, give it back! I found it!"

"No need to get possessive over an old rock, anyway!"

Frithlíc's eyes glinted as he tossed it back to his sister. "Isn't it time that you had a bath, eh? Ah, lucky you!"

Fréalas frowned. It wasn't that she minded the hot water warmed over the fire for bathing, to be sure, but now that it was early spring she always seemed to be cold, and the inconvenience of hauling water from the Mering for a mere bath seemed unwarranted. Especially since she was going to be wearing the same clothes tomorrow. At least their mother had skill in making tallow-soaps of pleasing scent, full of the lavender that grew on the nearby hills.

They didn't often go to the royal city of Edoras, but on occasion the Frithmund family did travel more to the heart of the Mark, trading soaps for things that couldn't be bartered from the other families near the woods. One could find spices there, from warmer lands further south, and metalworks from the Dwarves traversing the Western Road. There was the occasional Gondorian coming to visit family, as those of Rohan and Gondor were so inextricably linked, though Fréalas always felt somehow looked down on; rustic, through the eyes of the well-clad Southerners. "Are they all so tall?" she wondered, and couldn't understand why they all seemed to have such dark hair. She sometimes noticed the occasional furtive stare, usually from a Gondorian child, at Frithlíc and her, with their freckles and fiery locks. She was quite sure that she didn't like those folk from the big stone city. *Who would want to live in a place with such an ugly name as Mundburg?* she thought at such times. When confronted with a rare sugared candy offered in a gesture of friendliness, however, she was also quite unwilling to refuse the treasure.

The evening passed without incident, and after a dinner of mutton and potatoes and a scrub-down at her mother's insistence, Fréalas asked for leave to visit the Íensmith family. Shrugging, her father gave permission, so after donning her *gearnschrúd*, Fréalas walked barefoot to her neighbors. Their family had a few weeks ago been blessed with a daughter, Tamára, and Fréalas longed for a few moments of solitude with her. The Eorlingas believed heartily in the purifying aspects of being outside

in the fresh air, and so built rocking cribs for their babes in the forms of horses that they placed in sheltered side porches. As the moon looked down on the clusters of small homesteads, She would often see a fair daughter of Rohan sitting in a chair next to her horse-crib, rocking it whilst singing a lullaby to her newborn. It was believed that by being exposed to wind and star and moon that the child would gather the strength needed to be a part of these isolated peoples, proud, yet wary, intuition as keen as starlight, and always guarded. So Fréalas visited the Ísensmith's, waving a greeting to young Smithson, then making her way to stand next to Tamára's crib for some quiet rocking time. While gently pushing the blonde infant, she sang a lullaby from her recent youth.

*Lullay my ly' tling, my dear one, my sweeting,
Lullay my dear heart, my own dear dréaming...*

As the babe cooed and then fell into sleep, Fréalas watched the skies as the constellations silently followed their ages-old patterns across the night sky.

"See that, Tamára?" she murmured. "There's Swánsteorra the swan... and Eofor the boar... Seems as though he is unwilling to share the sky with the other stars, he takes up so much room!" Fréalas pulled her knitted top around her more closely, keeping away the evening chill. "As for me," she said, giving the child a final look for the night, "I simply want to share the fire. Sweet dreams."

Summer

Fréalas pulled the bow with what felt like all of her remaining strength, yet as soon as she released the arrow, it was painfully obvious that it would hit nowhere near the intended mark on the hay bale. Sighing, she bent down and picked up yet another for practice, pausing to wipe the sweat off of her forehead with the back of her hand. It was now the height of summer, so in addition to the heat itself as an impediment to concentration, there was the issue of trying to ignore the biting horseflies that were part and parcel of living around so many horses and sheep. Though clad in the lightest woven dress she had, it was still hot. And she still was not a very good archer, but determined at least to be as accurate as that silly Halma. She shook her head in resignation. *Why can't I be valued for my speed? she thought. Or in knowledge of the night sky? But knowing which way is east and west is not of much use if Orcs are running at you...* Besides, what else awaited her? Weeding in the garden, or going to find yet another sheep that had managed to stray too far from its home -

"Perhaps if you don't put quite so much energy into grasping the bow, you'll have more control over where the arrow lands."

She wheeled around, looking for the source of the unexpected archery lesson. A tall man, with dark hair and grey eyes with a hint of mirth emerged from the nearby forest eaves. Bow and arrow still in her hands, Fréalas started to ask who he was, but when nothing came out, she cleared her throat and tried again.

"Who are you?" she sputtered, trying to take in the figure, who wore clothes that looked as though they had travelled far and were as unkempt as the wearer. He had spoken in Rohirric, but there was an accent to it. Not knowing what else to do since she was alone, Fréalas stood her ground, arms shaking.

He smiled, raising his arms to indicate that he would not do her any harm, and while slowly walking toward her said, "Long-walker, you may call me. Though it has been many years since I was on your fair plains, it gladdens my heart to see that the people of Rohan value still both their sons and daughters in its defence."

At this, Fréalas loosened her hold on her bow, trying to sort through the wildly spinning thoughts in her mind. *How had this man approached so silently? Why was he standing there? Where was he from? Why her?*

"I believe you dropped this." He kneeled, retrieving out of the grass the incised rock that Fréalas had continued to carry with her, trying to figure out its riddles when not doing more mundane things such as watering the garden and staying out of trouble. It must have flung out of her pocket during her sudden reorientation toward the stranger in the woods. He gave it a look, and an unreadable and strange expression passed over his face. Straightening, he offered it to her. "Are you able to read its markings?"

She shook her head, and lowered her bow and arrow. "My mother is able to read, but I have yet to learn." Looking first at the ground, then daring to return his gaze, she went on. "We of the Mark are to be swift in horse and sword and mind, but the reading of runes and scripts is not valued as highly as those that keep body and soul as one."

Since he kept her gaze, and didn't speak, she continued, "Neither is that of learning the star-patterns, but..." here she stopped. Who was she, a child of no one of importance, to talk to this stranger who had simply appeared out of the forest? She gave him a keen look. *Well, he hasn't even put his hand to his sword, and I'm not dead yet, and he does speak in my language.* The thoughts danced back and forth in her mind like bees hastily journeying from flower to flower. "If you have lived here before, then you know that we feel best when on horseback, or if not that, with our feet in the grasses and our voices in song. To be sure, I will do my best to safeguard our lands, as I feel they are the most beautiful in the world." She continued to hold her bow and arrow and stood her ground, yet felt increasingly smaller as each moment passed, as though she were the namesake to be discovered in a game of Boar and Mouse.

With a very serious look, he offered her back the disc. Fréalas shifted the arrow into her left hand so that her right hand was free to receive it. "Long have I missed you and your folk. I fear far less now for the fate of the Rohirrim in these darkening times, having the fortune to cross paths with its future." The grey-eyed stranger gave her a studious look. "This is no talisman, but a piece of history. Guard it well, for only six left the walls of Minas Tirith many, many years ago. That one has found its way to you is rare indeed."

Fréalas nodded. She looked at the disc with its stars and unreadable symbols, then back up at the tall foreigner.

"You look like one who would find more satisfaction answering the innards of this riddle by her own merit rather than being told the answer unbidden. This much will I tell you: the letters are in Tengwar, and say 'Steward.' Your ancestors are woven into its tale." He stood in expectant silence, while Fréalas tried desperately to formulate a question, or sentence, or anything.

"I will find out what I am able -" she tried to remember what he had said his name was. "Long-walker? That isn't really your name anyway, is it?" It was obvious that wherever he came from, he wasn't of the elite of Gondor, nor of her kind. Neither was he Elf-kind, at least by looks; not that she had actually seen any of them herself, but she couldn't believe that any of those ancient ones would be so...dirty.

He crouched down to be closer to her eye level, and gave her a searching look. "I am known by many names, and I am needed elsewhere at present." With that, he rose, and turned to head back into the Firien Woods. After a few steps, he stopped, and rounded to face her. "If I happen to find myself near the Mering Stream again and see a red haired maid of Rohan, how should I call her?"

Fréalas looked at the figure, already disappearing into the forest, his garb blending into the shadows of the trees. "I am Fréalas, daughter of Fréawyn, Long-walker." Looking down, she realized that she was still holding her bow and arrow, her sweaty palms allowing it to slide to the end of the shaft. "I hope that if we do meet again, my bowmanship will be that worthy of our people." She looked into the gloom of the woods. "Should I call you Long-walker?" It was almost as though someone else had asked that question. Where was her brother? Where was anybody?

"I will answer to that."

And then she was alone again, with more sweat on her brow and above her lips to be wiped off with

the back of her hand. Holding her stone with even more reverence than she had prior to this unexpected meeting, Fréalas ran to rescue her misaimed arrows, then back to her house and ask her mother about what the word Steward and stars on a rock had to do with her past.

Author's Notes:

The inspiration for this story comes from three sentences in the story "Cirion and Eorl" found in *Unfinished Tales*. "He [Cirion] called for volunteers, and choosing six riders of great courage and endurance he sent them out in pairs with a day's interval between them. Each bore a message learned by heart, and **also a small stone incised with the seal of the Stewards**, that he should deliver to the Lord of the Éothéod in person, if he succeeded in reaching that land...The first pair of messengers left on the tenth day of Súlimë [March]; and in the event it was **one of these, alone of all the six**, who got through to the Éothéod." (emphasis mine) The appendix indicates that there were 3 letters, R ND R spelling *arandur*, or Steward.

I thought it would be fun for an ordinary child to find this unique piece of history, which would be very nearly 500 years old since the story is set in the year 3001. The grey-eyed stranger, well-travelled and knowing so much of the history of Gondor is, of course, Aragorn.

Anglo-Saxon words:

fréa= joyful

frith= peace

halm= helm

gearnschrúd= yarn-cloak, or sweater (jumper)

ly' tling = infant, child

dréam= joy, happiness

swánsteorra= swan-star

2. Sycldesweoster

Edoras
Summer, 3004

The two figures sat on the edge of the river, watching the waters rush over their tan feet and toes, the result of a summer of going barefoot when at all possible. Upstream their horses were busy drinking, their tails swishing in tandem at the ever-present flies disturbing their mission of refreshment.

"Goodness, Léoma and Salupád are thirsty!"

Fréalas tried to ignite another conversation, but her blonde companion remained silent. Shielding her eyes from the sunlight, Fréalas looked to the east, where they had gone out earlier that day to join some of the other children of Edoras for their almost-daily swordfighting and archery lessons. There was a dark cloud heading toward them, she noted, and she hoped that it would bring much needed rain and a temporary respite from the dry winds of late summer.

In the two years since Éomund and his ill-fated group of riders had been so untimely killed by Orcs, the people of Rohan, those in Edoras in particular, had increased night-time security and encouraged all in the Mark to keep a wary eye to their borders. A side effect of this included more rigorous instruction in self-defense and fighting skills among the youth of the Rohirrim, much to their annoyance during the heat of summer.

"Éowyn?" Fréalas looked over at her young friend, for friend she was, even if she was of the royal family and this made her different, somehow.

"Yes?" The blonde girl turned her head to speak. "Sorry- just thinking of all the mistakes I made today. I really need to get more control over how I hold my bow. The arrows never seem to land where I have aimed them!"

Fréalas chuckled ruefully. It had been a trying road for her as well, the skills of fighting not coming naturally to her, not like learning to decipher runes and scripts that were available, or how to read the patterns of the stars that shone so brightly above the plains. *But I am coming along, she thought, now that I'm getting some height. Swinging a sword is a little easier when one isn't so close to the ground.*

"I wouldn't worry about it," she said aloud. "You're only nine yet, and even the twins Staenwine and Staentwylas can barely keep from hitting each other with their arrows. It is especially a challenge when there is sweat in your eyes, and sweat on your hands,"

"Yes, I know," Éowyn interrupted. "But I *need* to learn. I feel that I *must* be prepared for... for the worst."

She hung her head, and wriggled her toes, disturbing a small school of tiny bluefish that had clustered around the two girls' feet.

Fréalas stared at her own feet, almost shocked by how brown they were, since the rest of her seemed only to be covered in freckles. She didn't know what to say. How did you console somebody who had lost not one, which would be terrible enough, but both parents? In the same year at that? Fréalas had known her for several years, as Éowyn and her mother Théodwyn had spent many summers at the Eastfold homestead. Éowyn's father, Éomund, was from the same part of Rohan as Fréalas, so when he and others in the Mark went out on extended patrols of the land, the elegant sister of King Théoden and her two tow-headed children would stay in the homestead near the Firien Woods for weeks on end. Upon the safe return of the Marshal of the Mark, the skilled defender of Rohan would pack up his family and return to their home in Edoras.

Until that fateful day. It had taken several hours for the tragic news to travel from the royal city down southeast to the Rohirrim who lived by the Mering Stream. The messenger had blown a horn to call everyone in the settlement together before announcing the sombre news. He encouraged everyone on behalf of Théoden King to be even more vigilant, if that were possible. Nobody knew why, but the Orcs were becoming more numerous, and brazen. That was enough to convince Fréawyn, Fréalas' mother, to move her family to Edoras, though her strong-willed daughter had hated every step her horse made away from their homestead on the edge of the forest.

Fréalas looked up from the river again at the sky. "Éowyn," she said, looking at the approaching storm clouds, "even if you had been there, there was nothing you could have done."

She immediately wished she hadn't said anything. *Stupid!* she thought. *Why can't you just keep your mouth shut, unless you have something helpful to say?*

"I know!" Éowyn replied, angrily. "But I *won't* be killed by Orcs. Never!" Her granite grey eyes blazed with hatred. "Nobody will take something away from me that I love, ever again. I will protect myself. And Éomer."

Fréalas quickly suppressed the darkly humorous thought of little Éowyn, so earnest, and yet still just a child, defending her older brother, who at age thirteen was already a good head taller than most other children his age. *It's not funny, she thought. You would have said the same thing if someone was attacking Frithlíc, even though he is ungrateful, irritating, slovenly...* She forced herself not to continue down that path. It was already too well-trodden in her mind.

She reached over and took Éowyn's hand in hers, prying open the fingers that had balled up in a fist during her explosion of heated words. "I will protect you, if you will allow me." Fréalas intertwined their fingers, and held them in her lap. "I am by no means the greatest warrior in all of Rohan, it is true, but I promise you that I will learn all that I can to be by your side."

Éowyn looked keenly at her face, her expression a curious mixture of defiance and desperation.

"My mother has told me tales of long ago, when women fought side by side with men, and the women all looked out for each other. Sometimes if a girl lost her parents, someone would pledge to look out for her especially, even if they didn't take her into their house. That person who did the protecting was

called a *syeldesweoster*, a 'shield-sister.'"

"A *syeldesweoster*." Éowyn repeated the old unfamiliar Rohirric word, then smiled. "You want to do that for me?"

Fréalas nodded.

"Yes, I'd like that. But I will get better at archery so that I can protect myself!" Éowyn said stubbornly. She looked down again at her feet, now getting somewhat wrinkled from their extended time in the river. In a quiet voice she continued, "I always did want an older sister."

As the two girls looked at the waters, they became aware of occasional tiny dots that quickly turned into outwardly circling rings.

"Ai!" Fréalas started out of the quiet moment, releasing the grubby but endearing hand she had been holding. "Rain!"

Standing, she turned and leaned down toward her friend, arms held out. Éowyn's formerly tightly-braided hair was now a mess, sprigs of grass intertwined with the plaits, a reminder of the occasional tumbles she had taken during the day's exercises.

"Well, get up then!" Fréalas said, hands ready to assist her comrade up from the riverside and back to the horses.

Éowyn looked up, and a grin as radiant as the sun in the dark of winter unexpectedly bloomed across her face.

"Rain!" she exclaimed, as though she personally had asked the sky for such a thing and, without question, it had complied. "Come... let us have a rain dance!"

Even as she spoke the words, the clouds appeared to oblige, and sheets of rain came pouring down to accompany the bass booms of thunder that now echoed across the plain. Their horses were silent, but in the repeated tossing of their heads, their uncomfortable displeasure was more than apparent. Éowyn turned her face upward, mouth wide open, tongue up, catching as many stray drops that happened to land on her upturned lips as possible, the picture of contentment despite the storm.

"Éowyn, the lightning! We shouldn't stay here! The horses!" Fréalas guided her companion up and away from the riverbank, pulling her toward the city. *At least the horses agree with me!* she thought sullenly, wondering just how much like a drowned mouse she must look, until Éowyn took her insistently by the hand.

"Come now, the storm still has a ways to get to us," said the sodden child, her muslin dress stuck to her like honey on bread. With a look of rapture in her eyes, she continued, "So you like the stars- I like the fights of cloud and rain." Éowyn sashayed through the wet grass, Fréalas reluctantly in tow. "You can't say that it doesn't feel good, the wet ground beneath your feet?"

Fréalas hated to admit it at that moment, but truly it was pleasant. Éowyn ran ahead a few paces, then slowly began spinning, her left side leading, then faster and faster, spiralling in her own vortex of sudden joy. The resignation in Fréalas dissipated, and she began to circle as well, but to her right, a larger circle of outspread freckled arms, her skirt tending outwards despite being made heavier by the rain soaking her through. By the river there were now two outwardly turning circles of girls, self-contained whirlpools in a great grassy sea.

Their pace grew faster, dizzying almost, spinning and spinning until the inevitable. Fréalas, quite disoriented in all of the turning, lurched sideways into the increasing mud, stopping the fall with her hands. Once she caught her breath, she called to Éowyn, "We had better go back now, honestly! Where are the horses? We are lucky not to be struck by lightning, or worse." She tried to look serious as she patted the mud off of her hands on her shirt and skirt, wringing out the hem as she did.

She looked at Éowyn, still circling, now in a slower pattern, unheeding this entreaty to safety. Fréalas was moved to pity at seeing the unfettered joy on the younger girl's face. It was an expression she had worn far more often during her visits to the Eastfold, back before many tracks of tears had transformed her pale visage into its more common stoic expression. Memories assaulted Fréalas: A face shining with happiness, sticky fig preserves around her mouth, Éowyn's first exposure to the sweet fruit. The little blonde child, standing still as a statue in a frock of scarlet, surrounded by colourful butterflies alighting on her hair and shoulders amid flowers in the garden. Unbidden, such memories jumped to the forefront of Fréalas' mind, her mood turning to a bittersweet melancholy.

Fréalas stepped the few paces to reach her spinning friend, and slowed her to a stop, placing her hands on the girl's shoulders. The two horses, which had been quiet during the first thunder rumblings, were now making anxious, sharp whinnies, a sure sign that it was time to go back over the Snowbourne to Edoras.

"I know you love storms," Fréalas said, pleadingly, "But couldn't we watch the jousting of the clouds from inside, where it is drier?"

Resigned, Éowyn shrugged, and turning, walked upstream toward their horses. Fréalas followed, noting how delicate the younger girl seemed, her dress stuck to her arms and legs with the weight of the rain. *It isn't fair*, she thought, *that somebody that young should carry so heavy a burden as being without her parents, the only girl in that big stone house.* They got on their horses in silence, and crossing the river, made their way past the barrow-mounds to the gate of the city. *But she isn't really alone*, Fréalas chided herself. *She has Éomer to watch over her, and the King himself has taken her under his wing. And did you not just pledge yourself to be her protector as well?*

The horses knew their way and trotted resolutely back in the direction of their warm and dry stables. They made muffled clip-clops as they traversed the main road, side by side, until Fréalas turned to go to her house, down the west side from the Golden Hall.

"You will be sure to dry Leóma off properly?" Fréalas asked, knowing full well that her friend would hand the horse over to someone in the royal stables so she could rush to her room and watch the summer skies play out their battles of lightning and rain.

"I will." Éowyn smiled, pausing to wipe the rain off of her face and pull her braids back over her shoulders. "Thank you for the rain dance, my *scyldesweoster*." Then she hastened her speed and continued up the road to Meduseld.

Fréalas turned Salupád down the muddy road, hanging her head in advance of the lecture she would soon receive from her mother about being out on the plains in a thunderstorm. And Frithlíc... she was sure that he would have no shortage of commentary on how she needed to handle her sword. He now appeared to be the apple of the eye of Guthig, the swordmaster who was leading instruction on the intricacies of fighting. She sighed, and patted Salupád's neck. "Almost home," she murmured, trying to counter the horse's nervousness as they walked past the many thatched-roof homes, smiling as she saw the occasional infant playing in the mud, enjoying the summer shower.

Léoma= lightning
Salupád= dark-coated
scyldesweoster= "shield-sister"
Staenwine= stone-friend, builder
Staentwylas= stone-two (twin)

3. The Company of Strangers

Edoras valley
June, 3009

Éomer and Fréalas rode their horses, cantering side by side, then split up to guide the straggling

sheep toward their destination in an awaiting pen. It was early summer, and time for the sheep to be sheared. This was Fréalas' favourite time of the year, after the lambs had been born and could be seen playing with each other, then running to be with their mothers. Their legs, unsteady at first, became stronger as they moved around the valley, indulging in the plentiful grass that was found there. Éomer would have been hard-pressed to admit it, but this was his favourite time of year as well. While Éomer was the nephew of the King and not his heir, he had still been encouraged by Théoden and Théodred to learn as much as he could about everything, for Rohan was a vast land with many responsibilities. Of course, swordsmanship and the love and knowledge of horses were as integral to life of all the Rohirrim as was the air they breathed, whether they resided on the plains or nestled in the foothills of the White Mountains. There was also animal husbandry and crops to be grown, and people in authority needed to oversee these enterprises.

Éomer had found to his surprise and satisfaction that he had an affinity and understanding about the care and management of sheep in particular. Though he was still young, his skill at sheep shearing was well known and appreciated by the nearby herders. The royal family of Rohan had its own stables near Meduseld, but their crops and sheep were outside of the gates a short ride away at a nearby settlement. He looked forward to this time each year when he would go to the shearers' shed and deftly wielding his sharp blades, assist with clipping the hogget wool from the first shearing of the sheep.

As Éomer and Fréalas and their well-trained horses manoeuvred the last of the shaggy-coated creatures into the pen, they saw Éowyn. Her horse Léoma was a distance away, contentedly eating some grass near the horses of the resident herder's family. She was practicing a sword exercise, a look of focused attention on her face. Éomer was almost upon her before she noticed him. "You have returned!" she exclaimed, lowering her weapon as he pulled up Firefoot. "About time, too."

"The time and the task would go faster if you would only help, you know," was her elder brother's tart reply. "You should be learning how to manage a farm, as well. What if there is a war and all the men are gone? How will you be able to lead the citizenry through the year when you can barely tell a ram from a ewe, much less a gimmer from a shearing?"

Leaning on her sword, Éowyn's eyes flashed with anger. "I will not be left behind if there is war in Rohan. I shall go and fight, as well. That is where my skills lie and you know it."

On the far side of the paddock, Fréalas closed the gate. As she approached, she heard the tail end of this familiar heated exchange, the topic having arisen several times before. As she dismounted from Salupád she racked her brain for a way to diffuse the situation.

"Fréalas, you tell him!" Éowyn wheeled around in the direction of her friend. "The King has advisors and counsellors that would fulfil their duties in his place, were he needed in a war. And who is to say I would not find a helm and join the Riders?"

Éomer shook his head while rolling his eyes.

"Now Éowyn," Fréalas said in placating tone, "you both have a point. As a potential ruler, it would behove you to know how to manage a farm as well as how to kill an orc, and your talents in that department and all fighting arts would indeed be valued if we were attacked. But you should also know how to settle disputes, and converse with people from nearby countries. We are not an island, and have alliances with Gondor that we may one day be called upon to honour."

Éowyn sheathed her sword, then said accusingly, "You are taking his side! Besides, since when do you care so much about allegiances and ruling?"

Fréalas sighed, and smiled. "Only since you and Éomer have insisted on arguing about it for the past few weeks." She put her arm around Éowyn's shoulder and pulled her to her side. "It has gotten a bit dull listening to the same conversations again and again. Maybe you could pay more attention to the sheep while we are here."

"Why do you care so much about the silly sheep?"

They had begun to walk toward Salupád but Fréalas stopped. "First of all," she said, losing her patience, "they are not silly. We could not make our clothes without the sheep wool. To be honest, I am fond of them because they remind me of my early childhood down by the Firien Woods."

Éowyn looked up into the face of her friend who was almost a head taller than herself at this point. The recent growth spurt meant that Fréalas was almost as tall as her eighteen year old brother, Frithlíc, but Éomer still towered over all of them having come into his height and wide shoulders even earlier. "Why do you not prefer living here in Edoras?" she asked.

Before Fréalas could answer, Éomer, who had been making a last circle around the sheep pen, called to them, "Two people are approaching and they are not on horseback! Take your horses and stay out of sight until I find out who these strangers are."

While Éomer leapt onto Firefoot and galloped out to the strange pair, Éowyn and Fréalas ran to their horses and led them to the nearby stables, putting each horse in a stall and then going to stand to look out from one of the windows that faced the direction of the visitors. Fréalas was not necessarily frightened, as it was obviously not an orc party, but she had not seen many people who were not of Rohan. A few folk of Gondor would come to visit the city of Meduseld from time to time, but Gondorians came up from the south, and these people were walking down from the north. *Walking?*

"I cannot imagine travelling on foot," Éowyn said incredulously, and Fréalas stared at her.

"Have you learned the craft of reading minds?" Fréalas asked. "I was just thinking that."

Éowyn raised an eyebrow. "Now there is a skill that would be useful in being a ruler!" She shook her head. "Fréalas, I want to be a warrior, not a queen. Let Éomer be the diplomat and take everything so seriously. Let my name be sung in songs of great battles."

Fréalas was stunned to hear such words out of one so young, but she knew that her friend meant every word of it. "Surely you do not wish for war for war's sake?"

Just then Éomer rode up to them, his expression both of incredulity and purpose. "I must ride ahead and tell Théoden King that there will be two visitors with us tonight, possibly a third. If you would care to join them during part of their walk to Edoras I think you would be welcome."

"Who are they?" Éowyn could barely contain her curiosity.

"One is the wizard Gandalf, though you have heard our uncle call him Gandalf Greyhame. He has been here to visit before, though it was before we were born."

"A wizard! What does he look like?"

"And the other is an Elf." Éomer shook his head, almost as though he didn't believe it himself, and as though he had not heard his sister's question.

"An Elf?" Fréalas was in shock. These were unexpected guests indeed, and she wondered what it could mean that such exotic visitors were coming to Edoras.

Éomer had turned to go when Éowyn exclaimed, "Wait! You said maybe three guests! Who and where is the third?"

He turned Firefoot back around and said, "A man of the North who has been here before, but long ago. He is taking a different route from Gandalf and Hithuldir, and may be at Edoras by nightfall, but that is not certain." Digging his heels into his horse, Éomer galloped away, leaving a small dust cloud behind him.

The two girls retrieved their horses, mounted them, and rode out to these mysterious travellers on foot. "What do you suppose an Elf looks like?" Éowyn asked, as though her friend had an answer.

"People say that they can hide even in broad daylight, and that they are fair to look upon, but I do not know," Fréalas replied. "What an exciting day! An Elf and a Wizard! And we are to accompany them!"

"This is better than spending time with smelly old sheep," Éowyn retorted, but her face was set in a smile and Fréalas knew that she was only making fun.

The two travellers were getting closer, and then seemingly all at once Éowyn and Fréalas were upon them. The visitors were both of tall stature. One wore a tall pointy blue hat and used a walking stick, and the other had a grey-green cloak that billowed in the wind and long, almost black hair that stopped below his shoulder blades. The walkers both stopped as the two youths pulled up their horses, then dismounted. For a few uncomfortable moments it was almost silent except for the swish of horse's tails and their occasional snort.

"Well!" The man with the staff and long grey hair smiled at them, obviously bemused by his greeting party. "You of the golden hair," he looked at Éowyn, "must be the niece of King Théoden. Your brother Éomer was kind enough to meet us and offer up your company for part of our remaining walk to Edoras so that he could ride ahead and alert the King."

Éowyn nodded her head, fascinated by his twinkling eyes, his tall hat, and his aura of knowledge and distance and great events of the world. "Are you Gandalf?" she asked suddenly, any sense of decorum lost in the excitement of meeting these two foreigners.

The wizard nodded. "I am known by many names, and that is a fine one for you to use. But you have not told me who your companion is!" He leaned his head toward Fréalas, who blushed brightly, making the smattering of freckles across her face stand out even more. "I would be remiss to travel with someone whose name I did not know."

"My name is Fréalas, daughter of Fréawyn," she said, and while the answer was directed to Gandalf, she found herself unable to tear her eyes away from the Elf-man. His eyes were the strangest color she had ever seen, a cornflower blue that in the light appeared almost violet. And his skin! White as Fréalas had seen only in a pearl pendant her mother usually kept hidden, the small orb seeming to contain its own inner luminous glow. His ears came to a point at the top with a tiny delicate braid traversing from above his ear down his back. She knew she was staring, and she hated herself for appearing so boorish and provincial, but nothing could have prepared her for this face to face meeting with a creature - a person- so unlike herself, out of stories told to children, and yet apparently not a legend at all.

The Elf bowed his head to both of the Rohirrim. "My name is Hîthuldir," he said in halting Rohirric, yet to Fréalas' ears it sounded like water merrily traipsing over rocks. "Do you mind if we use the Common Tongue? I know but a few words in your horse-language."

Éowyn and Fréalas both nodded their heads, since everyone in Edoras was now required to learn the common speech in addition to their native language. They did not use it very often, but they could have a conversation in it well enough.

"Shall we continue on?" Gandalf began to converse in Westron as well, and the two Rohirric youths answered in the affirmative. Fréalas did so after attempting a curtsy of sorts to both of the exotic visitors, though she guiltily realized that she had spent more time slightly bent toward Hîthuldir so that she could start at his brown, leather-looking shoes and absorb as much detail in his clothes and person as possible for a later conversation with her mother.

"Will you ride your noble steeds or accompany us on foot?" asked the Elf.

"It would be rude for us to ride if you do not also have horses, and we are happy to walk with such esteemed friends of Rohan," Éowyn replied.

As the small convoy continued down the road, Fréalas burned with questions she felt would be too rude to ask. *Where had they come from? Why were they in Rohan? Did the wizard really do magic?*

Did the Elf have a wife and children? Was his hair as silky to the touch as it looked, shining even though there was not much sun?

"You may wonder why we are here, and why it is that we seek the counsel of King Théoden," Gandalf spoke, his voice a resonant baritone. Fréalas, for the second time that day, suffered the discomfort of feeling that her mind was being read by another. "My two companions and I are in search of someone, and while he is not dangerous, we would like to find him as quickly as possible. But he is a crafty figure, and has eluded us so far."

"Two companions?" asked Éowyn. "Éomer said that there might be another tonight. This person must be important if it takes three of you to track him!" she spoke excitedly.

Underneath his white bushy eyebrows, Gandalf's eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled. "The house of Eorl is still a brave line, I see," he said, as he fished around for something in his pack.

Fréalas turned to the Elf, unable to keep quiet any longer. "Are you finding this person too?" she queried, allowing herself to turn and look at his face, though she had to tilt her head somewhat as he was quite tall compared to her, especially now that she was on foot and no longer riding Salupád.

"Only for this journey from Lórien to Edoras," he replied in his melodious voice. "I am accompanying Gandalf and Aragorn but primarily my business is to tell your King of the increasing belligerence and numbers of orcs on our borders, and to advise him to be especially wary. The dark powers of the South appear to be growing, and while the King of the Horseslords is perfectly fit to rule his lands alone, the Lord and Lady of the Wood felt it not inappropriate for me to make him aware of this increasing peril if he knew it not."

Fréalas heard only about one word in four that he spoke. She was simply captivated by his face and movements that were unearthly in their elegance and poise, despite the earthly weight of his pack and quiver of indeterminate grey material and large bow that was strapped across it. *So masculine, she mused longingly, yet with such beautiful eyes! His lashes! And he does not have a beard! How did I not notice that before? How old is he? Do all Elves look like him? What is it like to live forever? Does he sing? He must have a most beautiful voice...*

Her inner monologue of questions chattered away until she noticed with a start that a small white ship of mist had drifted between her and Hîthuldir. She blanched as she watched it, the wind slowly carrying it away until it vanished. Turning her eyes up to the Elf, she opened her mouth to ask if he had seen what she had when another shape meandered over her head, this time in the shape of a bird. Fréalas clamped her lips shut as the Elf cocked one eyebrow at her, a hint of a smile revealed in the upturning of one corner of his mouth. She quickly turned her head forward again, and then it became clear: Gandalf was smoking! A very long pipe was in his hand and he was puffing on it contentedly, speaking with Éowyn a few paces in front of her.

"You appear to have much on your mind, maid of Rohan," Hîthuldir said, watching as a blush began at the base of Fréalas' neck and crept upwards to settle in her cheeks. "I stopped speaking some moments ago, and yet you have not had anything to say in reply."

Fréalas carefully began to inspect the rocky ground on their path, fervently wishing that she was not so transparent to everyone that day, and desperate to be seen as clever and witty, not the dolt that she was sure she appeared to be.

"Do you perhaps have some questions you would care to ask? I am under the impression that you have never seen any of my kind before. Please do not be embarrassed." At this Fréalas raised her head hopefully to gaze at him again. "We Elves do tend in these later days to stay among ourselves. Ask what you will."

After swallowing, then watching a rather large smoke ring float overhead, Fréalas asked the first thing that came out of the swirling eddy of questions in her mind.

"Do Elves really live in trees?" The lyrics of a song sung to her from her early childhood had tugged at

her memory as soon as the word Elf had been uttered from Éomer's mouth, and of all the questions she wished to ask, this one spilled forth.

It might have been a look of surprise on Hîthuldir's face that Fréalas saw, but she could not be sure given his slightly alien, though beautiful appearance. "We do not spend all of our time in trees, no, though we do sleep and have some guard-posts and residences above ground in the mallorns that are in Lórien. Our Elvish kin in distant lands to the north and west do not do so, but we of the Golden Wood do have decorated platforms in the trees that we call telain."

"What is a mallorn?" Fréalas asked, her curiosity piqued now more than ever. *They did live in trees!* "Do they grow in Rohan?"

Hîthuldir smiled so widely that his teeth showed, and the sixteen year old knew absolutely that her heart had stopped beating for a moment.

"A mallorn is a type of tree, but I am almost certain that they do not grow on your grassy plains. They came to Beleriand from Númenor and are the most beautiful of trees to our eyes. Their leaves are silver in spring and summer then turn to gold in autumn and winter." The Elf tilted his head and looked at her for a moment. "Do you mind if I ask you a question before we approach the gates of your city?"

Fréalas looked ahead and saw to her dismay that indeed their group was much closer to Edoras than she had hoped, given the Elf's company. "Of course," she replied, unable to fathom what he could possibly not know, being immortal and so wise.

Hîthuldir reached out his hand and lifted up a curled tendril of her hair from her shoulder. "Are there many of your people with hair the color of the sunset? It is highly unusual among Elf-kind, but perhaps it is more common among your people on the sea-like grasses of your lands."

Fréalas was still in shock that his finger had lightly brushed her shoulder, but she managed to come to her senses enough to answer. "No, most people have hair in shades of gold, or brown, but my brother also has red hair. Our mother is said to be distantly related to some wandering but noble folk in the North, and that reddish hair was less rare among their line." She found that with the hand not holding Salupád's reins, she was now fidgeting with her hair, suddenly under the scrutiny of the violet eyes of Hîthuldir. "Truthfully," she said, looking back at the Elf, "I would prefer to have gold hair like Éowyn's. But I do not think about it that often anymore."

Hîthuldir gave her a searching look, then in his melodious voice said, "I say truthfully to you that your fire-locks are a gift, one just as much as I consider having met you."

Fréalas focused on breathing to ensure that she was still doing so. *He was glad to have met her?*

The group was now walking past the barrow-mounds outside the walls of Edoras, and Fréalas could hear as though from a far distance away Éowyn explaining the lines of the house of Eorl to Gandalf. She was speaking animatedly as the wizard continued to smoke his pipe. Hîthuldir excused himself to Fréalas and quickened his pace to tap Gandalf on his shoulder. They conferred for a moment while continuing to walk through the gates and on the main causeway to Meduseld, then the Elf slowed for Fréalas to draw up beside him.

The inhabitants of Edoras who happened to be out in the streets stopped what they were doing to gape at the small entourage making their way up to the Golden Hall. Elves and wizards were rare visitors indeed, and soon there was a gaggle of children clustered near the road, elbowing each other and speaking excitedly among themselves.

Fréalas patted Salupád on her brown neck and stopped, the horse beginning to pull its owner toward their house down a nearby path. "I suppose I should go home," she said wistfully, then turned and made a curtsying motion to the Elf and Gandalf. "It has been a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. Éowyn, you will find me sometime tomorrow, will you not?"

"Yes," Éowyn replied. "The sheep will not shear themselves, will they?"

Fréalas chose to ignore the sarcasm in that sentence. Gandalf put his hand to the brim of his hat and nodded to her. "Farewell, maid of Rohan," he said. "Perhaps my travels will bring me back to these lands and I shall see you and Éowyn again. Now however," he said as he stowed his pipe and reshouldered his pack, "we need to continue on and make our greetings to the King."

Hîthuldir bowed his head. "My business with Théoden also awaits. In my language I would say to you *namárië*. I wish you well."

Fréalas had a fleeting and fanciful thought of rushing to him and grabbing him around the waist and begging him not to leave. She needed days, weeks to spend with him, to learn about this Golden Wood with magic trees, to see the telain, to... an unbidden vision of kissing his soft lips flashed before her, and she knew that she must squelch that image immediately before her face betrayed any more of those hidden desires. "Good-bye Hîthuldir," she spoke softly. "I would be honoured to see your forest of gold one day, though I fear that shall never be."

He smiled, and to Fréalas' great delight, he took her hand and clasped it within both of his as he said again, "Namárië." Then he released her and strode up the path with Éowyn and Gandalf.

Fréalas remained, standing still among the other staring citizens of Edoras, watching his graceful steps, his dark hair streaming behind him.

Light danced on whorls and plaits of the carved stone columns, the flames from the torches lining the walls providing a gentle glow on the assembled group. Théoden sat at the head of the heavy table, his son Théodred at his right, Éomer at his left. Gandalf and Hîthuldir sat across from one another, all drinking a stout ale except for the Elf, who preferred the lighter mead also brewed by the Rohirrim. Éowyn had been sent away from the Golden Hall after dinner, and her displeasure had been obvious. She was not, however, so young as to talk back to her uncle in front of these visitors, though she wished desperately that she could have stayed. Receiving a good-night kiss on the forehead from Théoden was no consolation.

"So!" the King began, his commanding voice aimed at Gandalf. "It is always a pleasure to see you, wandering friend, but I sense that you are not here simply to pay a social call." With bright summer-sky blue eyes he glanced keenly at the wizard down the table, who was again smoking his long pipe, albeit with less ostentatious smoke rings than earlier in the day. "What brings you to Rohan?"

Gandalf gazed back from under bushy white eyebrows and replied, "There is a creature that one of the Dúnedain and I seek. He is not loyal to the dark forces of Sauron, but he was held captive in Mordor."

Éomer leaned in, cupping his chin in his hand, two fingers stroking his coppery beard.

Théodred looked disbelievingly at Gandalf. "And this person escaped? Why do you think he would be found in our land?"

"I did not say that I think we will find the creature in your land," Gandalf tartly replied. "I only said that we are looking for him and he may have passed this way." After issuing a smoke ring which floated somewhat suspiciously toward Théodred, he continued, "I must admit that we have lost his trail." Gandalf shook his head slowly. "In truth, this is more of a social call, for I have not been to your fair city in many years, and the hospitality of Théoden's house is welcome indeed as we journey to the South."

Théoden raised his chalice a short distance from the table and nodded in appreciation of the compliment.

"You are a gracious host, caretaker of the *mearas*." Hîthuldir raised his glass as well. "It is exceedingly rare that our people trouble you, and I wish that my news were more pleasant. The foul *yrchs*," here

the Elf accidentally slipped in his native tongue for a moment, "have become much more numerous and we must keep ever more patrols out on the borders of our woods. Our most beloved Lady has been troubled about dark powers growing in the South, and this was borne out with the news that Mithrandir brought to us."

"Beloved Lady? Sorceress more like," Éomer muttered under his breath, leaning back into his chair and crossing his arms across his chest. Théoden gave him a sharp glare, but Hîthuldir appeared not to hear the comment.

"Yes, we are well aware of the menace of orcs, and even in olden times our people were called on for assistance, not the other way around." A defensive note could be heard in the King's voice.

"I did not come here to offer assistance, Théoden of Rohan," Hîthuldir calmly replied. "That the Lady sees evil webs being spun that may affect you is the only message I have to bear. What you choose to do with that news is, of course, up to you as King."

A sound almost like a snort came from Éomer's direction but quickly became a cough as he took a mouthful of ale.

"Most Elves prefer to remain among their own kind, especially those of Lórien," Gandalf spoke up after a small swan-formed ring wafted over Éomer's chair. "Hîthuldir is uncommon in that he wished to accompany me to see a bit more... adventure."

Dark hair flowed across his back as Hîthuldir turned his head toward the wizard, then seeing the obvious mirth on Gandalf's face, he gracefully shrugged his shoulders. "Of course I have been to this region before, but it would have been many lifetimes ago for your kind. The mallorns of Lórien are the fairest things to behold on all of this earth, but your grassy plains are lovely in their own way."

Théoden could see that his nephew was contemplating what would probably be a diplomatically incorrect comment and spoke instead. "We are grateful for your news, Hîthuldir of Dwimordene. We shall, as always, be ready to protect our people. Gandalf, you have not given us many clues as to who it is that you search, and from this I take it that none are forthcoming. Still, you both are welcome to lodgings here in Meduseld for the night. Théodred, will you show them to their rooms?"

There was a sound of chairs scuffing the floor as all at the table stood. "Thank you for a most pleasant evening, King Théoden," the Elf said, bowing his head and gesturing over the table.

Gandalf tapped out his pipe, and with a smile aimed at Éomer, said, "Yes, a most pleasant and tactful evening." Looking at Théoden, he continued, "Éowyn is a most compelling young woman. Charming, intelligent and quite handy with a sword if what I hear is true."

The King nodded in the affirmative, then said, "While we have suffered much in the loss of Elfhild, Théodwyn and Éomund, I am fortunate indeed to have Théodred, Éomer and Éowyn in my household. The line of Eorl is a thriving one."

Hîthuldir soundlessly followed Théodred, Gandalf finishing out the small group, his long robes dragging on the stone floor. As they crossed the room, Théodred's question to the Elf carried over to the King and Éomer. "Pardon my ignorance of your kind, but tales are told that Elves live in trees. Is this indeed true?"

Théoden could have sworn he heard a sigh, but then the entourage had moved beyond the Golden Hall.

Hîthuldir= mist/fog - man; 'Man of the Mist' (Sindarin)
gimmer= female sheep that has been sheared once but not twice
shearing= male sheep that has been sheared once but not twice

4. Spin the Bottle

Edoras
Wintergamen, 3010

Pulling her *wimpegearn* closer around herself, the slender figure took a last furtive glance over her shoulder at the light emanating from Meduseld, her breath hanging in frosty clouds before her face. Éowyn ran quietly around the side of the building, back to the thatched roof structure that was the home of the royal steeds of Rohan. She felt her way toward the back of the stables, thankful that she knew the labyrinthine corridors of stalls like the back of her hand, since she had not brought a light with her. The noise of occasional quiet laughter and "Hush, now!" reached her ears, and she knew that she was in the right place. Earlier that evening, during the city-wide celebrations of Wintergamen, the small circle of friends had agreed to meet in the least likely place to be found by adults on this night of revelry: the royal stables. As she rounded the last corner, her eyes mostly adjusted to the dark, she saw a group sitting on the ground. Several were leaning against the walls with the omnipresent hay pushed into little piles, out of the way of the focus of the group: a lone green bottle, standing upright on the floor.

There was a rustle of activity as the group of Rohirric youths noticed the new visitor.

"Ah, Éowyn!" said a voice. She turned. It was her friend, Fréalas, her face illuminated in the light of the small candle that one of the more thoughtful adolescents had thought to bring with him.

"We thought maybe your uncle Théoden was going to make you stay for yet another song!" said Héalwine, scooting to the right to make room for the last guest.

Smiling, Éowyn sat down, looking at the other faces in the flickering light. *Well, she thought, the odds are in our favour, with so many boys...* she corrected her thought. *So many young men here in Edoras. Maybe that bodes well for Fréalas and Meagolwyn and myself...* Glancing over at her brother, she saw that he was otherwise busy with the unopened flask of wine that had been liberated from its intended place at the feasting-table in the Golden Hall. A somewhat shaggy-haired youth was, with Éomer's assistance, trying to use his small knife to pry off the top.

"So, Swaeser," Éowyn spoke, a mischievous gleam in her eye from the mead that she had imbibed not long ago, "I see that the skills of your hands have not been exaggerated!" She tried to suppress her mirth, but all was for naught on this night of festivity. Instead, after a small choke, she laughed out loud, much to the discomfort of the nearby horses, who began moving around and tossing their proud heads back and forth.

Fréalas tilted her head and gave her friend an appraising look. She, too, had been privy to some of the mead that poured freely during the midwinter's celebrations. Even without the slightly fuzzy sheen to the events before her eyes, she was grateful to see that Éowyn was genuinely happy, her cares and burdens seemingly forgotten for the time being.

A coughing sound came from a quiet figure seated in a dark corner of the stable, and several pairs of eyes swung in that direction.

"I say," said the voice. "Let's establish some rules." The long-limbed body that went with the sounds uncurled from the shadows into the light.

"Frithlíc, must you be so dramatic?" Closing her eyes, Fréalas sighed, audibly. "Rules are fine and good as long as they include one that means I do not have to kiss you." She leaned over to ascertain how Éomer and Swaeser were doing in their struggle to free the wine from its container.

"Ai! Success!" Swaeser put the newly-opened flask to his lips. "To Wintergamen!" He passed it to Éomer, half-sprawled on the hay, who took a swig, then handed it over pointedly to Fréalas. She took it in her hands and, raising it up, drank as well. After swallowing the fragrant and somewhat illicit red wine, she used the back of her left hand to wipe her mouth, then handed the container over to Éowyn.

"You all are going to take all night!" The plaintive exclamation came from Meagolwyn. "Father will use his strap on me for sure if I am not home before sunrise...I am going to spin."

The group clustered around the empty bottle as Meagolwyn put her hand on it, and spun. It slowed and stopped, the neck facing Frithlíc. He reddened slightly, then raised up on his knees, hands steadying himself on the stable floor, and leaned in over the glass container. Meagolwyn leaned in as well, closed her eyes, and put her lips to his. Their contact lasted but a moment, then they separated and regained their place in the circle.

There was a silence, interrupted only by the swishing of horses' tails.

"A bunch of weak-kneed, soft-bellied riders of the Mark you are!" Staenwine said. He was not usually seen without his twin sister, Staentwylas, but she had begged off from the gathering in the barn in order to keep dancing in the Golden Hall. Staenwine took the bottle by the neck, and turned it to the right. After circling around a few times, it stopped in front of Frithlíc, who eyed the bottle, and then his companion, warily.

"None of that!" said Éowyn, who lifted the nearby flask and, after indulging in a couple of swallows, handed it off to Frithlíc and took her turn with the bottle on the ground. It turned to Frithlíc, yet again.

"Oromë's horn!" he muttered under his breath, but looked up expectantly at the fair face of the golden-haired girl across the circle from him, her cheeks flushed both with the cold of winter and with wine. Again he rose, and meeting her mid-circle, received her perfunctory kiss, then sat down.

So the time went, with shy kisses and colorful jokes. The wine flask went around the circle, its contents slowly shared among the nine youths enjoying the celebrations that commemorated the shortest day of the year.

At one point Éowyn leaned in conspiratorially to Fréalas and said, "I always feel his eyes on me."

Fréalas, a bit confused, leaned over, almost fell, then grinning as she regained her composure, asked, "Who? When?"

"Gríma." She said the word distastefully. "He has come as an advisor to my uncle, and I am sure that he means well, but he appears to keep a roving eye on things that should not matter to him." She smiled, saying, "I am sure that I make too much of this." She sent out a hand to find the flask, and upon reaching it, tipped it back to her lips, draining the last drops.

Yet again it was Fréalas' turn to spin, the keen eyes of Swaeser, Tóswífan and Staenwine on her, their opportunities for affection more rare given the ratio of boys to girls. She placed her fingers on the stem, and spun. It slowed, then stopped in front of Éowyn. Shrugging, the fifteen year old leaned over, but instead of giving Fréalas a kiss on the cheek, she brushed her lips against those of her friend's, lingering slightly, then sank back to the ground. Fréalas was startled to taste the somewhat bitter wine combined with the unexpected sweet on her mouth. A shudder ran through her as she closed her eyes, a thousand whirring thoughts turning more slowly than usual through the fog of wine. She sat still, registering the tickling shock of warmth that spread from her lips and yet somehow also covered her skin in goosebumps.

Éowyn giggled, then spun the bottle. It slowed to a stop in front of Frithlíc, who attempted a poor job of disguising his delight at yet another opportunity to kiss her, and she was far less perfunctory in her affections this go round. Feeling braver than usual thanks to the strong wine, he held Éowyn's face in his hands, gently caressing her cheekbone with his left thumb as they met for another embrace, then parted.

Opening her eyes, Fréalas saw the scene in the stables re-establish itself before her, as the scene grew less hazy despite the dim light. With a bit of a start she noticed that they were three fewer than had begun this game of spin the bottle. Meagolwyn and Héalwine appeared to have found a more private location among the horses of Edoras, and Éomer, who had been at the mead longer than the

rest in the group before coming to the stables, had succumbed to sleep. Incomprehensively she viewed her long-time friend, *your scyldesweoster*, her mind hastily corrected itself, now sitting near her brother, their hands intertwined. Swaeser gave Fréalas a hopeful glance, but seeing that she was lost in her own thoughts, he leaned over and idly began spinning the bottle, brows furrowed.

Fréalas looked down at her hands, her freckle-covered fingers laced in on themselves. Out of recent habit, she pushed up the sleeve on her left arm, ignoring the flush that she felt from the recent kiss that journeyed down into parts of herself that seemed to be as disturbed as the grasses on the plains when bent into waves by the wind. *There is your security*, she thought, looking at the inside of her elbow at the horse-head that had been painfully inked in by the eldest of the few recently and secretly organized shieldmaidens. *With the dangers around us, and the Eorlingas away on our borders, all we can hold faith in is each other.* She let the thought mull around for a few moments, sleep almost overtaking her in the dark and soothing fragrance of hay.

Suddenly coming to, she stood up, and hissed at Frithlíc, "Come! It is late! We need to get home." Her brother gave her a mournful look as he contentedly stroked Éowyn's hair. Théoden's niece was leaning against him in a pose of half-sleep, and her new suitor appeared far less than anxious to leave the warm stables and go out into the cold night.

"Fine," Fréalas whispered. "But when you get caught here..." She looked around the stall and saw Swaeser, now playing dice with the other two unaccompanied, and disappointed, young men. Éomer was now fast asleep, his mouth half-open, the wide-shouldered youth quietly snoring. She shook her head. "Just be quiet upon your return!"

As she gathered her sweater, putting it around her shoulders, she ran her tongue along her lips, tasting the lingering flavour of wine, then bit down on her lower lip, a habit from her childhood. Her brows furrowed, she relived the sensation of soft lips on hers, the sweetness of it somehow far more bitter than any herb she had ever ingested to fight off sickness. Walking quietly out of the stables, a confusing mix of emotions ran through her, her heart beating as fast as those of the horses newly returned from a patrol. She looked forward to spending a few moments outside of their house, lying on her back on this clear, cold night, looking up at the stars making their ancient, showy patterns in the night sky.

wimplegearn= wool-cloak
Wintergamen= winter-festival
Tóswífan= to wander

5. The Forest Watches

Firienfeld
Autumn, 3013

Salupád walked around nibbling the grass, her happiness apparent in the way she held up her tail. Threohness came over and playfully nipped the other horse's flank, beginning a game which soon had them cantering away toward the dark woods.

"Are they not such beautiful creatures?" Tóswífan said, his love for the animals evident in his voice.

Fréalas nodded. "They used to instil such fear in me when I was younger," she admitted. She turned her head from her focus on the archer's target to the blonde young man at her side.

He returned the gaze, raising one eyebrow. "But you look so happy when you are riding."

Fréalas returned her attention to shooting her arrow. "I do now... they just seemed so big when I was a child. I preferred the sheep we had back at the eastfold. My uncle even carved a little sheep for me that I carried around everywhere."

Tóswífan laughed. "You continue to amaze me, Fréalas. Just when I think I know so much about you, you say something and I realize that I have only just scratched the surface."

She released her arrow. It whistled through the air, hitting the mark slightly above the centre. There the shaft and feathers stood at attention with many others, evidence of their practice at this isolated range.

"Dragon's breath!" she muttered, and rolled her eyes. Lowering her arms she looked fondly at her companion. "Yes, that's me: Fréalas, fire-locks, full of tremendous secrets."

He grinned, and not for the first time, Fréalas found herself struck by the kindness she saw in his face. That and his eyes, a unique hazel color that reminded her of fields of barley waving golden in the sun. The two had become good friends over the past few years, as she had discovered under his somewhat aloof exterior that he had a biting wit and a generous heart. He was also a good sparring partner for her since they were the same height. But most delightful, however, had been the unexpected discovery that they were both artists. The swirls of flowers, horses and birds of Fréalas' designs made their way from her imagination onto leather goods that she was then able to sell in the marketplace at Edoras, while Tóswífan was rarely seen without his knife, carving away at some bit of wood.

Fréalas still considered Éowyn to be her closest friend, despite the fact that Éowyn had become enamoured of her brother Frithlíc in the past few years, and that affection showed no signs of abating. Fréalas did not know what on earth it was that Éowyn saw in him, and with Éowyn's affections focused elsewhere, she had felt at times like a discarded horseshoe, not even worth putting above the door for luck. But then Tóswífan would seek her out, and they would sketch out patterns in the ground for future projects, or lie on their backs imagining fantastical creatures in the clouds after working with their horses. It was a childish pastime, she knew, but a welcome respite from the more responsible adult activities she was expected to pursue.

Tóswífan put down his bow and went to retrieve their arrows. Fréalas walked out a few steps away from the range toward the path they had taken to reach this high field, then stopped and with the back of her hand, wiped the bit of perspiration that had gathered above her eyebrows. She loved the view of the valley below, the mountains nestling the snaking path of the Snowbourne as it flowed toward Edoras. Beyond the sentinel city was a seemingly endless expanse of rolling plains. *I wonder if that is what the sea looks like from the mountains?* she marvelled. *But blue, of course.* For several minutes she let her eyes wander over the distant land, until something far off in the light blue sky caught her attention. *What is that?*

She suddenly stiffened, sensing before actually feeling Tóswífan step behind her. Gently he put his hands on her shoulders, and when she did not move, he slid them down her arms and clasped his hands in front of hers, around her waist. Fréalas was so surprised at the unexpectedness of this encounter that it took her a moment to realize that she was holding her breath. She willed herself to take a deep lungful of air, at the same time registering with surprise the calloused fingers resting on hers. The two had talked for hours and hours, it was sure, but aside from the occasional dance at festivals and weddings and some chaste kisses from a wintergamen several years ago, she had not really thought about his physicality. Now that she found herself nestled in his arms, she realized that though he was slender, his chest was far wider than she had imagined. *But you have never imagined anything about him... like this.* The thought quickly sped through her mind. Letting the view before her soften, she was startled at feeling a flash of heat go through her as she was absorbed by the unfamiliar sensation of his hips almost resting at her backside.

"What do you see?" he asked. She refocused her eyes on the scene before her, and then saw the speck again, off on the horizon. Disengaging her left arm, she pointed to the northeast.

"There! Can you see it?" She turned her head backward, keenly aware of how close his chest was to her back and how her shirt was stuck to her with sweat. "I think it is an eagle!"

Tóswífan's face was nestled in her hair. "Mmmmm," he sighed. "How is it that you always smell of lilac?"

Still trying to sort through this torrent of feelings, she took his hands in hers and then moved them to his side and turned around to face him. *What does this all mean?* she wondered, then answered his question.

"You know that making soaps is my mother's great skill." Tilting her head, she looked sharply at him. "Do you see the eagle?"

His eyes were full of amusement but he seemed unable to take them off of her face to look off to the horizon.

"Well? You will not find it by looking at me. It is circling far away." She turned back around, and pointed again. "To see one is supposed to bode fair fortune."

Tóswífan looked at the back of the young woman in front of him, his friend since mid-youth, and thought about simply turning her around, taking her face in his hands, and tasting her lips on his. Then he thought about how deftly he had seen her use her knife while they were being put through their paces for self-defense, and reconsidered.

"Fair fortune, indeed, is to be confidante and friend to one as down to earth as you, Fréalas!" He took her left hand in his right, and turned her away from the vista. "Any more luck, or fortune, and the horse-spirits are likely to smite us with something rather unpleasant!"

Fréalas raised her eyebrows and looked thoughtfully at Tóswífan. She was aware of many things, all at once: the sweat of their hands intertwined, the omen of seeing an eagle, the suddenly disconcerting feeling of just the two of them being so far away from the town, his familiar smell of wood and horse. Unable to do anything else, she continued to look at him until a slightly red hue came to his cheeks.

"Were I a piece of wood and you a bore-beetle," he said, "you would be nigh through me by now!" They walked together toward the trees of the Dimholt and their horses. "You have such a look of concentration... it makes me feel, well," he cleared his throat, "almost unclothed, if you will." He scratched at a midge-bite on the back of his neck, waiting for his companion to say something in reply.

After several more moments went by and they neared the edge of the wood, having passed their horses which were now contentedly grazing, he said, "Out with it! What on the horse's mane are you thinking?"

Fréalas continued her silence but seemed to be leading Tóswífan, rather than the other way round. The trees of the Dimholt were now around them, and they entered a profound quiet. This was a place that figured prominently in age-old stories of ghosts and deaths unhappily suffered. The youth of Edoras would come up to this plain on rare occasion, usually during festivals when their parents were otherwise occupied for several hours, and dare each other to enter the woods, alone. It was indeed a place that seemed haunted, an eerie entrance-way for anyone foolish enough to approach the door to the aptly-named Paths of the Dead. Usually none were.

She stopped by a large oak, and turned to face the young man. "You wanted to kiss me." It was a statement rather than a question, and Tóswífan was startled by her bluntness. He looked down at their hands, still intertwined, then slowly back up at her face, unsure what expression he would see there. She seemed to be smiling, so he allowed himself to gaze back, drinking in her features as though they were on a new person: greenish-grey eyes, some fiery red curls of hair stuck to her forehead with sweat, and freckles emerging from a sunburn that now stretched from cheek to cheek across her nose.

"Yes," he admitted. "No. I mean, I did. I still do."

Fréalas felt as though there were heat from the sun emanating from him despite the cool of the woods, and she felt a trickle of moisture traverse from behind her ear down her neck.

"We have been friends a long time, Tóswífan," she said. "But today, now, you seem different."

"Different?" he echoed, longing apparent in his voice.

"I am not usually at a loss for words," she said, taking both of his hands in hers, forcing him to move nearer to her. "But something happened. Seeing the eagle, us being alone, and..." She stepped forward, pushing his back into the tree, pressing herself against him. Her body ached all over, a sort of throbbing, confusing feeling of desire and fear. "And I have these feelings... I don't know where they came from, but..."

She put her lips on his, surprised at how soft they were. Tóswífan kissed back eagerly, then tried to put his tongue in her mouth. Fréalas was startled at the intrusion, then tentatively did the same. So *warm*. The thought went racing through her mind as he held her face in his hands. She explored his mouth with her tongue, then pulled away, panting.

"Is something wrong?" Tóswífan exclaimed with a look of apprehension.

Fréalas breathed in deeply, then laughed. "Oh Tóswífan, I was concentrating so hard I was not breathing!" She moved back in to him again and murmured, "Let me try again. This time I will be sure to do both."

She arranged her body so that she could lean on him as she felt a bit dizzy, and began kissing him again. She had a sudden memory of a game of spin the bottle she had played several years ago, and of quick kisses, followed by jokes and laughter. *This is very different*, she thought.

As they kissed, she felt a wave of desire go through her. It seemed to center itself between her waist and knees, and she pressed her hips against his. Tóswífan had anchored one of his hands at the small of her back, the other caressing the back of her head, but with this motion, he moved both of them to the curve of her buttocks. Fréalas felt as though every inch of her skin had become alive, and it was almost unbearable. Tóswífan broke from their kiss and looked at her. *As though I were something to be eaten!* she thought, and wondered what messages were being revealed to him in the same glance.

He turned his head and put his mouth to the side of her neck, kissing it, then languorously ran his tongue up to her ear. Fréalas felt as though her legs had suddenly lost their bones, and sank further into him, closing her eyes. He took her earlobe in his mouth, nibbling on it. She moaned quietly, feeling a heat from somewhere deep within her, a primal ache. She *wanted* him. She didn't know what that entailed, exactly, but it seemed that he had an idea of the path to be taken.

With her eyes still shut, she ran her fingers through his hair as he continued to kiss her neck. "Mmmmmmm. Salty," he whispered, then ran his tongue across her collarbone and kissed her at the base of her throat. Fréalas thought that surely her heart must be beating at triple its normal speed, but she also knew that she did not want him to stop. She became aware that the throbbing sensation she had below her hips seemed to be reflected in his body as well, and she marvelled at this change.

Tóswífan lifted his lips from her neck, and leaned back. Fréalas opened her eyes, and saw that he bore a troubled expression.

"Yes?" she asked, wriggling her hands behind his neck, and then down his back, against the bark of the tree.

"Well," he began. "It's just..." He ran his tongue over his lips. "I would be so honoured to see your body, to touch it." He gazed at her with his hazel eyes, and Fréalas felt as though she had already been laid bare. "I know you are strong from watching you in our years of arms training and riding." He pulled her to him more tightly, moving his hands up to behind her hips. "And I know that I want to feel your skin on mine. I can't say that I haven't hoped that this would happen." Fréalas nodded, acutely aware of the curls of his blonde chest hair showing at the neck of his loosened shirt.

"But I do not want us to regret this, or enter into anything unwanted."

In a husky voice that sounded unfamiliar to her own ears, she said, "I will let you know if you have gone too far." She trusted him, surely, and she also knew that she wanted... needed... to explore this new-found physicality that allowed her to escape her racing mind.

"Tóswífan," she began, then removed her hands from him and edged backward.

"Yes?" he replied, confusion in his voice.

"Tóswífan, will you shut your eyes for a moment?"

The young man's excitement about their activities was still apparent below his waist, but his face now bore an expression as though he had been slapped.

"I am not going anywhere." She walked back over and kissed him strongly on the neck, as though to draw blood. "I am simply... well... shy." She blushed, making her sunburn look all the more scarlet, even in the relative dimness of the forest.

"Shy?" He raised his hands as if to reach for her, then dropped them. "But we have known each other for years, Fréalas."

"Just do this," she pleaded, and Tóswífan sensed that if he were ever again to kiss this one who was so dear to his heart, he should do as he had been bidden. He closed his eyes.

"You promise you are not going to leave me up here alone..." he said plaintively, and cocked open one eye.

"Hush, you!" Fréalas stood, only a few paces from Tóswífan who was still leaning on the tree, a shaft of sunlight lazily drifting down onto his chest. *Spun gold!* Fréalas thought, looking at the curls of hair highlighted by the thin ray darting through the trees. She began again to feel a resonating ache below her hips and new dampness between her clenched thighs and realized that she needed to act before losing her nerve or nothing would happen.

She hummed to herself in the relative dark of the woods so that Tóswífan would know that she was true to her word, as well as doing something to keep up her own courage. Fréalas took a deep breath, and taking the bottom of her tunic in her hands, lifted it over her head, then knelt down to place it on the forest floor. She was, of course, still wearing a further undergarment for women, a tightly-woven singlet made to keep their discomfort to a minimum when riding and fighting.

As she clutched her fingers to the bottom of it, she took a deep breath. To be honest, she had never given her body much thought, aside from when she had received her mark of the warrior clan. Even then, when the sharp tip had poked into her skin, again and again and again and again, the sensation had not been purely that of pain. In fact, while it was rather uncomfortable, after many minutes had passed and she was able to release herself into the sensation, it seemed more like that of incessant loving bites of a butterfly.

Reliving those moments in the dark cave, she pulled the undergarment over her head, and then cast the flesh-coloured top down.

Shutting her lids she said, "You may open your eyes. I do not know what you expect to see, but here I am."

The quiet was almost oppressive as the two stood, hidden away in the wooded shadows on this hot day of summer.

Tóswífan did open his eyes, albeit slowly. Before him stood his red-haired friend, bare to the waist, two shirts piled at her feet. Her freckles seemed almost to glow in this dark, but that was not where his gaze ventured. He was unable to help it, but he looked straight at her chest, at two lovely, pale rises of flesh. At this, at the reality of being able to caress them, to feel their warm bodies together, he was undone, and sank to his knees, closing his eyes.

"Fréalas," he murmured, looking back up at her. "I..." then he stopped. "What happened to you?" He had noticed a rather large bruise above her left hip, and rose to go and tend to it with concern. "You didn't do that when..."

Just then, Fréalas heard a faint sound behind her. Faster than even she herself thought capable, she picked up the undershirt from the ground and pulled it back over her head, anxiously looking right and left for her knife.

"What is it?" Tóswífan asked, equally wary, though remorse was quickly working its way through his mind and senses.

"We are being watched," she said through her teeth, keeping her voice low. "I did not see anything, but I just know."

Tóswífan stood still, and though his eyes keenly took in the forest as far as he could see, nothing moved, not even the leaves on the trees.

"Are you sure?" Tóswífan believed that the solitude granted them on this high plateau would not be broken without notice, and certainly not in the woods.

"SSSSSSssssssssssh," she breathed, and they both were still.

Many moments passed, and then...

"Tóswífan!" Fréalas pointed back into the woods. "It is... it is..."

"I do not see what you do!" Tóswífan muttered, exasperation in his voice.

Fréalas spoke quietly, taking his hand, and Tóswífan was surprised to notice that she was trembling. "You may think I have taken leave of my senses, but it looked like one of the statues that lines the path." She looked at him, fear in her eyes. "I also do not think that our presence here is encouraged. We must go. Now!"

She led him quickly to the bright light on the Firienfeld, so intent on leaving that Tóswífan was forced to let go of her hand and run back to pick up her tunic. Once out in the sunshine again, she turned around and looked into the woods.

"Fréalas," Tóswífan began, "are you sure it was not simply a bird? The púkel-men do not move."

She slowly shook her head, then looked intently at him. "You may not believe me," she said, "but I know what I glimpsed back in the trees." She shivered despite the heat, and turned her back to the trees. "Let us get off of this plain and back to Edoras." She held out her hand to take back her tunic, and Tóswífan looked sadly at it, then at her face.

"You mean you want to leave... immediately?"

She reclaimed her shirt and pulled it over her head. Straightening it, she moved close to him and, closing her eyes, kissed him on the lips, gently. He began to respond with more vigour, but she moved back. "I am no coward," she said, an air of self-defense creeping into her voice. "But I am unsettled. A ride back home with you as company and a glass of strong ale upon our return seems a good thing to do."

He pulled her back to him and crossed his hands behind the small of her back. Placing his mouth to her ear, he breathed, "Are you sure, my *solate*, that we cannot stay just for a little while?"

Though Fréalas was indeed tempted, she still felt as though those eyes were on her, and she shook her head. "No, Tóswífan." With his lips nuzzling her ear she found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. "We need to return before my father sends a search party for me."

Tóswífan sighed as he buried his face in her red hair. "I did say you were well-grounded, did I not?" He released her hands and after giving her a peck on the cheek, walked toward their horses.

Fréalas retrieved their bows and arrows, then met Tóswífan and took Salupád's reins from him, feeling oddly shy. "You will not go and tell your friends about what happened in the woods, will you?" she asked, affectionately scratching her horse under the chin.

"No Fréalas," he replied seriously. "I would never betray your confidence." He cocked his head and shaded his eyes with a long-fingered hand to look at her. "And I, for one, have much to occupy my own thoughts."

They mounted their horses and began the journey back to Edoras.

His solate! Fréalas marveled, then revelled in the view from the plateau again before beginning the descent down the zig-zagging path. She distinctly refrained from looking at the old statues on the way down to the valley.

threohness= whirlwind
solate= sunflower

6. Eorendel, the Daystar

Edoras
Late autumn, 3014

Despite the warm evening, and a quiet one at that, as though the dogs and distant sheep had been drinking from a pool filled with a sleeping draught, Éowyn couldn't sleep. The fact that she didn't know what was going to happen that evening was what kept her thoughts tumbling, like rocks being ushered along the streams of the Entwash, continually in motion. She felt absolutely famished, now at the end of a four-day fast, combined with the physical exercises that were expected of her. There had been archery, shooting at tiny points far off in the distance that she was sure she would miss, but, perhaps thanks to the winds on the plains, she had not. Then she had been sent off into the grassy lands to spend a night alone, with only her horse Léoma to keep her company. She had spent a rather sleepless night under the stars, a small fire as her companion, wishing that there were something stronger in her small flask than water, as she strived to pass the many tasks that were required before she could join the recently revived clan of shieldmaidens. She could not get sick, and needed to return with several healing herbs that could only be found in particular soils, and she had done so.

Sighing, she turned from one side to the other on her sleeping pallet, then surrendering to the inevitable, she sat up. She rose and padded across the sheepskin rug to a window in her room and leaned on the stone ledge. After gazing out over the thatched-roof houses of the sleeping inhabitants of Edoras, she raised her eyes to the heights of the White Mountains, starkly beautiful under the full moon that seemed to blot out the flames of the stars with its overwhelming brightness.

She stood, and closed her eyes, not minding the exposure she felt in the light of her night-time companion, a sensation distinctly different from that of being under the scrutiny of her uncle's advisor, Gríma. An unbidden shudder came over her, thinking of those icy blue eyes which seemed always to be turned in her direction, except in those times when her brother or cousin were in the room discussing details of the Mark and the latest incursions of the Orcs. Gríma's words and advice were so seemingly helpful and yet she tended to feel inferior and belittled after being in his company, which gave her all the more reason to avoid him.

Éomer seemed changed. He was still her brother and occasional confidant, of course, but the pressure of filling the shoes of his father so young had chipped away at him, leaving a more stony exterior than

perhaps he would otherwise have borne. He was fully a man at twenty-three, having seen his share of dreadful carnage and keeping a wary eye to potentially desperate situations that appeared likely in the future. She shook her head, and wished not for the first time that she, too, would be riding off with the Eorlingas, but that was not her fate. *It could be worse*, she consoled herself. *Your battle skills are valued among these few other shieldmaidens, and it is with them that you must show your mettle on this last night. I would do them and myself honour.*

With this heartening thought she left the window and walked to the washbasin that stood on her table. Using a comb of white coral handed down from a distant relation who had travelled to the coast of Belfalas, she pulled through the small knots that had formed in her wavy hair that now reached halfway to her shoulder blades. Unlike many of Rohan, her hair was not particularly straight, nor was it exceptionally thick. She had wished to herself that she could have it cut off at the shoulders, or higher, the better to keep it out of her face during fighting exercises. But some things just weren't done, even during times when uncertainties outweighed those that could be counted on, and young women sporting boy's hair was one of those. Once she made sure she had gotten out the tangles, her nimble fingers with years of practice plaited her hair on both sides, then combined them into one braid to go down her back. Fumbling for a bit of twine in the half-dark, she tied off the braid, then stopped over her basin and splashed some water on her face. Brusquely she used a sleeve to dab off the water.

Éowyn crossed back over to the window, craning her neck. *Where was it?* she wondered. *On such an auspicious night as this, the moon is too bright. No, wait... there.* The shape was unmistakable, once she found it, curved from front to back, the long neck obvious once first glimpsed. "Swánsteorra," she breathed. Her long-suffering friend Fréalas had been trying to teach her the placement of the stars. She did see the value in knowing the patterns of the stars in finding direction, should one find oneself far from home, on the sea or in unknown lands. *Unknown lands.* She shook herself out of her reverie. *I'll naught be going anywhere at all, at least not without an escort. Would that I were Éomer's brother, instead of his sister.* She paused, gazing out at the moon, which on this night appeared ringed with a rainbow of white and silver. *It is time.*

Before leaving her room, she walked over to the cage that held her dear finch, Máthmæht. He was sleeping, of course, his cage shrouded. She could not leave without saying goodbye, so she lifted the cloth and whispered a quiet "Farewell!" to him.

Wearing her usual summer attire, a muslin dress with mid-length sleeves and a small bit of embroidery at the hem and neck, she quietly stepped out into the corridor that curved around the back of the Golden Hall. Glancing side to side, she quickly made sure that there was no one present before leaving the side entrance near the royal stables. A young woman walking alone down the main path of Edoras in the middle of the night would cause a stir at any time, so Éowyn chose her discreet path carefully. She walked stealthily through the dark on almost hidden roads. The maze of houses, horse-stalls and paths were known as well to her as the patterns on her sword blade, which hung girt at her side. Although she was of the royal line of Rohan, she was without any other adornment.

Upon reaching the gates, she paused, and stole a glance up at the dark windows of the Golden Hall. The newly resurrected night rituals of the women warriors of Rohan's ancient past were kept secret, and Éowyn knew that her silence was of utmost importance. Hearing a nearby noise she wheeled around and saw Sundéaw standing in front of the gates.

"Are you ready for your final trials, Éowyn, daughter of Théodwyn?" she asked.

Éowyn's bright grey eyes looked keenly into the eyes of the inquisitor. "I am a daughter of Oromë. His horn summons me to show my worth. I am ready."

The great gates opened slightly, and the two figures walked through them to the small group who awaited them. Only three other women stood there, all wearing dark cloaks. They turned from the gates and walked past the barrows, Éowyn following. Without a word the quiet entourage followed a path to the southwest of the city, to the base of the Ered Nimrais. As they went, Éowyn tried to keep her mind clear, knowing that much would be asked of her, although she was quite unsure what form these trials would take.

After walking for a quarter of an hour, they stopped in front of the rocky mountainside. Éowyn looked around, but could not see why they were standing in this particular place. The leader of the group walked toward the mountain and then seemed to vanish into the rock. Éowyn stared, as one after another the others did likewise, disappearing into the mountain. She followed, and then realized that they were walking through a very narrow passageway only visible from a particular angle. After several uncomfortable steps in the pitch dark, she was stunned to find herself in a great cave, with torches set into holders along the perimeter of the walls. *It is as big as the Golden Hall!* she thought in amazement. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the relative dimness compared to the bright evening they had left outside under the full moon.

Éowyn found herself looking at a semi-circle of women of Edoras. They were all familiar faces, but in this previously unknown cave with its flickering lights, they looked different, and impassive.

"Why are you here, Éowyn, daughter of Théodwyn?" The question came from Fréalas, who many years earlier pledged to be her *syldesweoster*. Centuries before when women warriors had been more common, there had been an understanding that an older woman would act as a mentor to a younger woman and provide more personal tutelage. This was most oftentimes the role taken between sisters, but if a girl had no sisters or cousins, occasionally someone else would offer to take on that role instead.

Éowyn lifted her head and, looking straight into Fréalas' green-grey eyes, replied, "To prove my worth that I may join the clan of the horse warriors."

At this response, the other women removed their cloaks. They were all clad in traditional Rohirric fabric of muslin, but instead of dresses, they bore square-necked tops that fell to mid-thigh and were cut on the sides to the waist. Instead of long skirts, as Éowyn had thought, they wore... "Pants?" she breathed. *Well, not form-fitting breeches as worn by men, and yet not a skirt either.*

"You are to perform the sword exercise of *fyrclian*." Another voice echoed in the cavern, and Éowyn suddenly realized how helpful such raiment would be for extensive swordplay. *Or horse riding*. A rueful thought of wishing that she had been living back when women of Rohan were valued as fighters made its way into her mind. She quickly pushed it aside to concentrate on the exercise demanded of her.

She took off her own cloak, and tossed it off to the side. "I am ready." She unsheathed her sword, and glanced at the line of women to see who her sparring partner was to be. Fraetwas stepped forward, a sword in her hand. Though the young woman was nicknamed Willow for her gracefulness, Éowyn knew better than to let her mind wander while going through this exercise, for Fraetwas was deft and very strong of arm.

The two young women began a complicated routine of parries and sword-strokes. *Fyrclian* was aptly named, as their swords seemed to flicker, catching the light of the candles on the wall as they clashed, and withdrew, then swung again. Éowyn was beginning to breathe heavily, for as strong as she was, Fraetwas was in these skills her equal, and very quick on her feet. Faster and faster their swords sliced the air, parrying and turning. For a moment they paused, swords crossed, the sinews of their arms taut and beads of sweat appearing above their brows. In a fluid motion, they swung their blades a last time, ending with the tips hovering in a deadly position above the other's heart. Éowyn looked into the young woman's brown eyes, and though Fraetwas' face was guarded, Éowyn seemed to see approval there.

"You may lower your sword, Éowyn of the house of Thengel." The two women stepped apart, Éowyn swaying slightly with fatigue, lack of sleep, and hunger, as they slowly lowered their weapons. "Through your days of trials you have performed admirably, and are considered worthy to join the warrior clan."

"There is only one further test required of you, my *syldesweoster*." Fréalas now spoke, moving in and placing her hands on Éowyn's shoulders. "We all bear a permanent mark of our loyalty, and receiving it will cause you much pain, though the bearing of the pain is not the test." She looked keenly into Éowyn's grey eyes, whose pupils were now largely dilated in the dimness of the cave. "Do you still

wish to be a shieldmaiden, pledging to defend every inhabitant of our fair land even unto your own death, and have forever on you the image of our people, the noble head of a horse?"

Breathing deeply, Éowyn clung to her friend to steady herself as she answered, "I would bear no other marking on my flesh than that. The pain suffered during its acquisition will remind me of the pain the innocent of Rohan have suffered under the scourge of orcs who kill and defile. Even as I use sword and shield I will see this image and take heart."

Fréalas embraced her, then stood back. Shyly she said, "Since I have been given the gift of artistry, I will be the one to gift your skin with ink."

Éowyn smiled in return. "If it is to be permanent, I would wish for it to be as beautiful as the designs that you make. Do not be nervous, my talented friend."

Two women in the group moved off into the shadows and brought out stools. Another brought out a small, brown mushroom-like item and offered it to Éowyn. "Though there is pain," Léah said, "We temper it by eating a small bit of starflower." She tilted her head, a serious expression in her eyes. "It has particular illuminating effects on the mind and body." Éowyn put the bit of plant in her mouth and chewed it. It was bitter, and she gagged slightly as she swallowed.

Sundéaw continued, "You may have a vision, or feel that you have left your physical self to travel in the unseen world. Whatever you see, or do, you must tell us, and from that we will know you have been led to your warrior-spirit name."

Fréalas took to getting her ink and needle out of a small pack that she had brought. This part of the ritual had not been fully explained to the newest shieldmaiden. In the past, the women of the warrior clan had marked themselves with a horse head on the inside elbow of their shield-bearing arm, but Éowyn had not heard of the ingesting of such plants to facilitate visions and dreams.

Éowyn gritted her teeth as the small needle went into her skin, Fréalas tapping some ink into it. Again and again, the needle and the tapping, Fréalas bearing down on her bottom lip with her front teeth as she bent in concentration. Éowyn at first tried to count how many times the needle went in, then gave in, and simply surrendered to the sensations she was feeling beyond the actual skin pricks. She felt a flush begin in her elbow that then coursed through her body, and though she knew she was still sitting in the dark cave, she felt a glow around her. She seemed to be surrounded by large globes of light, shooting from one side of her vision to the other. *Shooting day stars?* Her consciousness felt as though she were one with the golden stars, traversing the world, though it was not dark. How long she sped along with the lights, she did not know, but it felt as natural as breathing.

As she came out of her reverie, she heard a gentle voice call her. "Éowyn?" It was Fréalas. "I am finished. You need to go bathe after you speak with the shieldmaidens." As the haze cleared and the room darkened, Éowyn thought, *Bathe? Where?* She looked down at her arm, at the beautiful horse's head, surrounded by dots of blood. Raising her head, she found that she was looking at the questioning faces of several women.

"I," Éowyn began. "I saw stars. But it was not night - and they were almost dancing. I was one with them, dazzling and fast."

Sundéaw nodded approvingly. "To us you shall be known as *Eorendel*, the Daystar." She looked Éowyn up and down, then smiled. "It suits you, as it must."

Helping her to her feet, Fréalas took her by her right arm, and led her toward the back of the cave. "There are several reasons why this cave has been used for many years," she said, placing her friend's head on her shoulder and stroking her hair. "An underground water source is certainly one of them." They walked into the darkness, Fréalas taking one of the torches out of its holder as they retreated into a more confined space. Then Éowyn heard it: a tinkling sound of water droplets hitting a pool.

Though still a bit dazed, Éowyn could almost feel the cool waters before she reached them. Gingerly she shed her dress, unashamed of her nudity. The inside of her elbow still throbbed, it was true, but

she felt a sense of satisfaction in having proven herself worthy to the other women warriors. She was exhausted beyond anything she had ever felt before, but as she stepped into the chill waters and lowered herself into the shallow pool, she felt revived. Her thoughts refocused as she splashed herself, the cold drops bringing her very much back to the non-vision world. "Fréalas?" Her friend sat quietly in the shadows. "What is your spirit name?"

"*Glédfléon.*"

After a few moments of silence, Éowyn stretched, and rose from the shallows. "I suppose our visions must have been similar."

"It is not something that we often discuss," Fréalas replied without admonition in her voice. "But it is something for you to treasure through your life. You may never have visions again, though it has been known for certain shieldmaidens to be considered seers."

"Am I finished?" Éowyn asked as she walked toward her pile of clothes, gratefully accepting the drying cloth that Fréalas provided.

"Well... I am unsure." The humour present in Fréalas' voice expressed both camaraderie and relief, now that her tasks were complete. "Are you covered in goosebumps?"

Éowyn laughed, herself grateful for some levity after the seriousness of the previous days. As she stood, shivering, she replied, "Yes!" She dried herself off and went to her garments to get dressed.

"Wait a moment," Fréalas said, and brought her a clean white cloth, which she tenderly wrapped around Éowyn's arm. "It will be sore for awhile, but I know that you will bear your marking with pride." She embraced her friend, marvelling at the softness of her bare skin as she held her in her strong arms. "Now we need to get you back to the city to break your fast. Your shieldmaiden trials are over." Fréalas produced a flask of chilled water and Éowyn drank deeply. "Unless they are tested in battle, that is."

The two young women rejoined the small group, now shrouded in dark as they had put out the torches. Silently they left the cave, through the narrow crevice, until they were again outside. Turning, Léah spoke to her from the mouth of the cave, now illuminated by the brightness of the moonlight. "Éowyn, daughter of Théodwyn, go forth from this night and defend our people as the boar defends the forest." Her long tawny hair shone with starlight, her cape now worn with her head bared. "We are needed, daughter of kings." She let her eyes flicker over the small assembled company readying themselves to return to the town. "All of us."

Éowyn bowed her head for a moment, then returned Léah's gaze.

"I shall defend Rohan, even in her darkest hour."

The group walked quietly back to Edoras, their path made clear by the light of the heavens. Under her breath, Fréalas asked, "Can you see - "

"Yes!" Éowyn replied, a look of impatience on her face. "I found the swan-star. You need not give up on my stargazing abilities yet."

fyrclian= to flash, flicker

fraetwa= treasure, ornament

eorendel= dayspring, bright star

glédfléon= firefly (I created this word by combining the Anglo-Saxon words for 'fire' and 'fly;' it wasn't in my dictionary as a word.)

This chapter dedicated to Lasbelindi. Without her gentle admonishments that I could write a meaningful ritual for the shieldmaidens, this chapter would have been jettisoned ages ago.

7. Nightingale's Song

Southern Folde
March, 3015

The floors were almost shouting with the pressure being put on them, creaking with every step. "And around, and around!" The house of Héalmund was filled to bursting with spinning folk, holding each other by the waist, outside arms uplifted. It was the wedding of Héalwine to Meagolwyn, and seemingly most of Edoras was there to celebrate with them. The exuberance of the guests and roaring fire in the hearth more than compensated for the chill of early spring that could be felt outdoors. Frithlíc and his small band of musicians clustered in the corner, both to stay warm as well as to be safely out of the way of the merry dancers in the thatched-roof home. The red-haired young man plied his bow to fiddle with his friend Onthéon on a drum with a small ensemble of others. Together they kept the company in good spirits and in almost constant motion.

"Enough, I pray!" the bride exclaimed, her cheeks flush with happiness. "Let us have a little while for rest and talking and..."

"... and mead!" Her husband, Héalwine, finished the sentence, then, after bowing low, proceeded to scoop up his bride and hold her in his arms. He shuffled slowly past the mead-table, allowing her to pour another draught in their sturdy stoneware cup, and edged their way outside, much to the amusement and cajoling of the assembled company.

"Would the musicians' company like some refreshment as well?" The golden-haired figure leaned in to the small group clustered near the hearth, her sparkling grey eyes alighting on Frithlíc in particular.

"Lady Éowyn." The voice came from sturdy Staenwine, who with his friend Ánreath finished out the band with their recorders. "Why yes, but surely we humble folk can retrieve such beverages for ourselves!"

She rolled her eyes in a veiled mixture of merriment and annoyance, then took Frithlíc's pale hand. "Well, to the mead-table, then! All together!"

The gaggle of fair-haired Rohirric youth made their way to the middle of the room, accepting compliments on their music while tending to their rumbling stomachs by serving themselves healthy servings of mutton stew topped with sharp cheese and bread. Éowyn continued to lead Frithlíc by the hand, out past the table to the outside and a nearby stall where it was possible to talk without shouting. "You have played well tonight," she said to him, as he took a long draught of the sweet mead. He looked fondly at her as he used his left hand to wipe any remnant of drink off of his beard. Taking the cup in her left hand, she tipped it back, then returned it, daubing at her face with the sleeve of her gown.

"Am I fair enough company for such a lovely bloom of Rohan?" Frithlíc asked, teasingly. "I am of the lowly folk of the Eastfold." His eyes were full of mischief, but the earnest ring to it could be heard in the question.

Smiling, she tilted her head. "Ah, but from there my father came, tis no lowly station to me!" After quickly glancing sideways, Frithlíc carefully put his cup on the ledge of the nearby horse-stall, then placed his arms around the waist of his beloved. "This should more thoroughly answer your question," she replied as she leaned in to him, and cupping his head in her hands, she turned his head downward, then gently kissed him first on one, then the other, closed eyelid. They were almost the same height, which made this act more like the steps of a ceremonious dance than an awkward salutation. He raised his head so that their lips could meet, chastely at first, then more intimately while the sounds of the wedding floated out of the house door and dissipated into the night air. After a few moments they parted, their warm breath making little clouds before their faces.

It was at times like this when he really *did* feel that he was unworthy to be held in such high esteem by the niece of King Théoden, but then she would look at him with her piercing eyes and he knew that what affections she had beyond bow and sword were for him alone.

"So!" She drew nearer to him again, burying her face in his beard, then stepped back, and took his hand again. "You have never told me how you came to be such a fine fiddler. Surely *there* is a tale to be told!"

Frithlíc looked down at his feet, taking a sudden interest in them that corresponded to a faint blush on his face, barely visible in the dark near the stable. Éowyn took his chin in her hand and raised his head so that she could look him in the eyes.

"Well?"

He looked back at her, realizing that if he didn't say something soon he would never again be found, having drowned in the unrelenting pools of her grey eyes.

"Well!" He took her by the hand after she took his cup, and carrying his instrument at his right side, they walked to a large tree that was down the hill from the horse-stall. The stars were bright above them, a tiny sea of lights reflecting the fires of the homesteads on the plains of Rohan. Frithlíc sat down with his back against the trunk of an oak tree, his long legs outstretched, placing himself between the roots that reached out up from the ground as though to make their acquaintance with the stars and clouds. He motioned to Éowyn, and she sat down beside him, but then, an apparent weariness taking her, laid down, her head in his lap, her legs drawn up underneath her. He handed her his bow and fiddle, which she placed in the lap of her dress, treating them as tenderly as though they were a babe in arms.

"You know how we know that there is to be a musician in the family?" he began, running his freckled fingers through her long hair. She turned her face upward toward him.

"A nightingale appears at the house and remains for awhile," she replied.

"Yes, that's it."

He took another drink of his mead, then placed the cup on the ground, and let his hand stray under her hair to massage the top of her neck. *I shall never forget this night*, he thought, and let a prayer of thanks go up to the stars and those nameless ones behind them.

"And?" Her impatience was feigned, and he knew it, but willingly he continued.

"Well, when I was born, so my parents say, a nightingale landed on our house, and so at that point it was just a matter of waiting for me to grow older and discover what instrument it was that I was supposed to play. There was a man in our settlement who was a wonderful woodcarver, and when I turned seven, I guess it was, they asked him to make a fiddle for me."

"And you just knew how to play?" The incredulity was apparent in her voice.

"By Oromë's horn, no!" His laugh echoed down the greensward. "No, no. We were fortunate in our little establishment by the woods, as you know, to have a decent musician about, and he took me under his wing. I studied under good old Gléomund, and with much practice became the fiddler you now know."

A few moments passed, then Éowyn looked up at him. Frithlíc had ceased his affectionate rubbings at the base of her neck, now seemingly lost in some thought.

"What is it, fair musician of mine?" she asked.

He looked down at her, and she could see the pain behind his gaze.

"This is a night of joy," he said, shaking his head and beginning again with his soothing ministrations. "I do not wish to burden you with things from the past."

"But I would know all," she insisted. "I will not be satisfied until you harbour no secrets from me."

Looking out across the fields of barley, Frithlíc sighed, then looked down at his golden-haired companion.

"We had another sister, Fréaldas and I," he began. "I was eight years old, and Fréaldas was six. Our mother seemed to bear this child as well as she had borne us, and we all were so looking forward to an addition to the Frithmund clan. Our mother is a strong one, and naught seems to wear on her. But then," here he took a long breath, "our little Íl, the world was too much for her."

"Íl?" Éowyn said the name into the chilly evening. "Hedgehog?"

Frithlíc chuckled. "Yes. Unlike the two of us, she had dark hair, a full head of it. She was our little Íl, even if only for a very little while."

They sat in silence, listening to the intermingling sounds wafting down the hill, the neighing of horses and revelry from the wedding festivities.

"She lived only for a few days. After she died, we made a little hillock for her near the woods. Fréaldas, especially, she was so sad, being so young. She could not understand why our Íl had left us so soon. And the worst part was, a nightingale had been at our house, from the time our winter-sister had been born. After we buried her in her rocking cradle, we put up a marker of a horse head at the spot."

He looked down at Éowyn, her eyes closed to the night.

"The strangest thing of all," he continued, "is that the nightingale would not leave her. He would perch on the horse head, and sing every twilight. It was as though she was supposed to be the true musician of the family, but for whatever reason, that was not to be."

Frithlíc looked up at the glittering stars, his hand still idly caressing Éowyn's pale skin.

"That is why she didn't want to leave our homestead, you know. Fréaldas, that is."

Éowyn reached back and took his hand in hers, and placed it on her face. He felt wetness on his hand, and was startled to realize that she had been weeping.

"She was always so fond of you, Éowyn, and looked forward to spending more time with you up in Edoras. But it broke her heart to leave her little Íl behind. She was afraid that she would be lonely without us nearby, but I told her that the nightingale would be there for her. He would not forsake her, and he would keep watch over her and make sure that she would always have company and music."

Éowyn clasped his hand tightly, then released it.

"Will you please play me a song?"

In reply, he retrieved his bow and fiddle from Éowyn's entrusting hands. After gently sitting her upright against the tree, he stood, stretched his arms, and walked a few paces away. Closing his eyes, he began a tune. It was haunting, and melancholy, yet also bespoke of joys of living under the wide sky, and love, and loss. His bow made slow dancing motions across the strings as the melody flowed out across the fields and surrounding hills. When he had finished, he lowered his fiddle to his side. Éowyn stood and walked to him, encircling him with her arms, leaning into his shoulder.

"That was beautiful. What is it named?"

"Dwimmer's Lament. There are some who can do it better justice sung aloud, but it makes a fine

fiddle tune as well."

The noise of the wedding reached a new pitch and drifted down to the two partygoers. Éowyn and Frithlíc knew that they had been away for longer than they had anticipated, and would be missed soon.

"Shall we return? Héalwine and Maegolwyn will send for the Marshal of the Mark if we are not soon back in the mead hall!" Frithlíc tucked his fiddle under his arm, and took Éowyn by the hand. "Maybe someday you and I will be chasing down our friends from our own wedding feast." The words were out of his mouth before his mind could comprehend what he said, and he was immediately full of regret.

As they walked past the stable back to the thatched-roof house, Éowyn closed on Frithlíc's hand more tightly.

"Maybe," she said quietly. Then they were surrounded by merrymakers and Frithlíc was grabbed by Onthéon to go and play by the fire some more.

Ánreath= solitary, lonely path

Onthéon= to be successful, thrive

8. Asylum

Edoras
September 17, 3017

Frithlíc held Éowyn tightly to him, his arms around her waist, her head on his shoulder. "It is only a few weeks- it will be time for the winter festival before you know it and you will be dancing in my arms." The tall youth placed a light kiss on her forehead. "Besides, this is not my first time to go away, and from what you told me, you quite enjoyed having so much time to yourself."

The stalls were full of the sounds of horses eating and of swishing tails. Whitelock nuzzled Éowyn's hair, but she pretended not to notice. "I did, yes, but your absence was keenly felt." She leaned back just a bit to be able to look into his face. The gaze of her grey eyes were steady while her hands pressed into his upper back, lovingly kneading his shoulders. "After all, you will be in Éomer's care, and I know that he will be a fine leader. He has been appointed Third Marshal after all." She ran her pale fingers through Frithlíc's mane of hair, which now reached only halfway down his neck since she had cut it an hour before. "Théoden I fear is listening more and more to the inane suggestions that Gríma calls sound advice, but the King is still in his right mind when it comes to Éomer, Théodred and myself, and that appointment for Éomer was the right one."

Frithlíc leaned down and kissed her deeply. "You are very proud, my dear," Frithlíc said, a hint of mirth in his voice. After a second, more soft kiss which Éowyn teasingly tried to thwart, he whispered, "But your beauty outshines everything else about you. I still think that you are indeed a star sent from the heavens, my *blæse*."

Éowyn smiled and pulled him to her. "You have a honeyed tongue, my Rider," she said coyly. Then she murmured, "It is a good thing that you are talented with it in more than just words." Surrounded by the sounds of the stables, she surrendered to the passionate rain of kisses that followed until she was out of breath.

They did not remain very long as Éowyn's absence would soon be noticed, but before they left the sanctuary of the royal stables, Frithlíc embraced her again. "I feel as though none can harm us when we are together," he spoke low into her ear. "It is as though within each other our affections have found asylum. I hope you feel the same."

She nodded. After a moment, she said quietly, "Our pledges to each other will stand firm." Then shaking herself from her reverie, she smiled. "Come- we will have years to adore one another. And do not try to be overly brave, should you find it necessary to do battle, simply so that Éomer will tell the King about your actions."

Frithlíc opened his mouth in mock astonishment at the comment.

"Surely you have noticed by now that my brother, as marvellous as he is, is rather unaware of my pursuits and desires." Éowyn remorsefully shook her head. "That is what older brothers do, though, is it not?"

Frithlíc took her hands in his and kissed them both before replying. "Yes," he said, his grey-green eyes divulging his good humour. "We pride ourselves on our ability not to meddle in the affairs of our sisters." Before parting at the door, he looked at Éowyn again. "Ever. It is far safer that way!"

Éowyn rolled her eyes. "Get home, son of Frithmund. This will be the last comfortable night of sleep you will have for a while. Let your head enjoy your pillow while you can."

They kissed briefly, then Éowyn watched the slim fiery-haired man walk quietly down the dirt path. Once he was no longer in her sights, she made her way to the back of Meduseld to a seldom-used door out of sight of the main guards, and entered. Caught up in the flush that she always experienced when with her beloved, she did not sense that she had been watched by a pair of pale blue eyes following her from the stable to the side of the fortress.

blæse= firebrand, torch

September 18

Gríma strode to Éowyn's chamber, his dark cape fluttering behind him. The time was nearing for the departure of the patrol that he had suggested Éomer lead, now that he had been named Third Marshal of the Mark. *Théoden is becoming sentimental in his old age, he mused spitefully, appointing his nephew to the rank that he once held. Saruman was right; the way to ruin king and kingdom alike is to remove the pillars of his heirs, not to instigate infighting among the ranks of the Mark.* He found that he had stopped before her chamber door, the pull of Éowyn's presence on him as strong as Dwarves to mithril. As he raised his hand to knock, he found his thoughts troubled and muddled, and he paused. He desired her very much, this young woman of the house of Eorl, let free to run wild and possessing an unnatural interest to her skills of sword and knife. *And that freckle-faced peasant boy, Gríma snarled. She is the daughter of kings, and she will do far better than him once the White Wizard has come through on his promises.* Saruman had been using his dark cleverness of speech, and many of his sour words about the people of Rohan had settled softly into Gríma's subconscious, a smattering of tender barbs finding fertile soil in which to grow and fester. *My skills here are wasted among these people with their almost familial relations with sheep and wet-nosed dogs.*

He rapped on Éowyn's door. Silence reigned for a few moments, then he spoke. "Lady Éowyn! The Riders are leaving. Your presence is requested as niece of Théoden King to wish them well."

Gríma stood in the quiet hall, and was about to move forward to knock again when suddenly the door opened outward, barely missing his feet. Éowyn stood, clothed in a dark green dress, sword belted around her waist. Gríma felt the familiar sensations of awe and long-simmering yearning as he saw her, her golden hair shining in the morning sun.

"I will be there in a moment." Éowyn spoke curtly, then nodded her head, indicating that the conversation was over.

A disturbed expression crossed his face. "Shall I not escort you to join the King and his guards? You

need not be without company, fairest maiden of Edoras." He put his hand on the door to open it further, and proffered his other arm to her.

Éowyn's hostile gaze bored through him as she stood motionless. In return, he withstood her steely look and returned it. "I do not ask for your hand in betrothal, lone shieldmaiden." He tilted his head the slightest bit toward her bed. "I ask only to walk by your side to the steps of Meduseld. Surely it will not do you injury to do so."

Myriad emotions flitted through her before she settled on the safest one: dispassionate. "No, counsellor to Théoden, it will not do me a disservice to have you accompany me to the doors of the Golden Hall." Éowyn walked forward, pulled the door until she heard the satisfying snick of latch into its hole, then taking a deep breath, laced her arm through Gríma's and walked down the stone corridor toward the entrance of the Golden Hall, her heavy train trailing behind her.

She stood on the top step, relishing the presence of Meduseld's guards and feeling the more secure for it, despite her close proximity to Théoden's counsellor. Éowyn looked out at the ranks of Eorlingas soon to ride off in the morning sun, and cast her eye about until she could see him. Though his hair was bound in a short braid, the copper colour of his hair was easy to spot despite his similarly coloured helm. After glancing at Frithlíc, she cast her glance around the citizens of Edoras to find his sister, also easily viewed in the morning rays.

From a much closer distance near the gates of the city, Fréalas looked at her brother, leaving again for another patrol on the East March. He was wearing his helm and light armour, including a leather vest that she had decorated for him with twining snakes on both the right and left of the front. From this relatively close distance she could see him clearly once his horse stopped fidgeting, his narrow shoulders managing to bear the weight of his armour. Despite herself, she tried to find Tóswífan as well, even though they were on rather uncertain terms with each other. After only a brief time she saw him on his horse, Threohness, whose beautiful russet colouring was almost as unique as her hair. With a small sense of satisfaction she saw that even though they weren't currently speaking, the vest he wore was the one that she had made for him. No serpentine figures adorned it, however; rather there were emblems of eagle feathers and clouds. She caught his gaze briefly, but then he turned to look at Éomer.

Firefoot pawed the ground as Éomer, his rider, raised his sword. "The Third Marshal and his company rides to the east to patrol our borders. We shall return before wintergamen, if all goes well."

He gazed up at the wide stone steps of Meduseld to see uncle, sister, and ever-present counsellor Gríma. "Hail, Théoden King!" He turned his horse back around and the rest of the band readied their horses. Frithlíc and several other of the younger men in the group turned their heads to the assembled well-wishers to convey in a quick glance a last goodbye. For the next two months it would be nothing but riding and scouting, and while none hoped for battle, they knew that the orcs on their borders had become more numerous - by the thousands, some had said - and needed a more constant watch. Théoden raised his hand and Éowyn followed suit. "We shall return!" Éomer cried, then led his horse forward, and the group of twenty followed, their horses cantering, the last rider carrying a banner with the white horse of Rohan, which waved in the morning breeze.

"Ahhhhh." Gríma breathed out the one-syllable word over multiple moments as a steed snorted off in the distance. "It is a grave day indeed when such fearless," he breathed, nostrils twitching. "Such brave youths must be sent away to go and keep check on the borders of our lands."

As he casually combed his fingers through his hair, the man from northern Rohan with eyes of pale blue turned his head ever so slightly to catch Éowyn's eye, but unsurprisingly he found no respite there. Instead, he bore the brunt of two granite-grey globes staring at him. He continued to stand his ground quietly, since despite her obvious negative judgment, for months now he had held the power of the King behind him.

Below them, the soothing sound of hooves was growing ever distant. Fréalas kept her gaze set on the

last rider, holding the banner, until he and the company were nothing more to be seen than a cloud of dust on the horizon.

"Yes," Gríma spoke again quietly, "it is a grave day." Something in his countenance changed as he asked, "Lady Éowyn, would you care now to take counsel with me?" Gríma motioned with pale fingers, and the very guards of the Golden Hall escorted their liege into the building, leaving Gríma, Éowyn, and the ever-present swordsmen at the doors to the hall in a rather intimate foursome to bear the brunt of the autumn wind.

As the other residents of the city began to disperse and resume their routine activities of trade, farming and husbandry, Fréalas motioned her head toward the stables, and Léah, who stood near her, nodded in assent.

Éowyn instinctively used all of her warrior's senses instinctively to survey the odds about her, and judged that they were in her favour. "Gríma, trusted counsellor," she began, with all the formality that she could muster, "I have other pressing matters to attend to." After taking a lungful of air, she continued. "Please do not hesitate to consult me if issues of state become of such urgency that you need to see me, but otherwise I shall be out in Edoras dealing with the rather more mundane aspects of ensuring that the citizens of Rohan are safe enough to tend to their horses and loyal canine friends." Even as she said it, doubtful thoughts darted quickly through her mind: *Does Gríma think that we are all swayed by his words, or is he going to try and send me away as well? Maybe we Rohirrim are seen only as horse-riders who can wield sword and spear, useful only for keeping Orcs at bay. But surely not, surely Saruman will help defend us...* At this moment, Gríma, with a look on his face that she couldn't read, bowed and gestured for her to leave the confines of the stairs. *Wait.* She looked at him, anguish on her face. *Wait. You are the key, though I would not be the hand to turn you.* Her emotions battled as she quickly nodded her head and began the walk down the main road to the barrows and lands beyond the gates, her traditional sanctuary during the day.

Behind her she heard Gríma speak in a voice that rang with haughtiness, "Another time, then. These are dark days indeed for all who call the grasses of the Mark their home."

She wheeled around, her hand on the hilt of her sword, and was shocked at the unexpected expression that she saw on his face. It was one of misery, one that startled her enough to stop her purposeful pace away from the royal home. Éowyn locked her gaze to his, suddenly realizing that despite her personal loathing for him, she could be looking into the eyes of any one of her countrymen. She stood, listening subconsciously to sounds of women beating rugs, of family pigs running happily in the mud alleys of Edoras. She listened to the almost tangible sounds of now-absent men making their way to the furthest borders of the Mark on horses, their young riders unwise in the ways of the world...

This is what I shall inherit? The stone steps of Meduseld, a city of women and old men, myself the replacement ruler? she thought wildly, loss and pride commingling, making her unsteady on her feet. No, no... we are honourable and laudable people- we are worth defending. We shall defend Rohan even in her darkest days, no matter the words coming from this usurper's tongue.

Suppressing her maelstrom of emotions, she replied, "Another time." Turning her back on the carvings of the Golden Hall, she continued walking toward the gates of the city. Though she felt Gríma's eyes bearing on her as she made her way down the path, she refused to turn around as she walked down to and then outside the city gates, needing to get away from him and everyone else as well for awhile.

While she walked, some melancholy crept in under her bravado. She would miss Frithlíc, terribly. And she did wish that she were allowed to go on patrol with them. Though they would not acknowledge it openly, a few of the men being sent out in these companies knew that she, and a few other women, were their equals. And that they were needed. *But not unless there is actual war on our lands, Éowyn thought bitterly. Held safe until the last, and at that time, would there be aught to save?*

Standing near the barrows of her ancestors, she looked at the white flower-covered mounds, savouring the wind coming from the west. She stood for a moment, controlling her breathing, then took her sword out of its sheath and unbuckled the belt on which it hung, placing the decorated

leather off to the side. Before beginning, she took part in her own ritual, holding the sword upright before her face, and breathing its name aloud. "*Cwicseolfor*." Then, with a steady arm, she lowered it, the blade facing horizontally in front of her. Slowly at first, then faster she engaged her sword, leaning into parries and slices, but realized that her mind was wandering despite herself, thinking about Frithlíc, his kisses on the hollow of her throat, his narrow waist and firm belly, the inexpressible, joyous-painful-rapturous rush of passion that had overwhelmed her the first time they became familiars, only a few weeks before...

What can I do? she thought, dismayed, her concentration as scattered as the stars across the wide skies over the Riddermark. Then it came to her- she could try with her left arm. *A warrior never knows when she may be struck and have to wield with her weaker arm.* Standing straight again, this time with her sword in her left arm, she tried to do the same set of exercises, but she was much more sluggish and her wrist was not as strong. *Again!* she admonished herself, and swung again, leaning in and back, her knees making occasional cracking noises from the effort. Up, a controlled swing down, up, a controlled curve with her wrist... soon she was beginning to sweat, and when she eventually stopped to wipe her forehead with the back of her right hand she realized that the sun had moved a distance in the sky. The moment she stopped, though, panting with effort, her vision was again filled with her recent lover, whose adoring kisses she would now be without for several weeks. She missed him. He had not been gone from her side but for a few hours, but already she wanted to tell him more about her past, about how important it was to cool your feet in river water in summer, how she wanted to devour him with kisses, how she needed to hear his heart beat like butterfly wings...

Éowyn leaned down and picked up her belt, not for the first time pausing to admire the serpentine decorations that Fréalas had burned into it, the pattern an echo of the one that adorned Frithlíc's vest. She buckled the belt, then sheathed her sword, and after taking in another long look of the valley spread out before her, turned to return to the city. *Perhaps Fréalas and Léah could use some assistance in the stables,* she considered. *Poor Windchaser has been sickly, and I'm sure there is some mucking out to do.* While the niece of the king was not very fond of the sheep that were a mainstay of the economy of Rohan, she could spend day after day with the horses in the royal cavalry, even though many of them were now gone, off to the borders with their riders. She looked up warily at the imposing facade of the Golden Hall, but was relieved to see it absent of anyone except for the omnipresent guards, their polished helms shining in the sun.

She made her way around to the stables, which were strangely quiet. *Not many horses left, I suppose.* she mused as she walked through the door. Éowyn was troubled by all injuries sustained by the horses as though they were her own, and she found that she had unwittingly quickened her step approaching the stables. Once she reached the front of the building she continued in, then halted, unused to the quiet that awaited her. "Fréalas!" she called into the stables as she entered, rolling up the sleeves on her gown.

Léah leaned out first, a pitchfork in her hand. "Lady Éowyn! Fréalas and I began cleaning the back of the stalls shortly after the Riders departed." Her blonde braided hair had several pieces of hay in it, and sweat on her face caused even more matted strands to stick to her forehead.

Fréalas appeared from behind a sturdy wooden beam and walked into the main corridor between the stalls, wiping her hands down the front of her coarse dress. "Éowyn!" she smiled as she spoke. "What brings you here? Surely the mostly empty stables do not hold much interest for you."

Éowyn bore a sheepish expression. "Well, I was out doing sword practice, but I did indeed miss the stables, horses or no. I am used to being able to brush down Whitelock and I wanted to visit his stall for a moment, then look in on Windchaser."

The two older women looked at each other, then at Éowyn. "Shall I leave, Fréalas?" Léah asked. "Surely not all of us are needed here."

Fréalas nodded. "There are many tasks at hand to be done, and I thank you for your assistance in this rather ungratifying job of mucking stalls." She clasped Léah's shoulder and let her fingers linger there for a moment, then took her pitchfork as Léah nodded to Éowyn and left the structure.

Éowyn found her gaze following Léah as she walked away, noticing her full chest and eyes fringed with thick dark lashes for the first time. With questioning eyes she turned back to her friend. Something was happening in the silence between the words being said that she could not fathom and it made her feel slightly dizzy. Grey eyes found their mark in those of grey-green, freckles across her nose, so similar to that of Frithlíc.

"Why are you and Tóswífan not betrothed?" Éowyn asked the question as Léah's steps were heard around the side of the stables.

While she clasped the pitchfork, Fréalas turned her gaze to the floor, studying the patterns of hay and horse droppings as though through their unique placement on the floor they would reveal hidden messages to the viewer. Flies buzzed around the stable in the ensuing quiet.

"I am very fond of Tóswífan, and we have been in discussion about our future together," Fréalas began, still staring at the ground. "After much time spent with Léah, I am also very fond of her." She stopped for a moment, thinking briefly of how to explain how even passing friendly touches from this particular woman caused her skin to feel tingles wherever the others' fingertips had rested, and yet how that also intensified the desires and longing that she had for her male companion, but that she could not give herself entirely to either of them. She racked her brain to find words that would express the tumult that she had been trying so desperately to order within herself. Looking up, she said quietly, "I find myself drawn to both of them, though why this is I am unsure."

Éowyn's eyes became very wide, and she shrank back toward the solidity of the stall door near her.

"Think of this, Éowyn," Fréalas began again. "Do we not love both kin and friend, family and comrades in arms? We adore both mother and father. Why is it so incomprehensible that we should be drawn to both feminine and masculine, since we carry aspects of each within ourselves?"

Éowyn looked incredulously at Fréalas. "What does this mean? You still haven't answered my question. Why are you and Tóswífan not pledged to each other? Your eyes light up around him, I have seen it. What could Léah possibly have to do with any of this?" Éowyn looked searchingly at this closest of friends whom she had known since her childhood, the sister of her treasured Frithlíc, and wondered how she could now seem like a stranger.

Fréalas shrugged her shoulders, then bent her head down, as though bearing a heavy burden. "Tóswífan and I are grateful for some time apart, though the absence of his improper jokes and his inspired artistry weigh heavily on me. Léah and I..." her voice trailed off, then she looked straight into Éowyn's face. "Éowyn, I cannot explain it. It is as though she carries the shock of lightning. While I know that I am not to spend a lifetime with her, as our customs deem improper and wrong, I must admit that she seems to cast a spell around me. I would be lying if I said that my body is equally betrayed under her strong gaze as that of Tóswífan's."

Éowyn focused on the dust motes slowly dancing in the sunlight through the nearby window while Fréalas dejectedly stared at her hands on the pitchfork handle, then closed her eyes. She hadn't wanted to say anything at all, but Éowyn had turned out to be surprisingly perceptive, and she wasn't going to lie to her friend, as much as she wished that she could.

A horse snorted from another stall, and Fréalas raised her head to look at Éowyn. Her face bore a confused and mournful expression. "Fréalas," Éowyn began, "I do not understand how these conflicts have come to pass, and I will be the first to admit that I cannot begin to give you any guidance or advice, should you desire it. You and your brother have such generous hearts; I suppose it is small wonder that there is more than one whose affections you are attracted to." Fréalas shook her head ruefully, while Éowyn added, "But I could not support you pursuing any kind of... unnatural relationship. I think you should keep your eyes fixed on Tóswífan. Think of what beautiful children you will have, he is quite handsome and talented..."

"I know much more about him than you do," Fréalas said, angrily. "And I know how handsome and talented he is. I did not ask for your opinion, you are the one who asked me an intrusive question." She threw the pitchfork to the ground. "These distressing feelings are something that I wanted to

keep to myself and contemplate alone, not to be dealt your scorn and opinions."

Éowyn felt as though she had been slapped. "Fine! If all I have to offer you are my unwanted opinions, opinions that you used to value highly, I might add, and you want time alone, then time alone you shall have." She walked a few steps toward the door, then hesitated and turned around. "Does she know?" she demanded.

Fréalas' face was still flushed with anger. "Does Léah know how she affects me? No." She gave Éowyn a steely look. "I would never dream of behaving so improperly. No one knows. And Éowyn, if you value me at all, you will not say anything." Éowyn didn't move. "Not even Frithlíc. No one. I will sort through my feelings on my own. But you are free to go, if you wish." From the look on Éowyn's face, Fréalas knew that she had truly hurt her feelings, but she did not want to talk. She only wanted to do her work and then go for a long walk with Gold Eyes, who did not ask questions, but only wanted his head scratched.

"I am used to being dismissed by Théoden and Gríma," Éowyn said sharply into the hay-scented air. "But I did not know there would come a day when I would be dismissed by you." She turned and walked purposefully to the door, then left.

Fréalas' anger smouldered as she picked up the pitchfork from the stable floor and began tossing hay into organized piles. "Telling me about Tóswífan, as though she is my mother!" she muttered under her breath. "One day soon her wilful naiveté will be taken from her, and it cannot be too soon."

cwicseolfor= quicksilver

9. The Grasses' Sigh

Eastfold Settlement
October 3, 3017

***O wind, carry the burden of our lament
O drums, throb for the heart that beats no more
O pipes, chant our loss to the skies
O grasses, bend in sorrow***

Warrior of the plains, may your spirit run with the horses

The sun will not shine so fair with the loss of your bright eyes

***You have departed these fair grounds to join your brethren in the skies,
newest star in the heavens***

At twilight we will know that you gaze down on us, brave Frithlíc, Son of Frithmund

Your name will be forever whispered in the winds through the grasses in our lands

10. On Wings of Eagles

Dark. Everywhere, dark.

My sword! Reflexively my hand is on its hilt. I pull it out of its sheath, and point the blade outward. I do not know what devilry is afoot, but I will not be caught unawares.

Noise... there are others!

I look left and right, trying desperately to see in this soup of blackest night. Or is it day? Where am I?

I am in familiar territory, but I cannot place the exact location. My kin are in trouble; I hear the clashes of spear on shield, and guttural cries.

Orcs! Damn these foul creatures. What siren call is it that you heed when you cross our borders? Do you want more slaves? Is that it, you mud-beings, plague on this fair land?

I smell the stench of battle; blood and sweat of horse's fear and smoke. The scene before me is frustratingly dim. Where is the sun? The skirmish is to my left, so I run to join in their defense. But it is as though I am running through honey, my movements are slow, so slow...

Ai! It is Éomer, and Frithlíc, and others... the orcs do not stop, their thick arms hitting the helms of our guards, knocking them to the ground. Why am I hindered so? Let me loose my rage upon them! Accursed beings who slew my father- I will have my revenge!

I run, and run, and finally I am able to swing my sword at the closest orc, an ugly gash now running across his upper arm, forcing him to drop his blade. I need to find a weak spot in his armour, to thrust into his heart...die, you damnable creature...

"Éowyn!"

The anguished cry turns my blood to ice. Everything is too slow... I pull my sword from the chest of the orc and turn my head in the direction of the voice.

No... this is not possible...

My dear Frithlíc is lying on his back, his precious blood seeping into the ground. His torso bristles with several black arrows as he writhes in agony. An orc stands above him, about to take off his head with his sword, when Éomer turns and thrusts a knife up under the creature's chin. The orc staggers, then thuds to the earth, his foul form near that of this lone red-haired rider of the Mark. I drop my sword... all that matters is getting to him, taking care of his wounds, carrying him back to Edoras; I will do that, I will heal you...

I kneel beside him, my fair one, he alone whose music charms my heart. How could this happen?

I curse the arrows, it will make his travels back to the city more complicated, more painful. I will just go get the horse...

"Éowyn." It is almost a whisper, but I hear it through the din.

"Yes, my love. You are wounded; I will take you far from this place back home, back to the city, and your limbs will be cleansed of this terrible scourge..."

"Éowyn."

"Yes?"

I await his reply, and then look into his eyes. They do not blink.

His beautiful eyes no longer see me. I do not know what they see, but they do not see me.

"Where are you??!"

The sound comes from me, and yet, no one hears. I look at my dear one, dead at my side. I scream at the sky. There is nothing left. I lift up the head of my beloved, and stroke his face, then put my

body on his and clutch at him. How dare you leave this earth without me? I hear the sound of oncoming battle, but I care no more...

Edoras
February, 3018

Éowyn's eyes snapped open, and for several moments, she was unsure of where she was. Her hands clenched her bed covering, and without realizing it on a conscious level, she knew that she had been crying.

Slowly she took notice of sounds around her. Her bird, Máthmæht, unhappily awakened by the sounds that she must have uttered, was making displeased noises in his cage. It was a cloudy night, and only dim light shone in from her window. She closed her eyes again.

How many times must I have this nightmare? Finger by finger she loosened her hands on the blanket, and willed herself back into her room. *I was not there. Had I been, there would have been dozens of others of those foul creatures left to smoulder in the pyres.* She pulled the blanket over her head, trembling. *Damn them. Damn every orc back to the black pit from where they should never have come!* She tried to control her breathing, forcing the panic back to a more distant place in herself, further away. Far away...

She sat up. *Oh those who shine on us from the skies, please give me rest. I cannot continue to bear this.* Standing, she straightened her sleeping garment and went over to her golden finch, murmuring to him under his covering. "I am sorry, my little Máthmæht. I did not mean to wake you. But you can go back to sleep now, little one." She inserted her finger through the bars of the cage and stroked the bird's ruffled head feathers, and he appeared to be consoled. "I will just be off to find some water, or wine, and then I will be back to sleep myself."

Éowyn opened her door, and out of habit, looked both up and down the corridor before leaving. She went to the left toward the eating hall, planning to liberate a cup of something that she could take back to her room, wine, preferably, as she knew it would help her sleep. Several paces down the hallway, she took another left, and found herself in the kitchen, a high window letting in what little light there was. On a counter was a bottle of white wine from a seaside town of Gondor, half empty, from the evening's dinner. She made her way to it, but didn't see a cup, so she began to look through the nearby dishes that had been washed after the meal.

"Why is our fair princess of Rohan up at such an hour?"

Éowyn choked, hearing the sound of Gríma's voice so near to her. With her warrior's sense, she quickly took in the utensils on the counter, but there was nary a knife to be seen. *As of this moment, she promised herself, I will always bear an arm, even if it is simply my knife bound to my leg. Even in sleep.* She wheeled around, and saw the man in the doorway of the room, a slight smirk evident even in the dim light.

Baring her teeth in forced smile, Éowyn replied, "Why is our fair counsellor up at such an hour? Are there more men of the Mark who need to be sent to their doom, and you cannot yet figure out how?" She almost spat as she said the words, looking straight into his pale blue eyes.

An odd expression came over his face and he said, "My dear Éowyn, I too am a man of the Mark. Not a warrior, it is true." At this he looked out the window to the horizon of mountains, shrouded in grey clouds. "But I am a man of Rohan." Now he fixed his eyes on hers, then moved them slowly down, taking in her figure covered only by her nightshift of lightweight linen.

Éowyn tried to regain his gaze, thinking, *This is no man... he is a wolf who thinks he beholds a hare. But this hare has sharp teeth.*

She picked up the bottle of wine, and retorted, "And I am a woman of Rohan. I am awake due to a troubling dream. I should be asleep. A small cup of wine should help me in that pursuit." She was unwilling to turn her back to him, but she needed to find a clean chalice, and did not want his assistance. She looked up and down the counter, and saw an uncommon glass chalice at the end of the sideboard. Before she could reach it, however, he had quickly stepped over and picked it up.

"You seem to have the wine, she of the golden hair," he said, and twirled the cup in his fingers, his eyes never leaving hers. "But surely you are not so savage as to drink it from the bottle?"

Using more restraint than she knew she possessed, Éowyn calmly put the bottle on the board.

"Indeed," she replied, "though it seems that perhaps you think us less refined than your official voice belies."

Despite the obvious contempt in her voice, Gríma's expression softened. "Why do you despise me so, maid of Rohan? I have done nothing to harm you, and I wish only for your well being." The Wormtongue softly approached her, continuing to cradle the chalice in his long fingers. The skin of his pale hand gleamed despite the dimness of the cloudy night visible through the window.

Éowyn's face bore a look of incredulity. "My well being? Do you not linger here to serve as advisor to Théoden King, and therefore all of Rohan and her citizenry?"

Gríma took up the bottle of wine and poured most of a glassful, then handed it to Éowyn. His fingers brushed hers as she took the cup, causing an almost imperceptible shudder to run through her. He ignored her previous question, and said, "I am sorry about your disturbing dream. Do you here in Edoras share a saying common in the north, 'You have travelled with the eagles'?"

Éowyn continued to look him in the eye, and replied curtly, "No, that phrase is unknown to me."

Gríma tilted his head, running his hand through his shoulder-length dark hair. "It is said that when you have a dream as vivid and memorable as you must have had, that your spirit is travelling with the eagles."

"That is a disturbing notion," Éowyn spoke. "I do not think that I would ever care to be that far above the earth, whether awake or asleep."

The counsellor continued to look kindly at her, his gaze currently absent the leering look often seen in his eyes, and Éowyn found herself feeling empathy for him. *He too is one of our people after all, and even he may have suffered.* She picked up the chalice and took a long swallow, keeping her eyes fixed on his. *What a unique colour they are!* she mused. *Almost the color of robin's eggs.* Aloud she said, "We are not made to fly."

Gríma's mouth turned up in a smile. "No, daughter of kings. But I almost think that if you willed it so, you would find a way."

With a slight snort, Éowyn took another mouthful of wine, grateful for the tart liquid on her dry throat.

"The day would surely never come when I would rule in Rohan." Gríma looked at her, his eyes soft and his voice husky. "And yet, were that to come to pass, lovely Éowyn, mistress of the sword, would no longer need to feel caged in this city on the hill. I would let you roam free." He raised his hand to stroke her hair, having moved closer to her as he spoke. "You could ride with the Mark, your armour shining like a river in sunlight. Never again would you be held back, left behind, toasting the warriors and yet unable to taste yourself the battle whose lack seems to my eyes to consume you from inside."

Lulled somewhat by the wine and dull light, Éowyn continued to listen as Gríma walked behind her, lightly brushing her hair back over one shoulder as he moved. *How can he know so much?* she wondered, and drained her glass. *It is as though my thoughts hang around me like figs on trees, there for the plucking.*

"You feel like your little songbird, do you not?" His voice was low and silky, his mouth close to her ear. "I would never clip your wings. All of the plains of Rohan would be yours, and you could go on every patrol should that be your will."

Éowyn could see it. She was bounding away on Léoma, her polished sword at her side, a spear in her hand. She was wearing her armour, gazing off into the far reaches of the rolling grassy lands that were so dear to her, unfettered at last and free to hunt down and kill the filthy orcs that she knew were there...

He took some of her hair in his hand, caressing it, then dropped it as he ran a finger down the length of her back, saying, "Your realm would be as boundless as the wind...as long as you returned to me."

At that, the fog that had crept through her as she listened to his sugared words vanished. *Return to Gríma? He must be mad to think that I would ever seek his company.* She felt the heat of his breath on her neck, and stood quietly for interminable seconds, only then realizing how completely alone she was, and without a weapon. And yet, the vision still remained. *What is here for me to rule? I should indeed be their warrior Queen, standing proud on the steps of Meduseld, my mail shirt shining in the sun, leading the Eorlingas to their glories.*

"So..." Gríma's voice was next to her ear. "It is not so terrible a thing, you wild creature, to think of being raised above the rabble of this dirty city, to lead when you know that the people devoted to Théoden and his heirs will exalt you." After a shuddered breath, he continued. "You are due nothing less. You are like a butterfly kept in a cruel box, not allowed to spread your beautiful wings. How can you bear it?" He ran his fingers through her hair once more. "Will you not allow me to set you free?"

Éowyn closed her eyes, feeling his cold fingers run through her dishevelled hair, and considered surrendering to what must surely be the end. *He will send Éomer away, and Théodred, and Théoden is but his puppet. Perhaps I could stand by him, if he truly would allow me to be free...A sudden thought of walking up the steps of the Golden Hall, being greeted and escorted to Gríma's bedchamber, pale blue eyes demanding more than she ever wished to give assaulted her, and she came to her senses.*

Quietly and through gritted teeth, she said, "You are rather incapable of setting me free." Éowyn wheeled around, backing up a couple of steps. "You paint a very vivid picture, one that I am sure you have thought about for time uncounted." She stared at him as though for the first time. "Why I have caught your fancy I do not know, nor do I care to, but I have felt the ever-increasing weight of your glances for some time now. But Gríma, son of Gálmód, you shall never have me."

Gríma gave her a grim smile in the dim light.

Éowyn continued, "I sense that you had a good heart not long ago, but it has shrunken within you. I would prefer death to a so-called 'free' life with you."

Gríma looked as though he were a whipped dog. He nodded his head, and gave a perfunctory bow, then turned and walked toward the corridor. Stepping away into the dark, he said in a whisper that managed to carry down the stone corridor, "If not me, who else shall release the wild princess from her cage, now that her red-haired peasant boy is gone?"

Éowyn stood still, slowly absorbing what the Wormtongue had said. As nausea started to make its way from far inside her, she bit down on her lower lip until she drew blood.

How dare he? The thoughts tumbled through her like boulders down a mountain. **HOW DARE HE?**

As her knees began to buckle, she put the glass on the wooden counter, then steadied herself with her hands. She breathed in deeply for a few moments, then out of habit pulled her fingers through her hair a few times, then made her way back to her room.

After latching her door, Éowyn crossed the room and opened a wooden chest under her window. From it she withdrew a thin-bladed knife and clutched it to her chest. She turned and walked softly back across the sheepskin rug to her pallet. Once safely there, she curled up under the bed covering,

anxious for sleep but dreading it equally. She closed her eyes, willing her tensed muscles to relax. As she eased into the increased warmth of her covering, phrases of her conversation with the Wormtongue drifted in and out of her mind, like wisps of clouds across the sky. In a brief vision, she saw herself far above the plains of Rohan, mountains in her sight far off in the distance. *Should I ever find myself on the wings of eagles*, she thought darkly before falling into slumber, *I hope that they either take me to their eyrie...*

or that they let me fall.

11. Standing In the Shadows

Meduseld
March 2, 3019

How had it come to this?

Éowyn stood almost immobile, the struggle to keep her composure the only thing left to keep her from screaming the words into the dark room. *A tomb for the living*, she thought, the dark humour complementing her mood as she stood behind the gilded throne that cradled her once great uncle, now frail despite all that she and her brother had done to keep him from listening to that... that...

Wormtongue. The word rolled around in her head, slithering like he who bore the name. *I should take my knife*, she mused, *and while he is lurking outside my room, I will... wait, I will need a handmaid to be in my room in my stead, and then I will come up behind him and slowly slit his throat...No, he may cry out, I will have to cover his mouth and do the deed quickly before those whom he has corrupted come and find him...*

These were not new thoughts, but still they captivated her with a morbid fascination, and it did keep her mind from pursuing far darker paths, like those that led her to...

No. She stopped herself. The yawning abyss of loss and hatred threatened to overwhelm her, and so, consciously, ever so deliberately, she slowed her breathing, which had picked up speed. Self-control was the most powerful weapon she wielded in these dark days, and she tested it to the limits as the vision of only a few days prior arose unbidden before her. For who else was worthy...? *Worthy!* - the word seemed to spit from her mind... Who else was cold enough in heart to bear the agonizing process of bathing the flesh of Théodred, her dear cousin, preparing him for a barrow in which his fair, strong form should not have lain for at least a generation to come? She had been schooled enough in healing to know which herbs to mix for his funeral cleansing, a bitter bowl in which the water grew redder with each rinsing of her cloth.

She had wept while alone with him. Though the galling task of administering the last loving touches on him should never have been hers, it did enable her for a brief time to bear at least a different burden than that of being left behind, seemingly useless. *Ah Théodred, why is your father not here, to raise the mourning cry that should be heard across the plains?* With her sleeves upturned to facilitate her movements, she caught a glimpse of the pale inked horsehead inside her left arm. *Even we have been silenced*, she thought. *We who have trained with sword and bow next to our brothers have no skill against such devilry as this man whose words have defiled our halls.*

Théoden King only recently, and with astounding swiftness under Gríma's omnipresent consultations, had seemed to turn in on himself, as an apple forgotten on a table shrivels up to half its size. Shaking her head imperceptibly, Éowyn brought herself back to the present. As long as she had breath, she would remain a barrier between her beloved uncle and this interloper from a distant homestead in northern Rohan.

Seeing now that there were four strangers approaching, she subtly flexed her right calf, re-establishing for herself that her knife was still belted there, should things go wrong. *Or simply more suddenly wrong*. She couldn't imagine who would be visiting them during these terrible days, and acting as though she herself were simply a shadow of the throne, she let her eyes rove over the four

figures now standing in front of her uncle.

Odd. A wizened man, leaning on a staff, was speaking. "Hail, Théoden son of Thengel! I have returned..."

As a self-imposed shadow, she was only half listening to the actual words. They had disturbed Gríma, which brought her a perverse joy, and she almost smiled. The words, however, had also addled her king, which made her distressed, especially since he had stood in rebuttal, but then sank slowly back into his throne after she heard him finish, "...Why should I welcome you, Gandalf Stormcrow? Tell me that."

Gandalf? She longed to rush forward, to beg on her knees for him to stop time if he could, or turn it back to when she had first met him, before the horrors had begun. *Take me away, take me with you—do not stay here. Do you not see me? Have I truly become invisible to all except Gríma?* The oppressive weight of the inevitable kept her chained to the king's chair, and she didn't move. As though through a dense fog she heard coming from that monster's mouth in reply, "You speak justly lord. It is not yet five days since the bitter tidings came that Théodred your son was slain upon the West Marches..."

Again, the incomprehensible vision rose before her. True, he had been seventeen years her senior, but no father figure was he. Who else had spoiled her with unexpected fruit preserves in summer? Who had taken her on forays to the hidden swimming pools of the Snowbourn after she and Éomer had been taken under the wing of Théoden during those dark days of her childhood? And as the years came on and she had said that she wanted to learn above and beyond the skills of sword-wielding that were being taught to her, he did not scoff, but agreed to share his knowledge. How could it be that such an intuitive warrior, a man who could not be taken by surprise the morning after he had enjoyed large amounts of the fine wine shared at *wintergamen*, be the same figure with whose form she had recently become so intimate in such unrelenting quiet? She had rinsed the grime and blood from his wide ribs and abdomen, the Orc-arrow wounds gaping up at her, commanding her to disturb recent memories of another slain who was dear to her heart. This lone red-haired figure in the Eorlingas had been too persistent, too fond. She had allowed him into the tender recesses that she usually kept hidden away even from herself, and now he was

Dead.

Her father.

Her mother.

Her cousin.

Her uncle. Though his body was still present, her surrogate father was no longer there.

Her Frithlíc. Her joy. He could intuit her moods, which, while it irritated her to no end, also meant that she didn't have to bother with clumsy words, which were never her strength. *My strength.* It all came down to sinews on bone now, with her brother so preoccupied. *Imprisoned*, she corrected herself. *You have always only had yourself in whom to trust, she was reminded, so keep your tears for another day, they are an unaffordable luxury in this moment.*

Wait... what was this? Gandalf had raised his staff. The room was suddenly dark, and she heard thunder off in the distance. Éowyn gripped the chair and put a protective hand on Théoden's shoulder. *Point that wizarding stick at the Wormtongue. Kill him, and put us all out of this misery. Let this, please, be the end.*

She closed her eyes, then heard a commanding voice in the quiet. "Not all is dark. Take courage, Lord of the Mark..."

A rustle of movement beneath her hand caused her eyes to snap open. Her uncle was standing! No, more than stand, he was trying to leave the dais and go down the stairs. She hurried around the throne to assist him, as he had become so frail in recent months. She looked up from Théoden to the man who had commanded him to leave his royal throne. She stared at him, but he was focused on the King. *Gandalf! Why do you say nothing to me? See me.* She willed the words, but no sound came out,

and he walked toward the large carved doors.

Allowing her gaze to sweep the room, she noticed a heap of clothes on the floor. No, it was the Wormtongue. He was sprawling on the ground, a grimace on his face reflecting the knowledge that he could not escape. There was a grim satisfaction in her gaze as she beheld Gríma facedown on the floor of the Golden Hall. *That pose suits you well*, she smirked, savouring the image before her. *Crawling on the ground, as well you should be.*

Just then Gandalf rapped on the doors with his staff and he cried, "Open! The Lord of the Mark comes forth!"

The doors flew open and a wind rushed in. The scent of grass, and horses, and smoke from the nearby houses whistled through the room. It filled the room with life, like a shirt billowing on a clothesline in a strong breeze. Éowyn felt the bindings around her heart loosen, filled with pride seeing her uncle silhouetted in the doors of the Great Hall. Doubtless the guards were stammering in their greetings to this unexpected, yet most looked-for visage at the entranceway. Gandalf spoke, and she heard thus: "Send your guards down to the stairs' foot. And you, lady, leave him a while with me. I will care for him."

Fully attentive now, Éowyn stared incredulously at Gandalf, who had just dared to ask her to forsake her uncle who had just been brought back to her, and did not even call her by name. Théoden then turned to her and said, "Go, Éowyn sister-daughter! The time for fear is past."

A fiery rage sparked within her, and she saw the room through a haze of anger and loss. *How dare he? How dare **they**?* She clenched her left fist until she thought surely she would draw blood. *After all I have done, and suffered, watching our people killed needlessly, performing the dutiful role of surrogate daughter... how can they simply say the words and send me away, like a dog that has bothered his master's feet for too long?* The thoughts reeled in her mind as she tried to regain her composure. The moment passed, and resignation again took her. *The time for fear is past, he says.* Éowyn turned to leave. *Well I, for one, am not ready to sheathe my sword, even if I am sent away.*

She paused, feeling a keen gaze on her. The sensation was not that of a predator's on prey that she felt when the Wormtongue was around, but it was still discomfiting. She turned, and her eyes fell on a tall, dark-haired man now standing in the middle of the room. His clothes were not rags, exactly, but they and the wearer had obviously travelled many leagues and even more days to arrive at Meduseld. No sword or knife hung at his side, which was odd if not dangerous for a journeyman.

Ah, she mused, the guards would have seen to the disarming of our 'guests.'

She glanced at the face of this man who had so boldly fixed her in his gaze and she suddenly caught her breath. The sensation she had felt was sudden and shocking, not unlike that of being doused with a bucket of cold water without warning. The face that she saw was stern, yet beneath the surface she could sense the kindness and hope that lay there.

Hope!

She had not known that an expression could cut her to the quick, and she found herself shaking. Who was this man? Another magician, able to see into her soul and return to her unbidden that which she had lost?

"There is hope."

It was as though he had said the words, as they leapt unbidden to her mind. Her mind racing, she turned away, and fled to the familiar confines of her room.

Author's Note

As this story began to take shape, I wanted the chapters that directly quote LotR to be completely book canon. It was kindly pointed out to me by a faithful Beta reader that the parts in this chapter that refer to Théodred are movie canon, so I'm using writer's artistic license.

12. In Her Darkest Hour

Edoras
March 2, 3019

Their argument had been short, but venomously bitter.

"You absolutely cannot go," Fréalas insisted as she sharpened her sword at the grinding wheel.

"Of all in Rohan I must go!" Éowyn shot back, her face revealing the fury that raged inside her. "It is not right that you, and Willow, and now you tell me your own mother, are going to hide yourselves among the Riders leaving before nightfall! I am the one whose sword cries out for revenge. I am the one who needs to join with this bright-eyed man of the North who cured my uncle of Gríma's poisonous words and who shall surely do great acts in our defence. I am the one who will be left to mother the old and the children, standing alone in Meduseld. I am the one..."

"You are the one," Fréalas curtly interrupted, "who was selected, and rightly so, I might add, to be the leader of Rohan while the King and Éomer go to Helm's Deep." Fréalas' normally pale face was scarlet with rage. "What if none of us return? Who will our people turn to? Leading a people whose folk are as widely scattered as the Rohirrim are, into what appears to be a growing war, will take far more skill than simply wielding a blade, and I know you do that with an ability that far outstrips mine." Fréalas stopped pressing her foot on the treadle of the wheel and glared at Éowyn. "But if anyone's sword cries out for revenge, it is the chorus of blades of the house of Frithmund."

Éowyn felt herself taking a step back from her friend, unused to hearing such anger and reproach in her voice. She tore her eyes away from Fréalas, whose normally cheerful grey-green eyes were now boring through Éowyn with wrathful intensity, and chose instead to look at the sword balanced between the other's hands and round stone.

"Éowyn." The voice was gentler now, but still commanding. "You are the niece of the king. You must do your duty in this. I realize that you did not ask to be born into a ruling family, but you are no child and you have been well instructed in many matters of state and war."

"But I..." Éowyn began.

"You will remain here," Fréalas continued, forcing Éowyn into silence, "to carry out what may well be the most important task there is, which is to continue on, to fight against this evil that encroaches on our borders and protect your citizens. You do remember the oath you took, *Eorendel*?"

Stillness hung in the room, allowing muffled sounds of frenzied activity of the cavalry of Edoras preparing to ride west against Isengard to filter in like dust falling through sunlight.

"To defend Rohan even in her darkest hour," was the sullen reply. "So why can I not go with you?" Éowyn pleaded. "How am I defending anyone if I am standing on the front steps of the Golden Hall?"

"Éowyn!" Fréalas snarled the word into the air as she pushed the pedal again. "This is not your choice. It is your duty. Mother and Willow and I are going in secret because all swords are needed, and even as young men, youths barely out of childhood are included, we will fight as well with better chance of not being discovered. We are not going in order to win some kind of glory and valour!" Sparks flew where the blade of Nihtscadu was held against the stone, the sides coming to keenly sharp edges. "Think beyond yourself only for a moment. Do you not know how dearly I would prefer for you to be by my side? To hew at orcs and imagine Frithlíc's star sparkling in the heavens as his death is avenged? But that would be unforgivable for the other hundreds of souls in our lands who cannot fight. Who are, in fact, in need of guidance, and shelter, and food, and of reassurance. That is what a

good ruler provides, and I know you are capable of doing so.”

Fréalas lifted her foot from the treadle, and the sound of grinding metal ceased. She looked imploringly at her friend and said, “Can you not tell how much I will miss you?”

Éowyn, who had been chewing an already rather well-bitten fingernail, spat out, “I know nothing except that I am being abandoned when I should be going to fight. You can sit prettily on your high horse of ideals, for you do not have to ride it.” Éowyn stormed to the door of the armoury, then turned an icy gaze upon Fréalas. “Frithlíc always did say that you were too optimistic for your own good. If you think that by adding three women to the thousand Riders you will turn the tide of battle, then you are not optimistic, you are mad.”

She stomped away into the din of the city, blonde hair trailing away behind her. Fréalas took her sword and gave it an appraising look, then wiped it with a nearby cloth and sheathed it in its scabbard.

I am out of patience and out of tears, she thought to herself. We are both adults, and even though I am furious with her, I trust her to do what is right.

As she walked from the armoury, she muttered out loud, “But she is so stubborn! And arrogant! And self centred!” Shaking her head, she made her way back to her parent’s house to put together a small pack and to confer with Fréawyn. Mother and daughter had agreed not to tell Frithmund of their covert plans; they would perform their normal rituals of farewell, then put on helms and shields and follow at the end of the line of Riders.

An hour or so later, her copper hair pinned tightly to her head under her grey metal helm, Fréalas permitted herself one last look as the Riders thundered away from Edoras. Éowyn stood alone in front of the great carved doors of Meduseld, her mailshirt glistening in the sunlight and a forced expressionless look, Fréalas was sure, on her face. Turning her charge to keep up with the great host of Rohan, Fréalas allowed herself briefly to acknowledge the ache in her heart then pushed it out of the way to focus on the long ride and battle ahead.

nihtscadu= nightshade

Helm's Deep
March 2

Fréalas stood sentry on the inner gate, looking at the night sky, trying to ground herself in the familiarity of the animals and figures represented in the stars. *Even when we are gone, she consoled herself, those who come after us will be able to see the same stars, and all of these trials that we have suffered will not be for naught.* As she concentrated, out of childhood habit she bit down on her lower lip, letting her eyes flit from constellation to constellation, Eofer to Fiscere to Windeltréow with its cascading branches of stars. To the South, the stars were dimmed by clouds. She shivered despite her warm battle raiment, not fully understanding what dark forces were at work in that direction, but knowing that it did not bode well.

It had been a challenging ride from Edoras, to say the least. Fréalas, her mother Fréawyn, and Freatwas, more commonly known as Willow, had managed without much difficulty to infiltrate the ranks of Riders with very short notice. Many of those who had so valiantly left Edoras were boys a decade younger or more from Fréalas and Willow, and though set about in similar battle gear, their youth and fear absolutely pulsed around them. *The most difficult part, Fréalas considered, is knowing that Father is somewhere in this stone structure, and I cannot tell him I am here.* A light caught her eye, a quick flashing of a star coursing through the skies, shooting toward the earth. *No, perhaps not the most difficult, she reconsidered, thinking of Éowyn, who had finally accepted her responsibility of*

being unforeseen monarch, all the while wishing more than anything else to be off fighting with the men of Rohan.

Still. Fréalas was smarting from their argument from the day before, and decided that although their meagre fighting party could certainly use Éowyn's quick sword-hand, the rest of the people would need her far more. *And she needs to learn some discipline. Here she would continue to run wild, taunting Death itself if she could.* Despite her now-simmering anger, Fréalas risked a smile to the night sky at the vision of her friend standing her ground against forces far beyond her ken, then resumed her active perusal of the bleak landscape before her. Since she was alone in this part of the gate, she had taken the liberty of taking off her helm though she kept her hair in a braid. Her hair was not so long as to be curious, and in the cover of night and solitude, she felt that she could risk having a bare head for an hour or so.

"Did you solve your riddle of the stone?" The voice was right behind her.

Drawing her knife, Fréalas spun around to face whoever had caught her unawares. Angry and trembling, she found herself looking at the very man who had caught Éowyn's attentions. Despite Fréalas' height, he was far taller than herself, with dark hair and piercing grey eyes. There was an expression of mirth in his face, though there were dark circles under his eyes. Slowly he raised his arms to show he would not draw his sword.

"I take it," he looked down at the knife pressed against his mail shirt, "that too many years have passed for you to recognize me, especially in this place and in these days." The beginning creases of a smile formed at his lips as he continued, "Though this is the unlikeliest of places I would have expected to see a woman of Rohan. I suppose I am safe in assuming that you are not alone, and that you few are here in similar guise. Rohan has indeed valued both sons and daughters in its defence, even if the latter are more difficult to see with unaccustomed eyes."

Unwilling to move her knife, Fréalas looked him up and down, noting his worn clothes and mud-covered boots. Slowly, very slowly, a full smile crossed his face, and a very distant memory came to the fore of Fréalas' mind. Long ago, back when she was still a child living in the Firien woods settlement... shooting arrows... the woods... a stranger... With a start, she exclaimed, "Long-Walker?!"

He nodded, and said, "You are old enough now, Fréalas, daughter of Fréawyn, to know my true name. I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn, of the Dúnedain."

Fréalas let her arms drop, and asked simply, "How do you remember such a one as me from many years ago? I am a child no longer, and we are indeed far from those fair woods."

Aragorn gestured at her hair. "That colour on one of the Rohirrim is unique enough to remember, no matter the age." He motioned to her knife, and the sword girt at her side. "I see that you are as good as your word, and continue to defend your folk, even in the most dire of circumstances."

Fréalas shrugged. "I do not wish for my end to come any sooner than it must, nor any of our people. We have lost far too many of our brightest on routine patrols, and now our young and old are here to bear the brunt of the evils of Isengard. Why should those who can also bear sword and shield who happen to be women not be allowed to do their duty?" She swallowed before continuing. "In truth, I am here in large part to avenge my dear brother, killed not three years ago. My mother is here too, and father, though of course he could not know that the remainder of his family is here." Fréalas gazed deeply at Aragorn, searching for the judgment that she felt sure she would see, and when she didn't, she continued. "You will not betray our trust, Aragorn, son of Arathorn? For you do seem to be a man who keeps his word. We are not here for glory in battle, but it is not right for youths so recently out of childhood to be here, nor men with heads of grey, and so we few felt it would not be so terribly a wrong to join them, even if we are seen as contrary to our gender." Aragorn continued his intent listening. "'All grasses sigh in the wind.' It is a phrase we Rohirrim have, meaning that we are all equal when one thinks of life and death, regardless of gender, or how large your pasture is, or the numbers of sheep in the paddock, or children running around the house..."

Aragorn looked intensely at her, and while she felt somewhat apprehensive expressing her innermost thoughts on why she was at this stronghold of her ancestors in the guise of a male Rider, under his unsettling gaze she felt suddenly very young again, as at their first encounter many years ago. Even in the dark of that very black night, Fréalas knew she was blushing.

"I am grateful to you and your kinfolk, brave daughter of Oromë." Aragorn nodded his head to her, then with his tired eyes twinkling, said, "As long as your helm is on your head, and your head is still connected to your fair form, your true identity is safe with me. I am very sorry about the loss of your brother. These days are dark indeed, but if bright days ever dawn again, I will hope that you are blessed with many fair faced children to run amuck on the plains of Rohan. Perhaps one will even be as fearless as the one I met many years ago." Before turning to go, he looked earnestly at her. "We will need all of the courage that can be mustered when the scourge of Orthanc arrives. Keep your helm on your head, and may your sword flash with the fire that is in your spirit."

Fréalas stood staring for a few moments as the Dúnedan walked away, off to visit other lone sentries, or, she hoped, to get some sleep. She turned to look at the night sky once more, then leaned down and put her helm back on her head, after twisting her hair up underneath it. After several minutes of staring at the sky, she thought, *Well, maybe I can see how he caught Éowyn's eye so quickly. He is an honest, caring man. And a handsome one. And he listens...*

She shook her head, looking out at the ever darkening sky, not at all sure whether the butterflies that she felt were from speaking with this man from her past or from the battle only hours away. Focusing on the horizon, she took several deep breaths, resting on her sword. Looking up at the stars again, she spoke quietly under her breath, "Please look after me, and Mother, and Father, and Willow, and all of these honourable people. We only want to defend ourselves... but if we fail, please take us up and add us to the lights in the sky."

Fréalas shouldered her shield, and proceeded to walk around the circle of the inner court of the Hornburg to stay awake.

fiscere= kingfisher
windeltréow= willow

Meduseld, March 3

Éowyn stood gazing out her window at the White Mountains, their snow-covered peaks gleaming in a sterile beauty that seemed to mock her as she looked at them. She was alone, her room unlit by even one torch, and as she finished her glass of wine, she realized with a start as she went to pick up the bottle to refill it, that it was empty. *Am I drunk?* she wondered. *What does it matter?* she consoled herself. *Even the forked-tongued Gríma has left these halls, this city, filled with nothing but ghosts of people left behind to wait for their eminent deaths.* Putting down her glass, she resumed her vigil at the window. Her eyes unfocused, and then was suddenly overwhelmed by a vision. "No... no..." she murmured, wishing the images away, but they had her in their hold and as always, she was helpless and surrendered to them.

She could see the fighters of Rohan, their helms with proud plumes like horses' tails, shining in the sun, standing in rows like the orchard trees that brought forth apples and cherries in the warm summers. And then terrible things, black things, more countless than ants when disturbed from their hilled homes, rushed through, hewing and hacking, felling the soldiers row by row. Then she saw Aragorn, or saw only his piercing grey eyes, seeing through her to her naked soul, willing her to go there, to bury the dead, even as his sword, which seemed to have flames licking its blade, cutting away at the horrific black creatures, the very light of his sword making them quail in fear. *Must I, my lord?* her seeing-voice wailed. *Let me instead raise Cwicseolfor and join you. My place is with the living, not the dead.* The grey eyes turned again. *Then wait for the living. They will need you. Hope*

still reigns. She saw to the far edges of the lines of the Mark, saw that many still stood, and pride again leapt within her heart. *Yes, yes I will be here to lead them!* In seeing so many pitilessly cut down, her blood began to boil, then all of a sudden, all she could see were the cold mountains off in the distance, an icy wind on her skin coming in from the open window. A deep shudder brought her to her knees, and she felt as though she had run for many leagues and was exhausted. She folded in on herself, resting her head on her knees as she lay prone, Máthmæht chirping agitatedly in his cage.

The Hornburg
Early morning, March 4

Her arms ached with every swing, stroke after stroke, most of the them splattering her with gore and black orc blood. *How long had this been going on? Did it matter?* She staggered backward, chest heaving, resting her arms for a brief moment while there was a rare pause in orcs crawling over the wall. Fréalas was adrift, floundering in a sea of carnage. As though through a fog she heard screams, guttural incomprehensible yells, an incessant grating of metal on metal and the sickening softer sounds as knife and arrow sank into flesh. She gagged, again and again, trying not to heave up the bile that had formed in the base of her throat. A wild coherent thought dashed through her mind as she leaned over, alternately heaving and drawing haggard breaths: *Éowyn, pray with all your soul to the stars that you never have to go through this.* Then there was another set of foul metal-covered fingers scraping the walls, and she rushed forward.

Out of the corner of her eye as she swung her sword down, hacking a black hand from its former owner, she saw someone in Rohirric armour collapse, the graceful movement a mockery of the unjust act that caused him to crumble at her feet. Then the orc behind him fell backwards off the wall, a telltale elegant arrow in his eye that revealed that the lone Elf she had seen from a distance had found his mark yet again. Taking precious seconds, she glanced down and then immediately wished she had not. It was Fultwine, a mere boy of fourteen at the most, and one who had spent much time with her at the sheep paddocks, showing as much promise as Éomer in his sheep-shearing abilities. His creamy pale skin was now rudely covered in his own blood, his throat cruelly slit. Fréalas leaned her head back and howled a cry of rage and anguish. Heedless of everything else around her, she dropped her sword and sank to her knees, caressing his face with her leather-covered fingers, her tears dropping on to him, cleansing some of the grime from his youthful cheeks. Suddenly she heard the horn and cry to retreat, and after placing a kiss on his forehead, she gently lowered his head to the ground, then sternly wiped the tears from her eyes, picked up her sword and followed the other remaining fighters into the heart of the Keep.

March 5

Fréalas and her mother Fréawyn rode behind the *eored* with the other refugees from Helm's Deep, not that their presence would have attracted much attention at that particular moment. All persons still riding on horseback were exhausted, and filthy beyond recognition to anyone save immediate kin. Willow had found them, and after grateful embraces of appreciation and thankfulness for still being alive, she had volunteered to take their swords and armour since her parents had died a few years before and she did not need to disguise her return. This allowed the two women to better blend in with the rest of the women of Rohan returning from the keep. Unbeknownst to them, however, the women, children and elders of Edoras had actually gone up to the plains of the Firiensfeld, and didn't yet know that it was safe to return.

It was as though the fire that normally burned in the feet of the horses of the Rohirrim had been extinguished; they had lived to see the day, to be sure, but the cost had been dreadful, and the horses felt it as keenly as their riders. Some women behind them were singing a song of triumph, their clear voices reaching up to the sky, but Fréalas found her heart still far too heavy to contemplate joy. As she silently rode back to their city on the hill, Fréalas found herself assaulted by visions: her brief conversation with Aragorn; the interminable night; weeping over Fultwine, lying dead next to the

wall; standing with the rest of the Mark inside the Keep, her sword held unsteadily in front of her ribs, unable to fathom what further terrors might yet come...

She found herself lulled by the quotidian sensation of riding a horse over level ground, shivering in the cold wind that blew incessantly through the grey sky until her nose registered an unfamiliar smell, and she looked to the west. Though this was unfamiliar country to her, she instinctively knew that trees had been burned, and as the acrid smoke wafted over her, she choked. Turning her head, she could see the damage that had been wrecked while they were fighting in the hold of her ancestors, and, unbidden, tears coursed down her cheeks. It was as though the very children of Rohan had been set aflame while she was fighting side by side with their parents. Trees had been butchered and set alight, their monstrous glow still visible in the unforgiving light of day. Fréalas could not bear it, and lowered her head so that she could blindly continue on.

Frithlíc. Had he been truly avenged, when so many others had been slain as well?

Vengeance. Revenge.

She turned the words over and over in her mind as she willed herself to keep riding forward. She tried to make the words have meaning, but could not. Instead, they became hollow syllables in her head, mere sounds. She forced herself to listen to the singing, yearning to lighten her heart, to revel in the overthrow of the scourge sent from Isengard, but everything within her was full of mourning.

For a brief moment, she looked up into the iron-grey sky, empty save a few pale streaks of cloud and a carrion-bird making slow, deliberate circles around the distant stronghold she had left. It was almost beautiful, its elegant motion, the inexorable pattern down and down, until she thought about the tall barrows on which it would rest, so many golden-haired men, and youths, who would never know that the evil had been overcome. *Do they hear our lamentations?* she wondered. *Surely even as they are at rest they know that their names will be sung for generations to come...*

Fultwine.

And then the tears began again, even as she surrendered to the reassuring feeling of riding on solid earth, grass brushing the horses' flanks.

Frithlíc. Her mother. Her father.

Aragorn.

She was assaulted by grey eyes that could see through to her very soul, and she didn't care. *See what you will- I have tried to be brave, to uphold my secret vow to defend the Riddermark. But not to be fighting side by side with children, seeing them cut down, this is not the way things should be...*

Smoke filled her nose, riding... riding...

What is there to do? We cannot resist such reckless hate for long. She looked over at her mother for solace, but Fréawyn was lost in her own thought, a dirty strip of cloth across her forehead covering a deep gash. Had they made a difference, she and her mother and Willow? *Does my father still live? Or Tóswifan? Why was I allowed to survive?* Her thoughts were sluggish, all of her senses still in shock from the trauma of battle.

And so she kept riding.

Fultwine= fultum- help, support, aid

13. Where Will Wants Not

Hold of Dunharrow
March 10

It had taken some bribery, to be sure, but these were desperate days. Éowyn had realized with a bit of a shock that she could frighten people simply by looking at them, and idly wondered what expression it was that must be present on her face. It didn't matter. In the Hold of Dunharrow, surrounded by the dead-eyed statues of the Drúadan, she found a black joy in having secured the tools of disguise that she needed. Helm, hauberk, mail... now it was just a matter of keeping this gear hidden in her tent. That and continuing to pretend that she was still playing the part of the dutiful daughter, mourning yet again as brother and uncle and muster of Rohan rode off to battle and glory.

She was disgusted at her weakness that had allowed her to beg Aragorn to let her accompany he and his small band on their surely deadly sojourn on the Paths of the Dead. *On my knees, a refugee from our Royal House*, she mused bitterly. *Never again shall it be said that Éowyn, daughter of kings, was beggared in such a fashion. Though he is noble and fair of face...* Here she shook her head, dismayed at admitting to herself that she had felt drawn to him, only to be rebuffed. *Nay. Rather let the tale be told of Dernhelm, struck down in battle, defending his king.*

In this moment of dark reverie, she looked tenderly at her bird in his little bower, her songbird the one extraneous item she had brought with her from Edoras. "Ah máthmæht." she sighed. "I think you must understand me better than anyone, even Fréalas." She shook her head. "Although of everyone, surely she will appreciate that it was only due to her success that I believed I too could disguise myself with the Riders." Éowyn walked over to the cage, paused, then lifted the latch on the wooden door. The little bird hopped on to her finger, affectionately nibbling at her short fingernail. With gentle strokes, Éowyn patted the yellow feathers of the finch. "We are both to be without cages now," she whispered, as the bird tipped its head right, then left. Éowyn walked to the flap of her tent, and raised her hand skyward. *Go now, my little treasure.* She willed the little bird to fly as far away as it could, but it landed on one of the nearby statues, still looking at her and tilting his head back and forth, rustling his feathers. "Go!" Éowyn said aloud, startling the bird so that it flew into a tree. There it hopped around, then flew off toward the valley below. *Yes, go home, for home you have*, she thought. *The battleground will finally be my home. Éowyn the trammelled is now set free.*

Though it was early morning, an uncomfortable darkness draped the encampment like a winter blanket that smothers on an unexpectedly warm night. Éowyn had not slept much, and so had risen early and was now dressed in preparation for the leave-taking. She was in battle garb, wearing her leather vest with its markings of horseheads and sworls, girt with sword and knife, her hair hanging loose over her shoulders. She did not wish to be caught unawares and inattentive, so she stood outside of her tent in the cold air, drinking some bitter flavoured hot water that was readily dispensed at the fires near the cooks' tent.

When she was halfway through her mug, she saw her uncle Théoden coming to her tent from the royal pavilion, Éomer close behind. Readyng herself, she put down her cup, and with her left hand picked up an earthenware chalice that she had had filled with wine. Théoden walked toward her, and she looked up at him, masking the sliver of hope she carried in the depths of her being that he would, at this last, desperate moment, ask her to join his company. Upon reaching her tent, Théoden stopped and stood before his dear niece. Her right hand on her sword ready to take a vow of allegiance, Éowyn looked up at him. She felt that she was ready to meet the gaze of his stern countenance, no matter the content of the unspoken message she might find there. As she looked into his clear blue eyes, however, she was overwhelmed by the love and anguish that she found, and she felt a deep ache in her heart.

She kept her composure, however, and grasping at the hilt of her sword, she looked first at him, and then her brother. "May the strong legs of our horses carry you far, and the fair winds on the plains be ever at your back until you return to our fair Edoras, O Lords of the Eorlingas." Having said such, she took a sip of the wine, then handed the cup to her uncle. He clasped it in both hands, took a deep draught, then passed it to Éomer. Closing his eyes, he held it by the stem in his right hand and drank, then handed it back to Éowyn. She looked at the meagre contents remaining, then putting the chalice to her lips, finished it off.

"Ferthu Théoden há!" She said, her eyes shining. Turning to her brother, resplendent in his armour, she echoed, "Ferthu Éomer há! Would that I were to accompany you in such glory and honour, but many of us are needed to defend our borders whilst you are absent." She put down the chalice, and walking a few steps to her brother, she threw her arms around him, murmuring words of safe return into his ear. Releasing him, she stepped over to her uncle. Securing her hands on his shoulders, her grey eyes looked keenly into his and she said, "Since the death of Éomund and Théodwyn you have been my father; I hope not to be made an orphan for a second time." She took in a deep breath of the cold morning air and continued. "You are loved dearly by your people, and there are those whose affections you may not yet know until you are on the battlefield. Even then, know that you are not alone, no matter how dark seems the sky."

At this, Théoden looked at Éowyn, a sparkling gem in stony Meduseld. As he realized how closely she resembled her mother, he was suddenly robbed of speech. What could he say, knowing there were thousands of men to ride behind him down to Gondor, and to what end? He did not feel that he would ever be back to look upon the walls of the house of his ancestors, but now was his time to lead and be their King. This knowledge was heavy enough burden to bear.

"My dear Éowyn, the hearts of our people are with you in my absence." Taking her hands from his shoulders, he held them in his own, and clasped them above his heart. Leaning, he spoke quietly, "I will not always be king. Take care of our folk, dear sister-daughter. In none other would I trust more."

He stepped back, and keeping her hands in his, he kissed her clenched thumbs, then stood back, holding himself erect. "Westu Eorlingas há! The Red Arrow has been proffered and we must to Mundburg, even though we may ride to our doom." Théoden and Éomer turned and left the Hold, while Éowyn stood, the empty chalice at her feet.

The Muster of Rohan rode for a brief while to Edoras, then stopped for a meal and to add three score Riders to their ranks. Éowyn stayed far from Théoden and Éomer. *This would indeed be darkest day if I were to be discovered and sent to mourn with the women of Underharrow, she thought bitterly. No, tis better to be silent on the road to Mundburg. Men wish to be with their own thoughts before battle, and this will assist in my disguise.* She looked around the camp as they readied to depart, and she realized that she did not lament leaving the city of her youth. *It is Dernhelm who ventures forth, she contemplated. Éowyn was lost to Rohan after she begged on her knees, and she remains in the Hold, never to be abandoned again.*

She saw the hobbit speaking with her uncle, and after an apparent unpleasant interchange, he left the King's side and went off to sit by himself. Though she had met the child-looking and yet very adult-seeming Meriadoc only briefly, she felt a keen fondness of him by his obvious loyalty to her uncle. It did not seem to suit someone who seemed so fond of jests and a simple life - the fact that he was there among her kindred was odd enough, and on those rare occasions when she had seen him, he appeared truly overwhelmed by all of the goings-on. *In truth, she considered, the only time that I have seen his eyes light up was during one of our meals taken together. But he is also kindred spirit to me, as he must feel left behind and unwanted due to his size, as I am due to my sex.* Even as the thought came to her, she gathered her gear and mounted her horse. *Perhaps two of us may, with some slight of hand, be counted among those who love the Rohirrim enough to fight for them, regardless of station.* With these thoughts, she trotted her horse over to the curly-haired young man, now staring dejectedly at the ground with his hands shoved into his breeches pockets.

Quietly Éowyn approached him, and leaning down so that only he could hear, said, "Where will wants not, a way opens, so we say, and so I have found myself." Startled, he turned to face her, a distraught expression on his face. "You wish to go whither the Lord of the Mark goes: I see it in your face."

"I do," he replied, then focused his attentions on his feet.

"Then you shall go with me." The plan was now clear to Éowyn, and she continued with exhilaration. "I

will bear you before me, under my cloak until we are far afield, and this darkness is yet darker. Such good will should not be denied. Say no more to any man, but come!"

Merry looked up, his gaze expectant, yet wary. He thought of how far he had come from Buckland, and the dangers ever-present. Then he thought of how he had felt like extraneous baggage even to Théoden, his liege-lord, and of his dear friends, and knew that no matter the cost, this was the unlooked-for opportunity he had hoped beyond hope would come.

"Thank you indeed!" he replied. "Thank you, sir, though I do not know your name."

He knew that he faced the same grey-eyed Rider he had seen earlier in the morning, whose attentions had caused a shiver to go down his spine, though he did not know why. *Now is not a time to shrug off a gift mug of brew*, he thought, *and goodness knows when I'll next see one of those!*

Éowyn sat upright on Windfolá, an unexpected mirth in her eyes. "Do you not?" she said softly. "Then call me Dernhelm."

Meriadoc made a quick glance around the camp and, realizing that all of the Riders were busying to their own affairs, climbed up onto the grey horse, hidden under the cloak of the slight physique of Dernhelm. The warriors swiftly readied their horses, and Merry soon wished that he had a pillow under his backside for this long journey. He was grateful to Dernhelm, most assuredly, but the young Rider was not one for conversation.

Éowyn rode with the Rohirrim toward Gondor through the next few days, the holbylta hidden in front of her. She held her thoughts tightly to herself, but there was something in the scent of his curly hair that drifted up to her keen nose that made her think of her early childhood, and it brought her unexpected contentment. *We are all of us to our end*, she thought, *but this way is less lonely than I had anticipated.*

Firienfeld
March 11

Fréalas stood in Éowyn's lodging on the Firienfeld, absorbing its emptiness, still reconciling herself to what it meant for its occupant to be absent. The fighters had returned from Helm's Deep only to be relocated to a camp at the foot of the Starkhorn. They were then sent off again to Gondor, heeding the call of a centuries-old alliance asking the Eorlingas for aid as the Gondorians were besieged by forces in Mordor. Fréalas had been so traumatized by the fighting at the Hornburg that she hadn't even sought out her friend, and Éowyn, still furious at being told to stay back, had not come to see her. She knew that the three women had survived since Fraetwas had come to her tent and told her some of the details of the war.

Éowyn was desperate for the particulars, especially those concerning Aragorn. "So he yet lives?" she asked, and Willow nodded. Éowyn pondered this news as Willow continued.

"But Éowyn, there is no splendour to be found in war. This was for survival only, against ridiculous odds, and far too many of our people were killed fighting the river of foulest creatures that poured forth from Orthanc. Young boys, our grandsires- they should not have been there. Fear was on the faces of so many, trying to be brave, but even Riders who have fought many times before turned pale at the sheer number of these evil beings." She shook her head, and limped a few steps closer, nursing a deep cut behind her knee where an orc-blade had made its mark, slashing through her armour. "There must first be sung songs of lament before those of triumph about men of the Mark dying on the walls of the Deep, their precious bodies trampled underfoot by Orcs. I can see in your eyes that you want only to wield your proud blade, but the reality of it, the noise, the blood, the stench... it was a nightmare come to life. Do not continue to wish for battle."

Now Fréalas stood in Éowyn's tent, her sword as always girt at her side, her fury building yet again. "How will you defend your actions, should you return?" she said aloud into the silence. "You should be here protecting your home, but it has become painfully obvious that you have defied every mandate

given you and you are hiding among the Riders, so desperate to fight that you have deserted your people." Clenching her fists, she growled, "You have abandoned me! How could you continue to be so self-focused during such times of danger? ARRRGH!" The last word came out as a yell as she ran over to Máthmæht's empty cage and kicked it soundly so that it crashed to the ground. She kicked it twice more as it lay on the earthen floor, denting the thin bars with her sturdy leather shoes. "Runaway! Deserter!" With a last resounding grunt of anger she shoved the cage again and stormed out through the doorflap. She almost ran into Swiðhild, one of Théoden's older advisors who had stepped into Háma's role after he was slain at Helm's Deep and after the refugees of Edoras realized that their King-appointed leader was nowhere to be found. "Pardon me, Swiðhild," she snapped, then continued down the grassy path.

"Fréalas!" he exclaimed. "Are you going to the armoury to take an inventory of what weapons remain?"

"Yes I am. I was on my way but I had a few last words to say to our absent liege." Her face was still faintly flush with anger as she continued. "Do not worry, I shall not fail in my responsibilities of ensuring that all are armed as well as can be."

"Your mother is in Edoras, gathering more provisions, correct?"

"Yes," Fréalas nodded. "Several others went with her and they should return by twilight. They will also refresh our water supply and bring some sheep with them. And Gold Eyes."

The older man raised an eyebrow. "Will your dog aid in our defense?"

Fréalas smiled. "He can be quite ferocious when he needs to. And the children love him. They are doing the best that they can, given the situation, but it would be nice for them to have a playful companion up here until we can return to Edoras."

Swiðhild nodded, then turned to attend to another of the many tasks ahead of him. He and Fréalas were now the primary leaders of the exiles, coordinating the logistics involved in keeping a group of several dozen sheltered and defended as they settled in to wait for the return of Théoden and the Eorlingas, hoping desperately that the orcs would not pursue them to this sanctuary on the mountain.

And so they waited.

Swiðhild= strong-battle/war

14. Fly Away Home

Drúadan Forest, Eilenach Beacon
March 13

Not a breeze to stir this wretched, still night! Éowyn thought to herself, standing in dark shadows behind a tree. Her uncle Théoden and brother Éomer were in conversation with a creature so odd that had she not seen it with her own eyes, she would have believed anyone else describing it to her had enjoyed too much wine. *It? He?* looked disturbingly familiar, but she was sure that she would have remembered seeing and hearing such a one as this. It was a man shorter even than the holbytla whom she had taken with her, his desperation drawing her to him like a magnet to iron. This creature, however, had a beard, and wore grass around his middle, and looked as though he had walked out of the nearby stone. Even his voice sounded like rocks grinding together.

As Dernhelm, she was able to blend in with the Riders, but she had taken to speaking as little as possible to avoid suspicion, and all in the company were few of words. *I must be already half-dead, she considered, and therefore only taken half as much notice of.* Despite such thoughts to which she clung tightly, her mind strayed to the halfling, Meriadoc. *Well,* the ghost of a smile on her face, *almost*

all are few of words. He had suffered during their four days' journey to this place, and she was assailed by a wave of pity. *He does not really know,* she thought, *what our end is to be. But he is of stronger kind than I would ever have considered.* Leaning into the tree so that she could better hear the conversation between this person from seeming ages past and her kin, she thought back to when she had invited Merry to join her in her perilous ride.

He had not recognized her in her raiment as Dernhelm, and he had tried more times than she could count to engage her in a conversation while they fled to the south, the fair lands of Rohan passing league after league under the swift feet of Windfola. "So!" he had attempted. "You don't want to leave the side of Théoden either, do you? I mean, King Théoden? Even though you aren't wanted? I think he really does like hearing about the Shire, and I would like nothing better than to show him around Buckland and the Brandywine, but he is so busy..." and "Well, that wine they serve in Rohan is nice, I would never snub my nose at that, to be sure! But it doesn't begin to compare to the ale we have in the Shire. You should come and visit sometime! I will personally pour you a pint myself from the Master of Buckland's keep if you'll just make the journey. I know that it is a long way, but more than worth the effort, if I do say so. You'll love Pip, I mean, Peregrin Took, he is my first cousin on my mother's side and he can be irresponsible at times, but we have some grand plans for the future, assuming Gandalf has kept him safe, that is..." here he had stopped, and hanging his head, took to looking at the plains as they sped under their horse.

A night ago, she had bivouacked near to him, and hearing him cry out in the night, she had let down her guard to console this other lost soul whose path she had joined as they rode into a yawning blackness.

"Pippin!" he had murmured into the dark. "The stone! Don't look into the stone! He will take you with him! Pippin!"

Éowyn raised her head, awakened by his cries, and seeing that he had not alerted others in the Mark sleeping nearby, she took the liberty of moving nearer to him. Assured of the heaviness of the night, she put her arm over his small form, hoping to provide comfort. He ceased his dream-speech, and she passed the rest of the night in a rare sound sleep, his even breathing somehow evoking a sensation long unremembered, that of being rocked outside in a cradle, under the skies.

Now she refocused her attentions on what was being said. "Let Ghân-buri-Ghân finish!" the stony man seemed almost to be shouting in his low and gravelly voice. "More than one road he knows. He will lead you by road where no pits are, no gorgûn walk, only Wild Men and beasts..."

In a flash it came to her. *The statues that line the stairs to Dunharrow! But that is leagues away from this forest - perhaps Fréalas really did see one of them.* The thought of her friend was a painful and angry one, bringing back with it the memory of that decisive morning when Aragorn would not let her join his small company on the Paths of the Dead. There had been dark circles under his grey eyes, and his face bespoke of worry. *Ah, but proud Aragorn,* she angrily mused, *I was not to be abandoned so easily. There is yet need for Dernhelm of the Mark.*

She heard her uncle and Éomer speaking in Rohirric, discussing the offer of guidance and safe passage that the Wild Man had proposed. Her brother was anxious to be on their way, especially since he had heard that Mundburg was on fire, and Théoden was in agreement. They both acknowledged that a more straight route was impossible, and though this way would be slower, they were more likely to arrive unharmed and unexpected.

"We will receive your offer," Théoden said in the common tongue to Ghân-buri-Ghân, and with that, Éowyn took a few moments to scan around the lit enclave to make sure that she could leave unnoticed. The conversation seemed to be coming to a close as she quietly left her hiding place behind the tree and moved into the gloom. As she did, she saw an uncommonly short person furtively look around from a nearby tree, then make his way in the same direction that she was heading.

Another spy! Éowyn thought wryly to herself, admiring the bravery of the hobbit to eavesdrop on the

King. *His loyalty is unwavering, and he must feel as cast aside as I do, no longer able to be in the confidence of one whom he wishes to serve.* She tread lightly toward her horse and pack, following the muffled sounds of horses snorting and murmurs of conversations. *Should I have him confess to his night-time activity?* she considered for a moment, then decided against it. *This journey already weighs heavily on him. I will let him know of our plans and if he wishes to confess, so be it.* She walked into the camp, getting a couple of pieces of dried meat from their dwindling supplies before making her way to her bedroll on the outskirts of the group.

Meriadoc was readying his pack when Éowyn reached him and said, "The news of our leaving must be whistling through the camp like winds on the plains!"

The hobbit's ears turned bright red, and he said, "Well, yes. We need to be moving on. I could tell." He added almost proudly, "The horses have been fidgeting, and that means they know that things are changing."

Éowyn valiantly tried to suppress a smile. "You have learned much during your days with the Riddermark, Master Meriadoc. I hope that your valiant acts are sung with great praise upon your return to your fair Buckland, as you have so eloquently described it to me." More quietly, she continued, "You are indeed brave, and have borne up well in difficult circumstances, to say the least. Who again shall say that simply because one is small that one has lesser worth?"

Merry looked at Éowyn, and his face glowed with pride. "Thank you, Dernhelm." Then, embarrassed, he began to fidget with something in his pocket. "I must say that although I do have a mighty sore backside, I am grateful to you for bringing me along. I couldn't stand the thought of Pippin being burned alive in that huge stone city with me far off, safe... and useless..." He stopped, then looked at Éowyn with a very serious expression. "This may be the end, mightn't it?" He put his hand to his sword, his knuckles turning white as he clutched the hilt. "But I'm ready. We Brandybucks are full of surprises, and I plan to do my bit in this battle." He looked around the camp. "I pledged my sword to the King, and even if he doesn't realize it's here, I feel the more honourable for it."

Éowyn knelt, and placed her gloved hand over his. "King Théoden has many who fight for him whom he realizes not."

Merry looked keenly into her eyes, and felt a flicker of deeper recognition, though it quickly vanished like a spark rising from a fire.

"Let us ready ourselves and join the rest of the *eoreds*." Éowyn stood, and gathered up their few belongings.

They followed their several-days routine of Merry standing on Éowyn's clasped hands so that he could climb onto Windfofa's back, then Éowyn also got astride the horse. As they cantered off, Éowyn felt an odd sensation of regret, since despite herself, she had become very fond of her talkative companion. He was quite unlike anyone she had known, and though she knew their time together would be short, and they would both soon be dead, she was grateful for his honest attempts at friendship. *I wonder how differently he would treat me if he knew it were Éowyn of Edoras rather than plain Dernhelm to whom he spoke.* Éowyn turned her thoughts to the brief trail to Minas Tirith. *It is all for the best,* she consoled herself. *It has been good finally to be truly myself, and yet not be so alone.*

They began riding in the afternoon, following the line of riders down a hidden path. At a couple of times during their slow sojourn, Merry sat alone on the horse while Dernhelm went off into the woods to take care of his needs. The hobbit found himself looking at the escort for their company, one of the creatures that he had seen in the dark the night before.

Nobody in Buckland, oh, who am I kidding, he thought, *no-one in the Shire would believe me if I told them about these people who look like stone statues brought to life. If only I can see Pippin again... he would believe me.* He fidgeted in his pocket to feel his pipe, its familiar shape a reassurance for him in such unfamiliar situations. *Well, Meriadoc,* he mused, *you are indeed far away from home. Thanks to*

Dernhelm, at least you aren't seen as unwanted. And that means something. Probably means you're going to be killed, most likely. He sighed, then saw Dernhelm emerge from the trees.

A message rushed like wildfire through the ranks that the Gondorian messengers carrying the Red Arrow from King Théoden had been found dead. The Riders paused only for Théoden to arrange the line of attack of the *eoreds*, Elfhelm's going to the right of the city walls. Éowyn heard the cries of some of her kinsmen as they battled a small cluster of orcs still remaining at the scene of the siege. It was quickly over, and then they could see the line of fires on the field of Gondor. The smell of smoke was growing more pronounced as they got closer to the stone city, and a dread stillness fell on the group. Éowyn looked to her uncle, waiting for the call to charge, but he sat as though undecided. Suddenly a wind passed over them, with a scent new to the warrior-woman. *I have smelled the sea!* she thought, and an abrupt melancholy filled her heart. *Alas that I shall never see it.*

Just then, Théoden cried aloud, "Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!"

Éowyn felt the hobbit behind her clench his arms as tightly as possible around her waist and she manoeuvred her horse forward.

Unbidden, as Windfola leapt forward into the fray of battle, a long-forgotten childhood song came to Éowyn.

*Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home,
Your house is on fire and your children are alone.*

Her eyes were already smarting with the smoke of the fire raging from the siege of Gondor, but now tears born of loss began to flow down her cheeks.

"Forth Eorlingas!" she cried into the din, then spurred her horse on, keeping her sights fixed on King Théoden.

15. For Living or Dark Undead

Pelennor Field
March 15

Éowyn rode, swinging her sword at orcs and Southrons alike, Meriadoc clutching at her. She was almost drunk with triumph, every sense filled to overflowing: the deafening sound of orcs running and the Mark descending upon the banner of the black serpent and those who carried it with their curved swords; the stench of burning grass and blood and sweat and horse; the view of fair folk and foul, some on foot, some on horseback, an unorganized, unrelenting madness.

And yet, the stray thought found her, *You still ride. And kill.* Urging Windfola around, she took her sword and hewed off the head of a swarthy man who challenged her as she rode past. All her thought was bent on the preservation of her uncle. *Horse's mane!* her wild thoughts raced. *Where is Éomer?*

And then the sky was shrouded in black. Éowyn looked up uncomprehendingly, then back down at her kinsmen, crawling on the ground in fear. *Crawling?* Her mind could not absorb the images before her.

An otherworldly creature hovered above the battlefield. A hulking, black thing on a monstrous bird had descended from the sky and now placed itself above the man she loved as her father. She watched, horrified, as this devil-monster put its long talons into the pale, sweat-covered flesh of Snowmane, most beautiful of horses. At this, Windfola reared up and threw off her charges and raced away to safety. Éowyn picked herself up from the ground. *Nothing broken.* she thought quickly. *Not yet, anyway.*

All that mattered was facing this incomprehensible demon-creature and tearing its attentions away from the Lord of the Mark.

"Begone, foul dwimmerlaik, lord of carrion!" she cried into the swirling din, her eyes fixed on

Snowmane as he writhed in agony. "Leave the dead alone!"

A vision ran before her eyes as she said the words: her father, her mother, Frithlíc, Aragorn to be sure, he who had borne such hope was most surely gone now...

The creature spoke again, taunting her. In reply, she drew her sword, saying, "Do what you will, but I will hinder it, if I may."

There was nothing left to be lost. She stood, twenty-four years old, clad as a man, in a battle more nightmarish than anything she had ever experienced in her bleakest night. Snowmane twitched in his death throes, unwittingly crushing her surrogate father.

The voice that emanated from above was more chilling than anything she had ever heard, even out of the mouth of the Wormtongue. "Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me."

As if in a dream, Éowyn tilted back her head. Surrounded by nothing save absurdity, she coddled a laugh centred in her belly, then let it loose across the carnage of the Pelennor fields. She laughed and laughed, then coughing after inhaling so much smoke, she threw off her helm and spoke clearly. "But no living man am I! You look upon a woman." *Not much longer for this world*, she thought, *but you will pay for your assumptions*. Taking to her heart the memory of her parents, she said, "Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if ye be not deathless. For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him!"

Standing straight, she brandished her sword at the impossibly large creatures before her. As they rushed at her, a last warrior's thought raced through her mind as she swung up at the leering black visage.

Where was Meriadoc?

She swung, and felt a satisfying shock of having hit her mark. The winged creature fell to the ground, and the earth shook.

Swaying, Éowyn looked around, then saw the rider of the demon-thing coming at her. Out of sheer instinct, she raised her shield, all of her anger focused on the foul creature.

Damn you to the darkness, and I shall battle you there.

The impact was bone-shattering. Shuddering to her knees, she felt waves of pain wash through her. Everything seemed to have gone quiet, and Éowyn wondered if perhaps she would now wake up from what must surely be a long dream. Then she heard an unearthly laugh of victory, the sound rolling over her as though from a high distance. Slowly she looked up, and saw the unbelievably tall mockery of a man standing above her, a crown on its head. She tried to lift her shieldarm, but it did not respond. *Broken*, she mused through the red haze of pain. With a last cry, she stumbled to her feet and aimed the tip of her sword at the hideous crown-wearing head. "One for Eorendel the daystar!" she screamed as she leaned toward the horrific being, making contact with her sword. An icy cold filled her, and she fell.

Ah, peace at last, she thought as the blackness took her.

Houses of Healing
March 16

"Misthleoðu." Éowyn's lips moved, the word barely audible.

"What is the Lady saying?" Ioreth was distraught, a permanent furrow now above her greying

eyebrows. "Is there aught who can understand her?"

Gandalf was summoned up to the Houses of Healing, and spent many moments sitting silently beside her bed.

"What does she say?" Hilda, one of the youngest healing-women of Gondor stood beside him, the language quite beyond her comprehension. She felt defeated herself, as one fully trained, yet unable to treat this sickness that held her charges in its throes. "I know she dreams," she spoke to the man with flowing white hair, "but I cannot decipher what it is that she says, or sees."

Gandalf looked long at the healer, his blue eyes almost piercing through her in their intensity. "She is on the wings of eagles," he said simply, then lovingly placed Éowyn's sword arm across her chest.

Ioreth's assistant looked at this old man clad in war-stained raiment, unwilling to let him leave without further explanation. He certainly bore an air of authority, and everyone had seemed to look to him for guidance in these recent awful days of siege and war. With a warm cloth, Hilda dabbed at the brow of this most odd person, a woman dressed in men's war-garb, now murmuring in a language that she could not begin to comprehend.

Éowyn's mouth formed the word again. "Misthleoðu."

The young healer with the cloth looked desperately at Ioreth, still by the beside of Faramir, the dying Steward of Gondor, whose whole body seemed to be consumed by a fire from within.

"Mist-what?" Hilda said with agitation.

Gandalf slowly raised his clear blue eyes from Éowyn into those of the young woman of Gondor and said, "Mountains wreathed in mist. Her spirit is being carried far away among the fog of highest mountains." His shoulders fell, and a haggard look shadowed his face. "The wounds of these two are most grievous." He rose and walked to Faramir's bed, his kind eyes full of sorrow.

Ioreth, who had been at the Steward's side since his arrival that morning, found herself awash in new tears of frustration and sadness, and said, "Alas! if he should die. Would that there were Kings in Gondor, as there were once upon a time, they say! For it is said in old lore: The hands of the king are the hands of a healer. And so the rightful king could ever be known."

A change came over Gandalf's face, and a new hope could be seen in his visage. He looked keenly at Ioreth who wiped a stray tear from her eye, tenderly soothing Faramir's brow, moving a tendril of his sweat-drenched dark hair from his forehead.

"Men may long remember your words, Ioreth!" Gandalf stood as she spoke. "For there is hope in them. Maybe a king has indeed returned to Gondor; or have you not heard the strange tidings that have come to the city?"

The senior healer gave Gandalf a weary but defiant look before replying, "I have been too busy with this and that to heed all the crying and shouting. All I hope is that those murdering devils do not come to this House and trouble the sick."

Gandalf ran as though a fire licked at his heels, and he was almost to the door when she finished speaking. Out he rushed, leaving Ioreth, Hilda and the other healers alone once more with their charges whose wounds baffled the knowledge of the frustrated women.

Éowyn blinked her eyes, and saw her brother above her as through a dim haze. Though she breathed deeply, she was utterly confused. *Is he holding my hand? Are we not dead together?* Suddenly her mind was troubled, racing through dream and waking alike.

Fighting. The holbytla behind her. Her uncle falling. The black creature.

She continued to gather breath, feeling as raw as a fish caught and sliced open on the shores of the Snowbourne, her very self there for all to see.

But there was her brother, his green eyes shining radiantly into hers.

"Éomer? What joy is this? For they said that you were slain. Nay, but that was only the dark voices in my dream."

The dream... she had felt lifted up, only to be carried back down again. *Were we not to light the dark sky together?* What else had she seen that was but vision?

"How long have I been dreaming?"

"Not long, my sister." Éomer's voice seemed to carry devotion itself, and Éowyn was almost set adrift in his affections. "But think no more on it!"

She allowed herself to be carried away, from mountains to plains, to...

...the battlefield. Théoden. The orcs. Meriadoc!

"... and what of the king's esquire, the Halfling?" she asked, desperately. "Éomer, you shall make him a knight of the Riddermark, for he is valiant!"

Even in saying so, she was taken back to their several days' journey, his unique scent ever before her, his silent steps despite wearing heavy boots, both of them pretending to be something other than themselves. She heard her brother say that the holbytla was also hurt in battle, and in the next room. Her uncle was dead, and not solely in dreams. Then Éomer said, "Great gladness is it to see you wake again to health and hope, so valiant a lady!"

Éowyn found herself beginning to sink. It was such a far distance from the mists that she had climbed earlier. She had failed. She had not defended her King, she had been discovered, she was not of use as Éowyn, only as Dernhelm...

wait.

I have yet some use, were I to bind this injured arm to my ribs... the thought raced through her mind until she realized that Éomer was awaiting a reply.

"To health?" She looked down at her shield arm, bound in cloth, then with an almost defiant gaze, continued, "It may be so. At least while there is an empty saddle of some fallen Rider that I can fill, and there are deeds to do." She started to sit up, then overtaken by exhaustion, she sank back into her bed.

Hope for what?

Éomer's face was filled with a look that would have broken Éowyn's heart had she not believed herself dead until a few moments earlier, and his company with her. He took her hand, kissed it, and in a rare show of affection, hastily shoved tears off of his eyes with the back of his hand, then left her side and took leave of the Houses of Healing.

I hope I never dream again. Éowyn thought, as she succumbed to slumber.

misthleoðu= misty cliffs

16. In the Gloaming

In the deepening twilight, a silhouetted figure sat hunched over next to the fire, hands moving in jabbing thrusts. "Ai! Dung and dragons!" The epithet was mumbled, but still audible to another woman approaching the fire, her cloak wrapped tightly around her. "Why must these loops keep sliding off?"

"So, Fréalas, I see that you are still endeavouring to master those needles!" Geornwyn clucked her tongue, her bemused face illuminated in the flickering light.

"Yes," Fréalas replied, exasperated. "And I had thought that learning to shoot an arrow was difficult. Learning to knit may well ruin me!"

Geornwyn laughed aloud. "Then my timing to have you take over the watch is quite fortuitous! We cannot afford to lose one of our nightwatchmen." Fréalas placed her wool and bone needles on the ground, then winced as she gingerly stood up.

"This cold does nothing for my joints," she said, leaning down to pick up her project.

"For one in the prime of her youth, you sound like an elder like me!" Geornwyn exclaimed. "This experience will keep you from getting soft."

"Soft?" Fréalas shook her head, but she was smiling. "No, I do not think so. None of us are overflowing in comforts, though I for one would certainly not mind being back inside my house sleeping on my bed. Ah well." She began to walk toward her tent. "Tis good to be alive, even if the amenities are lacking and there is still no news from anywhere."

"It could be said that no news is good news," Geornwyn retorted, leaning in to warm her hands over the merrily crackling fire.

Fréalas stopped and shook her head. "Would that were the truth, but I think now I would rather have any news, whether good or ill. Despite the practice, my skill at waiting is not improving as the days go on."

Geornwyn waved her along. "Go get that dog of yours and take your post. You can complain to the stars overhead, if you wish, they will be happy to listen."

Fréalas made a vague grunting sound of dissent, then resumed her way to her lodging. Aided by the light of a torch outside of the tent, she placed her knitting in a corner on top of a blanket, put on her heavy cloak, and kneeled down to rub Gold Eyes' head. "Time to wake up, sleepy bones!" At the word 'bones,' he picked up his head from the floor, and Fréalas smiled. "Yes, hopefully someday soon I will be able to treat you as well as you had become accustomed before this retreat." Vigorously rubbing his floppy ears, she said, "But for now, it is time for sentry duty. Come on!" The dark brown dog got up from the floor, then shook himself from front to back as his owner retrieved her bow and quiver with several arrows. The two figures left the tent and walked down the path toward the end of the camp near where the path up to Dunharrow reached the edge of the Firienfeld.

Fréalas' watch had nearly come to yet another uneventful end. In the recent undisturbed nights while she had been watching from the tall plain, she had found herself remembering many songs from her childhood, and one in particular kept coming to the forefront of her mind, much to her dismay.

*Baa baa, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.*

*One for my master, one for my dame,
One for the little boy who lives down the lane...*

...and on it went as she paced.

*Baa baa, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir...*

Just then she saw small lights far off in the distance. Suddenly very attentive, she tried to focus on the moving specks and, after a few moments, she could see that they were headed toward the Starkhorn. There didn't appear to be many of them, but they could be decoys with hundreds of men behind them. Fréalas rushed back to the camp, telling the others on night watch to put out all torches and fires until she could tell how many people there were and whether they were friend, or more likely, foe. Soon it was inky black on the high plain, making the forest of the Dimholt seem all the more menacing. Staentwylas and Swiðhild joined Fréalas in watching the small lights continue their approach to the mountain, then begin the long ascent on the ancient switchbacking trail that would lead them to their camp. "They must surely be one of the Rohirrim if they knew how to find this road!" Staentwylas whispered, even though the approaching visitors were still well beyond earshot.

"Or they saw our fires from across the far plains." Swiðhild had been opposed to any fires after dark, and now his suggestion seemed to be a good one, though heeded too late.

"There cannot be that many of them," Fréalas said under her breath, "unless they can see in the dark. There are only three torches."

The three guarding the exiles of Edoras stood and waited as the people carrying the lights continued up the road. Soon they could hear the sound of a horse's feet clopping on the stony path, as well as wooden wheels turning.

Fréalas looked at her companions, their spears aimed at the path's end in front of them. "Staentwylas must be correct as I do not believe that Orcs travel with wagons."

Then the cry of an infant carried up the path, and Fréalas loosened her grip on her bow as a woman's voice said, "Ssshhh, *lytling*. We are almost there."

Moments later Fréalas, Swiðhild and Staentwylas found themselves looking at a woman in filthy, worn clothes holding a young child in her arms. She was followed closely by three skinny children with huge fear-filled eyes and an exhausted looking horse pulling a small open wagon behind him. Seeing two spear points and an arrow aimed at her, the woman loudly exclaimed, "Please do not shoot! I am of the Eorlingas!" and her baby burst into loud wailing at the sound. She looked frantically at each of the faces of the three guards, then stared at Fréalas. "Fréa?" she said in disbelief.

Fréalas stared back. She did look familiar, but in the flickering torchlight she could not place who this woman with the haggard face was.

"It is Meagolwyn. I have travelled from the Southern Folde after escaping from those evil men who burned our village to the ground. The children and I hid in the woods for several days, but no one ever returned, so I decided to scavenge what I could and come to Edoras."

"Meagolwyn! But that is many leagues from here." Fréalas dropped her bow and quiver and rushed to her childhood friend, embracing Meagolwyn's gaunt frame and crying infant. "You have come all this way with your children?"

Meagolwyn nodded, rubbing her forehead on Fréalas' shoulder. "I had thought that someone would return, but they did not, and I felt more and more threatened there by myself. It seemed safer to travel by night to Edoras, but when I saw that it too was abandoned, I almost lost hope. Then I saw your lights and I wished with all I had that some of our people were here."

"There is much to tell you," Staentwylas spoke softly. "First let us get you some mulled wine and dried meat. I am sure that you have not eaten well during your journey."

Meagolwyn nodded, patting the head of one of her children who was clinging to her skirt. "Staentwylas, you too are here!"

Fréalas stepped back to retrieve her weapon. "Many of Edoras are here now, but the story of how this has come to pass should be done in front of a fire." After receiving a sharp look from Swiðhild, she asked, "You were not followed?"

The woman shook her head. "We have seen no-one in many days now. I was beginning to think that all had been slain, though I did not see any barrows."

Swiðhild took the horse's reins and led the small group down the main path. Meagolwyn began asking questions which were answered swiftly until she said, "You have not mentioned the Lady Éowyn. May I speak with her?"

Fréalas paused for a moment before answering resignedly, "She is not here."

Houses of Healing
March 20

"You called for me, sir?"

Merry stood in the doorway to Faramir's chamber, looking rather ill at ease.

Faramir smiled warmly, and motioned for the hobbit to come in. "Please enter, Master Meriadoc of the Pheriannath! I have heard of your feats of outstanding bravery, and you are to be highly commended."

At this, Merry's ears turned a bright shade of red, and he muttered something, "Just doing what needed to get done, couldn't leave Pip out near Mordor like that..."

"Meriadoc, would you care for some food and wine?"

The hobbit politely bowed his head. "Yes, Steward Faramir. But please- you can call me Merry. I can't get used to all of these formalities, pardon my saying so."

The kind-faced Steward nodded with understanding, then moved to the table where some bread and wine and dried fish had been laid, and prepared a small platter for his guest.

"Your people, lord," Merry continued, "are of noble face indeed, and speak with authority." He gratefully accepted the plate, then with a piece of bread halfway to his mouth said, "Have I done something to offend them? Or you? The healers have been nothing but splendid and caring..."

Faramir shook his head, mirth in his eyes. "No, no, dear Merry. I asked you here because I have just met Éowyn of Rohan, with whom I have been told you spent every day during your travels from Edoras to these lands. She is a lady of few words, one trait among many that makes her stand out to my eye more than any other woman I have met. If it would not infringe on your time, I would like to know more about this woman who bears such beauty, and yet is gripped by such sorrow."

Merry chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed. "Lord Faramir," he began, "I would be more than pleased to tell you all I know about Éowyn, but sir," a troubled look crossed his face. "To me she is still Dernhelm. Through those long days and nights, I did think I was with a man of the Mark, just one who was younger than most. And she wasn't one much for chatting, though I did get lonely during our long rides and would try to foster a conversation with her."

Faramir nodded, then indicated for the hobbit to continue.

"Well sir, he, I mean, she - she seemed to have given up hope, if you know what I mean. Not in a

desperate way, but when I first saw her, him, I didn't know it was her obviously, but I saw her eyes and they were so clear, but they seemed to be looking through me, to his own end. Her, I mean." Merry looked over at the table. "Do you mind if I have some of that wine, sir?"

"Of course not!" Faramir poured Merry a glass and brought it to him. "Would you care to walk around the garden as we talk? I find the view of growing things to be soothing in such dark times, and that way you can enjoy your pipe in the open air, should you wish."

After drinking his wine, Merry gratefully fingered his pipe with his hand and said, "That's fine. There's much more to tell, now that I think about it. She was very kind, and quiet, and loyal." The two walked out into the corridor, their footsteps echoing in the stone hallway.

"You know, she found ways to move through the ranks so she never let King Théoden out of her sight. And somehow she just knew about some things, without being told." The hobbit looked Faramir in the eye as with one hand he searched for his tinderbox in his breeches' pocket. "That's how she came to me, sir, I know it. She could tell that I was pretty desperate at being left behind, though we had never spoken."

As they walked out to the garden Faramir replied thoughtfully, "That does not surprise me. I feel as though she has seen deeply into me, and I would despair of her parting."

Merry lit his pipe, unable to reply.

March 23

Éowyn stood outside, as she had for the prior few days, looking out to the north, her woollen cape wrapped around her. She had recently returned to the chilly garden after spending a welcome respite from her own thoughts by spending several hours in conversation with Merry, who again shared her fate.

"Looks like we've been left behind again," here he paused, as he always did, still adjusting his perspective of her from warrior Dernhelm to Lady Éowyn, "eh, Éowyn?" She nodded, her emotions so jumbled and exhausted that her face remained impassive as a result. Merry conjured a rueful smile for himself.

"Merry," she asked, "would you please tell me more about your friend Peregrin? You and I bear the terrible burden of kin and loved ones fighting when we cannot be near them, and it would gladden my heart for you to elaborate on your valiant friend and what your life was like up in the land of Buckland." She took his hand and affectionately squeezed it. "I am sorry now that I did not engage you more during our days of travel, and I hope that you will not spurn my request."

"Oh no, not at all!" he replied, and launched into several hours' worth of childhood tales, of their plans to accompany Frodo as he left the Shire, and even his recent limited moments together with Pippin before he was called away to join Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas and others six days ago.

Now she found herself leaning against the stone wall, hands clenching her cape as she scanned the unfamiliar landscape. As the wind blew, she absentmindedly removed her unbandaged arm from its warm haven to move an insistent rogue piece of hair out of her eyes back behind her ear. *What fate is this*, she wondered, for the hundredth time, *that befalls Merry, these other halflings, Éomer, Aragorn...* thinking of him, with his grey eyes and commanding yet compassionate manner, always made her feel suddenly distracted, and she hated herself for it. *They will fight valiantly, to be sure*, she thought, returning to more comfortable thoughts of war and loyalty. *So many who are loyal to Rohan accompany them.*

Then she felt cut to the quick, just as she heard the nearby door open. As though the voice had carried on the wind, she heard in her mind, *'You will remain here, to carry out what may well be the*

most important task there is, which is to continue on, to fight against this evil that encroaches on our borders and protect your citizens. You do remember the oath you took, Eorendel? Turning, she saw Faramir standing before the large carved wooden door. He nodded his head, placed his hand to his heart, then raised his eyes.

"Éowyn!" he said, his twilight-coloured eyes searching her face for displeasure. "Would you prefer your solitude?" Éowyn shook her head slightly in response, hoping that he could not see the anxiety she was trying to suppress.

"No, my Lord Steward," she replied, motioning to the empty stretch of wall next to her. Guiltily she looked down, realizing that not once since she had joined the Riders had she thought about the women, elders and children of Edoras that had expected her to be their ruler. *But you did not expect to live!* Her thoughts ran wildly as Faramir walked the few paces to reach her side. He stood quietly, as though he were waiting for her to speak. She looked at him, this caretaker of a kingdom which had no king, whose borders faced the very land of evil incarnate, and felt humbled.

"You are troubled." Faramir's voice was gentle, but insistent.

Éowyn gazed at him for a moment, then gestured to one of the tiled paths that wound its way through the garden as she said, "Shall we walk? I am afraid that I am used to a more active life, and this well-meaning emphasis on rest does not suit me."

Faramir nodded in assent, and Éowyn found herself troubled by the depths of grief in his eyes. "Too often inactivity can lead to brooding, especially when such great travails are being undertaken and we are unable to assist."

Éowyn felt as though salt had been rubbed into a cut deep in her chest. *No, she inwardly moaned, I am quite unable to assist, this useless bird with its clipped wing.* She studied the tiled walkway and flinched in surprise when Faramir's warm fingers softly moved back some of her hair that had fallen before her face.

"Your people find me strange." It was a statement, spoken with a note of challenge. "Do you not also, Lord Faramir, find me, as some have suggested, a half-wild creature?" She looked at him resolutely, expecting a rebuke. When he did not reply, but instead stepped toward a patch of vivid flowers flaunting themselves despite the cold, she became agitated. *Perhaps due to your whining from the days before he is now going to treat you like a child,* she chastised herself.

Faramir returned with a newly-cut wild rose, its red-violet petals fluted on the edges. After cutting the thorns from the stem with a small knife, he handed it to her. Surprised, Éowyn accepted the gift, instinctively placing it before her nose to smell its scent, closing her eyes as she inhaled its light perfume. Faramir looked at her, this woman who had appeared as unbidden as a stray flower growing up from a crack in the wall, and knew as certainly as he had known of his brother's untimely death that he did not ever want her to leave. She was unpredictable, moody and haughty, yet beautiful and honest, and, like himself, she bore wounds far beyond those sustained on the battlefield. He also sensed that she, too, was haunted by visions beyond what sight alone could reveal.

"No, Éowyn," he found himself speaking. "You appear to me as one who thrives in open spaces, free to chase the wind should you so desire it, and it is but these walls which chafe at your spirit." The dark circles under her eyes belied how little rest she endured during her days in Minas Tirith and how heavily she bore the weight of her inability to fight at her brother's side. His heart racing, Faramir laid his hand on her arm, and looking into her grey eyes that echoed those of him who had rescued them both from the Shadow, he asked, "Will you tarry and tell me of your homeland? This waiting is insufferable to us both, but I find that even the heaviest of burdens is lightened by your presence."

Éowyn stood silently under his intense gaze and was about to speak when suddenly she was overcome by a wave of emotion that emanated from Faramir and washed over her. He wanted her to speak of Rohan, about her childhood, about whispering winds which lulled her to sleep... and unbidden, just for a moment, she saw a hint of his soul in his eyes, glittering as brightly as dark sapphires and smouldering like an unquenchable fire, and she was struck mute.

Faramir looked encouragingly at her, taking her arm and walking slowly down the path. His own sorrows were there as always, burning yet not consuming, an ever-present flame that lingered until, he assumed, the world ended in the near future. *Would that the monstrous wave of which I dream would suddenly sweep down and cleanse this land of ash and death!* he thought mournfully, then knew again in an instant that he did not yet want to drown in water or sorrow. He yearned to hear Éowyn speak, afraid that he had been too insistent, afraid that there would indeed be no more tomorrow, just when the tiniest seedling of hope had planted itself in his heart.

Éowyn walked as she tried to put the vision from her mind so that she could speak coherently. *My life! Where do I begin?* She was in agony.

"I deserted my people."

She said the words quietly, her eyes studying the ground. "I will tell you more should you wish it, but know that first. The dark into which I knew I rode has not deserted me, nor do I think it ever will." As her future tilted toward oblivion, Éowyn ceased to resist, and surrendered to the end.

Éowyn, valiant shieldmaiden of Rohan, would fight no more. To her mind, she had utterly failed, and she waited only to be swallowed into the bleak nothingness of the last few days.

They walked a few silent steps, then Faramir replied as he took her hand, "I am not your king, and judgment is not mine to give. Let us speak no more of it." He looked at her, and his heart seized. Her eyes were full of pain and misery, and a wan smile flitted across her mouth as she withdrew her hand.

"Friend, let us not. One need only open one's eyes to behold rampant despair, we do not need to discuss it at length." She turned to walk back down the path to the Houses, then looked back at Faramir. "I am exceeding rude," she said faintly. "I have not thanked you for the flower." She held it upright in her hand. "It will brighten my room. Thank you for your kindness to one as ungentele as I am."

Faramir stood watching as Éowyn made her way to the door, pulled it open by its thick brass handle, then disappeared as it closed behind her. *This is not how things progress in books!* he thought with a mixture of anger and frustration. Well-trodden paths of guilt and self-berating rose to his consciousness, and he followed blindly. *Had Boromir lived, he would have charmed her within a day and they would be discussing battle plans,* he despaired.

But it is you who live! an inner voice cried. *Wait, and be patient.*

"But there is no time!" he muttered, striding toward the wall, gripping it with his fingers until his knuckles were white. "Perhaps I should speak with the Halfling again..." then putting his face in his hands, he lamented to himself, "Your affections are reckless. Would that I could trust my own counsel anymore."

He leaned on the wall for a few moments, then feeling utterly spent, he walked slowly to the base of an unkempt hedge, lay down on his side, and pulling his cloak over his face, fell into a dream-filled sleep.

17. Journeys of the Heart

Firienfeld
March 29

The vivid blue sky, looking freshly scrubbed, gleamed overhead, an unwitting mockery of the mostly grim expressions borne by the adult citizens of Edoras. The numbers of Rohirrim on the Feld and in Dunharrow had minutely increased as a few additional exiles from settlements further afield in the Mark made their straggled way up to this ancient ground. It had been three days since sounds of an earthquake had been heard in the South, and then an oddly calming wind had rushed across the

plains. Some had cried tears of joy, feeling suddenly relieved, though none could explain why. As the days of anguished waiting turned into weeks, Fréalas felt the tension in her threatening to snap. At first she had likened each day of unknowing like standing on the very edge of a chasm; it made her dizzy, but she knew that she must stand there, looking down, careful not to lose her footing. But now, nothing had changed since the echoes of dread, fell sounds of groaning earth had washed over them - not a horse's hoof to be heard, no smoke, no fires...

Nothing.

It was insufferable. She was almost ready simply to lean over- and fall.

Moments ago, the ever-patient child who was trying to show Fréalas how to mend the holes she had accidentally knitted into her *gearnscrúd* had given up. She explained to her friends, "Fréalas is wearing her hawk-face," and when she did, it was best to leave her alone. Several moments after the lesson ended, Fréalas muttered, "Gearnscrúd! Will be nothing but a soft mat on which Gold Eyes can lie. That is all it will ever be good for."

The comment hovered in her thoughts as she walked past the outlying tents of the camp nearest the trees of the Dimholt. Despite the stoic expressions worn by many of the women and elders as they established new routines for those basic activities necessary for survival, younger children were still making the best of things. Even Fréalas had to smile as she passed by one lodging, its unique decoration setting it apart from the clusters of drab-fabriced temporary homes. A small green flag bearing a white horse had been fastened to a stick and then placed lovingly into the ground. The banner waved splendidly in the wind, though its construction was obviously made by young, unskilled hands and of materials any weaver for Meduseld would have scorned. Shaking her head, she mused, *Such proud people- and yet we seem made to carry heavy burdens of grief.* As she chewed on a rather dry and stale piece of bread, she thought of men who had fought and died, and women and children who carried on, generation after generation.

Hawk-face. She sardonically mulled over the term. Perhaps after all that had happened at Helm's Deep and Éowyn's betrayal, her face was more guarded, or perhaps it was the careful dispersal of food rations that made her already prominent nose stand out even more. As she peered into the dark woods, scratching her dog's ears out of habit, listening to the dim sounds of some children playing "duck, duck, goose," she suddenly started. The memory of her first passionate kisses with Tóswífan had happened not far from here, but under such a different situation that it seemed like a lifetime ago. *Do you even yet live?* Fréalas wondered, her heart beating as quickly as it had seven years ago. For a moment her frustration and bitterness of the past days vanished like fog in morning sun, and all she felt was a deep ache of longing and sorrow. Loss and memory flooded her, making her feel that she would surely drown in unshed tears, and her eyes began to blur. She spat out the bread and moved away from the trees, breathing heavily. *Now is not the time for shows of emotion.* she admonished herself. *For all that you know, the world has ended but its heralds of doom have not yet arrived.*

Gold Eyes had his nose to the ground, sniffing something intently. Still shaking as she regained her composure, Fréalas moved her sword so that she could crouch down beside him, and saw a hard-shelled beetle of some sort, its glittering green back dazzling in the sunlight. Fréalas watched it determinedly make its way across the dirt and leaves, then she stood up, resolve now on her face.

"Well, my sagacious friend," she said to Gold Eyes, "if the herald will not come here, I will ride to him."

She marched down the main path to her lodging, stopping first to ask a question of a shy dark-haired boy who was whittling a stick. He looked surprised at Fréalas, but then with a look of quiet pride, he nodded. With Gold Eyes at her heels, Fréalas went into her tent after murmuring a greeting to Staentwylas as they passed, and shut the flap.

"You cannot do this!" Léah, Swiðhild, and Fréawyn walked next to Fréalas, who was astride Salupád,

riding slowly to the path that would take her down to the valley below.

"Ah, but I can, and I must," Fréalas retorted, dressed in her war raiment, including a leather belt that she had lovingly made for herself, its bold twining braids making one unbroken line around its edges. She had let her red hair hang loose, though struck by a sudden inspiration from long ago in her past, she had deftly plaited two braids from her forehead back behind her ears and down, as she had remembered the hair of the Elf from Dwimordene whom she met as a youth. Nihtscadu her sword was girt at her side, her quiver and bow strapped to her back, and two small bags of provisions were bound to the saddle behind her.

"Fréa, my love," Fréawyn pleaded as she ran her fingers down the leather arm braces that Fréalas wore, also of her own making, "do not leave me - is it not enough to have lost Frithlíc, and Frithmund suffering what fate I do not know... Must I lose you too? It was prideful folly that that I allowed you to join me with the Riders. It has tormented your heart and driven you to this."

Fréalas stopped at the edge of the Feld, then dismounted. Standing next to Fréawyn, she embraced her, and said, "I am far more tormented not knowing what has happened, much less what may be happening, and unable to do anything about it." She stepped back from her mother, keeping her hands on her shoulders. "I think only now do I begin to understand how Éowyn must have felt." As the anger of her friend's secretive departure began to rise, she continued, "Unlike her, I am riding on in plain view. There are many here who can continue on until I am able to return with what news there may be, but this waiting is making me mad."

Fréawyn shook her head, her greying strawberry-blonde hair lifted by the wind. She clasped her daughter's hand in hers even as it still rested on her shoulder. "I suppose I am partly to blame for this streak of yours, having even a remnant of the blood of the Dúnedain to pass on to you. They are ever wanderers, but I demand that you wander only as far as you must and then return as quickly as your Salupád will carry you."

"Please tend to Gold Eyes while I am gone," Fréalas beseeched. "He is most unhappy at being told to stay." Her mother nodded in assent, then Fréalas turned to face Swiðhild, Léah, and some of the people in the camp who had come over to see what was transpiring at the end of the road.

"I am riding south," Fréalas declared. "Unless I am killed, I will return with news of what has happened to our kin fighting valiantly in Gondor. Do not give up hope that our Riders will return soon." At this, there was some murmuring of dissent, but it quickly died away. "After hearing the terrible noises to the south, seeing none of the Mark since then, nor orcs," she emphasized pointedly, "it seems the most appropriate action that someone should go to see them. I leave now and hope to return within fifteen days if all goes well."

Fréalas nodded to the exiles of Edoras, then returned to her mother and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Do what you must." Fréawyn whispered, then patted Salupád on the nose. "You bear her well, as you always have," she said, then stepped back.

Fréalas mounted Salupád, then produced a standard from her quiver. Holding the reins in her left hand, in her right she held a green flag with a white horse, rather crudely made, flapping in the wind. Silently she began her descent, and still unnerved from her incident in the Dimholt from nearly a decade earlier, she did not look at the statues that lined the road. Soon she was at the foot of the Starkhorn, and replacing the flag in her quiver, she snapped at Salupád's reins, and they raced to Edoras and beyond.

For three days Fréalas rode south, hoping to reach Mundburg, were it still there, as soon as she could. She kept close to the mountains, not knowing that soon she would be passing the ancient line of Gondorian beacon-hills as she did so. She tarried briefly at the Firien Wood, her childhood home, but the homesteads were deserted, and no livestock could be seen. She had not come across another soul, and slept in the woods that night, too wary to make a fire despite a chill rain. She had heard much birdsong in the air which cheered her, but she was unused to feeling so completely alone, aside from the company of her horse.

The next morning Fréalas bathed in the Mering stream, a quick, brisk dip. She had found a few wild figs growing on some untended trees, and savoured their sweet fruit as she broke camp. The next day, as the sun was high overhead, she heard the unmistakable sound of horse's hooves, though very distant. It was more than one, but less than an eored, *If Rohirrim they are!* she thought. Seeing a small copse of trees not far away, she guided Salupád over to them to hide until she could gather who the approaching riders were. Her heart beat so loudly in her chest that she was sure whoever was approaching would be able to hear it, and she readied an arrow as a necessary precaution.

Leaning her head to get a better view, she squinted to see several people riding quite fast... yes, they wore helms with high plumes that resembled horse's tails. They were Riders! Fréalas opened her mouth and gasped, as she had unwittingly been holding her breath. She raced to replace the arrow and swung her bow back over her head and chest, grabbed the small green flag and ran from her shelter, waving madly as they approached.

The Riders slowed, rather bewildered by the scene before them: hours from any settlement, now stood a tall, red-haired woman in Rohirric war garb holding a crude green flag bearing a white horse. As the horses jostled, chomping on their bits, Fréalas shouted in Rohirric, "What news? Stars above, what news??"

The man closest to her dismounted and took off his helm. Though he had a patch over one eye, he still bore a smile at meeting such an unexpected figure. "Exceeding good," he replied, then gestured at her. "What does a lone woman do here, dressed for battle?"

"I will explain myself in a moment - " she looked keenly at him, not knowing his name.

"Tréowthain." He bowed his head. "My apologies. My manners quite left me when you appeared so suddenly from the trees. We are in great haste - " he began, his eyebrows raised.

"Fréalas." Her name was spoken by a strangely familiar voice.

She spun to her right, not having noticed a figure walking from the back of the group of Riders. A handsome man with honey gold hair stood next to Tréowthain and said to him, "You should continue on to Edoras in all haste to prepare the city for King Éomer's return. I will remain and let her know what has transpired of late."

"Tóswífan?" Fréalas suddenly felt faint. She swayed slightly, confronted with his sudden appearance in that moment, seeing his leather vest smeared with blood, his helm cradled in his arm, a hint of mirth shining in his luminous hazel eyes. He smiled, and Fréalas felt as undone as she had up on the Firienfeld, her mind racing and yet empty of everything except for memories of the warmth of his calloused hands, his sweet breath...

"Yes, Fréalas, I am returned, and all of us here are anxious to spread the news of a King long-awaited who will unite all lands under his banner." He tipped his head backward at the group of Riders who looked particularly keen to move on.

She stared at him, still holding the child-made standard, though it was now sagging in her hand.

Tóswífan continued, "We have suffered many losses, though, and there are many who will not return. Thankfully your father did survive and he will accompany a larger company."

Fréalas felt entirely incapable of speech, but she forced herself, tearing her eyes away from Tóswífan's

to look back at Tréowthain. "Do ride with all haste!" she said. "Those of Edoras have been living up on the Firienfeld and in Dunharrow. We are in mean estate, but none have perished, and others have found their way to us from settlements further afield. But all will want to return to their homes and hear the tidings that you bring." She breathed deeply, swallowed, then gave Tréowthain the flag still clutched in her hand. "Take this with you, and let them know that I will join them as soon as possible." Tréowthain looked at the clumsily made banner, and gave her a quizzical look. "When we discovered that the Lady Éowyn had abandoned us, others became leaders in her stead." Looking him in the eye, she continued, "I was one of those." Fréalas stepped back, letting her eyes rove over the men, knowing well how clearly they wished to be on their way after this unexpected pause in their rapid travels. "Go now! Fly- they are waiting."

Tréowthain put his helm back on his head, and after a baffled glance at the banner, stuck it ungraciously in a small pack hanging from his saddle. "We continue north!" he exclaimed, and soon the Riders were gone in a cloud of dust, horsehooves pounding the road.

In the growing quiet, Tóswífan gazed at Fréalas, then let his eyes search until he found his horse. Threohness had meandered over to the trees and was munching on grass next to Salupád, abandoned in Fréalas' sudden exodus from the shade out to the road. "They ever did get along, did they not?" he said contritely, turning his hand so that his thumb pointed toward the horses. Fréalas nodded mutely, feeling as though somehow she had been set aflame, all other thoughts flying far away, until abruptly she came to herself.

"Blood!" The word suddenly came out of her mouth, as she pointed at his vest. As he looked down, she continued, the words spilling forth as torrents loosed from a dam. "How serious are your wounds? Does Éowyn live? I knew that she must have disguised herself, it is my fault, she knew that Mother and Willow and I... but I will never forgive her, and we heard sounds as though the earth were ripped apart, and yet no one came, and you are here now, and..."

Tóswífan chuckled, and striding to Fréalas, he dropped his helm on the ground and took her hands in his. "Yes, she lives. I have not seen her with my own eyes, but the stories about her bravery on the Pelennor ran through the ranks faster than Héalwine to a pint of ale." Then the delight in his eyes lessened, and looking searchingly above her freckled nose to her grey-green eyes, he asked, "But I would ask you, did you miss me? Has your heart settled on a path, and if so, do you know where it leads?"

Fréalas felt as though her mouth were made of clay, her tongue sticking to her teeth. *What can I say? How can I explain what I have seen and done? He will not desire me after all I have to say...* Her thoughts spun as crazily as a one-winged beetle as she remembered words shared long ago, and all that had happened in the intervening years. "Tóswífan, my life has taken rather unexpected paths of late. But as a sunflower turns to the sun, so have I found myself, as your *solate* once called, returning to thoughts of you again and again."

He did not reply for a moment, but continued to look keenly into her face, then winked. "I am most pleased that you have indeed missed my roguish company." She felt her hands clasped strongly, then gently released. "So." Tóswífan gave her a searching look. "Does this mean that I might have your loyalty over that of your royal friend?"

Ah! Understanding suddenly came to Fréalas, and she took back his hands, then kissed them. "You are both very dear to me, yet you reside in very different places in my heart." Tóswífan looked sceptical at her answer. Fréalas shook her head, still breathing shallowly. "Love, dear Tóswífan, does not often travel alone. Do you fear that you will share my heart with others beside my family and you will be thusly slighted?"

Tóswífan did not speak, instead he took her face gently in his hands, and kissed her insistently, so that they were soon both flushed and even their horses were watching them from the trees. Gasping, they leaned back from each other for a moment, then Tóswífan asked quietly, "Does that mean that you do love me, then?"

Fréalas knew that there were tears running down her cheeks, but she was proud enough to ignore

them. "You know I do, or I would never had made you that vest. Which you had to go and wear during battle... but it has served its owner well, has it not?" She began to run her fingers over the designs she knew as well as the whorls on her fingertips, until her hand was taken in his.

He unlaced his vest and took her hand, pressing it to his heart atop his sweat-soaked tunic. "Do you feel that?" he asked quietly, his eyes never leaving hers. "My heart is almost full to bursting. I did not know, in the darkness of battle, whether or not I would see these fair plains again. But I vowed to myself that I would have your plain word if ever I were to see you again." He brushed away a tear from Fréalas' cheek with his hand, and removing his other hand from underneath hers on his chest, he embraced her. "Your rather unexpected appearance and my grateful survival hastened my questions."

Fréalas clasped her hands behind his wide back, nuzzling his neck. "I am sure there are many others," she murmured, "and I have many to ask of you as well."

Tóswífan smiled, then winced, rubbing his lower ribs.

"Your injuries!" Fréalas exclaimed, a worried expression on her face. "I assumed that as you were sent forth as the first messengers that you were mostly unscathed from battle."

"Well," he replied, his lip upturned, "we are among the most hale." He shook his head. "There is still much to be told. But we have a several day's journey for me to tell you."

"And I you!" Fréalas exclaimed, then she became somber. "Though my feelings are very conflicted about Éowyn, and I am rather unsure how I will feel when I see her again."

Tóswífan kissed her brow, and said, "It may be many days. Let us instead speak of what has befallen you, and if you wish to hear it, I will tell you of my journey to Gondor and the battles in which I fought." He whistled, and Threohness cantered over to him. Patting her on the nose, he looked at Fréalas, who stood back when his horse approached. "You have suffered many trials, I can see it on your face."

She returned his gaze, then moved closer to kiss him tenderly on the cheek. "As have you." She walked away to retrieve Salupád, then her voice rang out as she spoke over her shoulder, "The world does not end tomorrow- we have several days, yes?"

Tréowthain= tree-friend

Minas Tirith

The words of the question hung in the air for long moments after they were uttered, like the last heard echoes of a bell rung far away. Éowyn continued to look at Faramir as though she had not heard them, as though their meaning had much further to go to actually reach her, she whose mind still dwelt away in the shadows far beyond the joy of the citizens of the White City.

the gift of a gentle heart...

Once before in that very garden, when she answered the seductive call of the abyss which now held her heart in its sway of despair, she had seen an ember of his soul flicker in his eyes. Now as she gazed steadily, it seemed to her as though he glowed himself, somehow bearing an inner light which refused any longer to remain hidden. Slowly but inexorably, she felt her soul warmed by this unselfish affection, and the melancholy which possessed her began to recede. It was as though she had emerged from an icy stream, and her heart raced under the heat that now coursed through her. She spoke in reply, yet did not answer his question. She was forever changed, and yes, many things were now her will, yet his unspoken question was also left unanswered, at least in words said aloud.

She was then enfolded in his arms, and as their lips met, as they shared breath and then drew back,

Éowyn knew suddenly that oblivion would never again be her pursuit, that as never before she longed to feel truly alive. Faramir gently moved some hair from her face, the warm touch of his finger behind her ear making her whole body shiver with unexpected delight. As she looked around the garden, she almost laughed with joy at the roses, now tended, near the wall, their splendour a riot of colour. Returning to look at his face, she touched his lips with her fingers.

Home.

Minas Tirith
Early May

Faramir began to smile well before he reached his intended destination, striding purposefully toward one of the smaller kitchens on the sixth level of the tower. He paused at the doorway for just a moment, his grateful eyes drinking in the scene before him, then entered.

"And then he said, 'Fool of a Took! This is a serious journey, not a hobbit walking-party. Throw yourself in next time!'" Merry spoke in his best, and very effective, Gandalf impersonating voice, wagging a thin loaf of bread like a staff. Pippin and Éowyn howled with laughter. Upon seeing the Steward of Gondor, wearing a rich cloak and looking very regal, the hobbits quieted down and Éowyn began to rise from the table, her smile as bright as white sand at midday.

"No, no, stay seated," Faramir said congenially. "I did not mean to interrupt, as I am on my way to what I hope is a brief council." He looked at the table, with plates of food, mostly eaten, some ale, a flask of wine and jug of water. With a twinkle in his eye, Faramir asked, "And what meal is this one called?"

Pippin spoke up. "Elevenses, sir." After taking a satisfying bite out of his apple, he asked, somewhat muffled, "Would you care to join us? There is still some to go around."

"Yes, Faramir," Éowyn said, "please do. I did not think you would mind... it has been such a wonder to have my appetite back again, and Meriadoc and Peregrin are most clever in their ability to create delicious meals." She took Faramir's hand in hers, placing it on her shoulder, and Merry gave Pippin a knowing glance, then looked toward the opposite door.

Pippin got up from the table, pocketed a small bit of bread and cheese, then bowed to Faramir. "Merry and I have lingered long enough. We need to go find that rascal Sam, and Frodo too. No doubt we can find Sam in the garden, since they say -"

"Once a gardener, always a gardener," Merry finished the sentence as he rose, giving a jaunty nod of his head to Éowyn. "There is at last a look of hobbit health around you now," he said with a grin as he patted his own rather flat stomach, then retrieved his pipe from a pocket in his vest.

Faramir stepped across to straddle the bench, taking Merry's place at Éowyn's side as the two hobbits left the kitchen, going off in search of their companions. Éowyn picked up a strawberry from a small plate, and with a coy smile, placed it to Faramir's lips, which he opened with surprise. He chewed thoughtfully, desire flickering briefly in his eyes, then he shook his head. "Ah, lady, would that I did not need to attend this council!" He ran his fingers through her hair, then leaned in to kiss her lips softly.

As he leaned back, Éowyn traced her finger along his cheekbone, murmuring, "As do I, lord." She picked up another strawberry for herself, enjoying its sweetness. "But we shall leave soon, and there is still much I need to do to prepare for my return to Edoras."

They sat in contented silence for a few moments, Éowyn resting her left hand on Faramir's thigh. *What grace is this which is given me?* Faramir wondered, feeling both the need to go to his

appointment and yet wishing for nothing more than to run to the highest point of Minas Tirith and shout out for all to hear, 'She will have me!', the words ringing across the rooftops. He picked up her glass of wine and took a small sip, then looked ruefully at Éowyn as she played with the green strawberry-leaves on her platter. "Are you ready to return to your home?"

Éowyn ceased twiddling the leaves and looked at him, tilting her head slightly. "Would you have my true answer?" she asked, her grey eyes hinting at much, yet revealing little.

Faramir nodded. "I would never wish for you to tell me a falsehood, no matter the sentiment."

Shuddering, Éowyn replied, "Those who speak half and untruths hold special loathing for me, and none shall ever fall from my lips." As her hand massaged his leg, she bowed her head. "It is odd for me to return, Faramir," she began haltingly, then turned her face to his. "I am filled with such joy now, and hope, but I had none of those things when I left the place of my birth. I did not plan ever again to see the shining helms of the guards of Meduseld, to see horses running free across the plains, to confront those who I left behind..."

Her voice trailed off as she returned her gaze to her plate on the table. "It is an unexpected privilege, and yet I do not know how I will be received." She sighed, watching her fingers as they played around the edges of the dish. "So much has changed," she said quietly, then quickly turned to look at Faramir. "I have changed." Her tone was solemn.

Faramir knew that he could not linger, but before he rose to attend his council, Éowyn continued, "There are those to whom I must redeem myself, those who have loved me dearly since I was a child." Taking his hands in hers, Éowyn looked earnestly at Faramir, his expression one of complete attentiveness. "You must know my friend Fréalas, even as I must explain my actions to her."

Faramir gently held his beloved's hands. "If it is of import to you, then I shall."

18. Reconciliation

Mid-May
Edoras

Snip. Snip.

Fréalas ignored the flies that buzzed around her head as she deftly wielded a large pair of clipping shears, holding a wriggling sheep in place. The sun hung heavily above the horizon, casting a golden glow over the paddock and pastures. With a sound of satisfaction she released the shearing and watched it scamper away to join its fellows, much lighter given the pile of wool now lying at Fréalas' feet. Standing straight she looked around her at the dense curly hair and gave a smug nod. "Despite all that has happened," she said aloud into the hazy air, "this will keep the weavers busy for quite a time!" She leaned over to pick up some of the wool when she heard someone yelling. Rushing out of the shelter toward the road, she saw one of the recently returned Riders racing up the path to Edoras, and she felt her heart rise in her throat.

She stood, gripping a wooden fence-post as one of the women of the homestead rushed to her.

"Did you hear?" the homestead woman gasped. "King Éomer and the Lady Éowyn are returning! We are to go to Edoras with all haste." She turned and without awaiting a reply, ran on speedy feet back to the main house.

Fréalas continued to stand at the fence, her stomach churning as though she had just eaten a piece of undercooked meat. She had known for several weeks that this moment would come, and yet now that it was fast approaching, she felt completely unprepared. Éowyn and her brother the King were returning, and the royal city would be hurriedly decked in splendor and a great feast held. What place would there be for her, for Swiðhild, for those who had held the reins of leadership out of necessity - would they be acknowledged? Or almost worse, ignored as though nothing had needed to be done

after the fighters of the Mark departed for Gondor, unwittingly taking the last royal heir of Rohan with them?

Fréalas took her hands off of the fence and angrily saw that they were trembling. *You have faced far worse than a feast and welcoming ceremony in Meduseld*, she thought as she strode swiftly to the shearing pen. Hastily hanging up the shears and piling the wool, she turned to ensure the area was remotely tidy, latched the door, and ran to Salupád.

It did not take her long to reach the barrows and the city walls. She dismounted from her horse, guiding her to the path that led down to her mother's house. People were hurrying to and fro, and Fréalas could smell that the meats roasting for the feast were well underway. Salupád pulled toward the road leading to the royal stables and Fréalas paused, troubled. Much of the stable had remained empty since the exiles' return to Edoras, and so she had felt it not inappropriate to board Salupád there, but what now? She bit down on her lower lip in frustration and pulled Salupád back down toward their house.

"Fréalas! Where have you been?" Her mother's voice rang out as her daughter approached, brows furrowed. When she didn't answer as she came into the house, Fréawyn said her name again. "Fréalas! Horse's mane, my dear, you are a sight."

At this Fréalas looked at her, then down at her coarse dress with bits of sheep wool still clinging to it, then back at her mother. Still unable to speak, she sank into a straight-backed wooden chair, shaking her head.

"What is it?" Fréawyn's voice was concerned, though she continued her actions in the room, tidying shelves, standing a broom upright in its corner, then stopping before Fréalas. "Well?" she asked again as Gold Eyes wandered over and placed his large head in his master's lap.

Fréalas stroked his ears for a moment, then looked at Fréawyn. "I feel like two people," Fréalas replied. "I am so glad that Éowyn has survived and is to be celebrated and lauded with Éomer. King Éomer." She corrected herself. "But I am so angry!" She looked beseechingly at her mother. "She abandoned her people - us - she did not heed the wishes of King Théoden. She was selfish beyond measure and now returns in triumph and glory."

Fréalas stood suddenly, prompting Gold Eyes to pad over to Fréawyn, seeking friendlier hands. "Does no one else see this? Will she be unrepentant to the end? If so, I can no longer be friend to her. Not that she will be lacking for company," she continued, more quietly. As her anger reignited, she said, "Do you know, never once was I invited to Meduseld! Not once! All these years of companionship..." Tears began to well in Fréalas' eyes, but she shook her head, furious, wishing that she could simply confront Éowyn alone, now, and be done with it, all the while knowing that was not possible.

Fréawyn placed a loving hand on her daughter's shoulder. "If the stories are true, she will soon be wed to a ruler of another land, and your dealings with her will be of no import. Your friendship with her has been unique, but you must tread carefully with those of royal houses, no matter how long you have known them." She gently squeezed her, then moved back into the kitchen, took two loaves of braided golden bread out of the oven and wrapped them in a cloth.

As she left the house to go up the road to Meduseld, Fréawyn turned and said, "Let her speak first before you judge." Then Fréalas was alone in the house, Gold Eyes gnawing contentedly on a bone near the warm oven.

The noise was impressive enough. The thundering of hooves of an *eored* stirred the hearts of the waiting assembly, all the more since the sound was approaching, rather than departing. As the crowd of horses drew nearer to the city, at the gates a cry went up, "Long live King Éomer!" "King Éomer" echoed from the walls, even as a dark green standard bearing the image of a white horse could be seen nearing the barrows. Éomer approached the outer walls of Edoras, his long golden hair shining in the sunset. He nodded both to the left and right at the First and Second Lines of the Kings of the Mark

he passed into the city. It was suddenly quiet as he rode up the main street, though there was a muffled "King Éomer!" heard as a mother clamped a hand over her son's mouth even as his oversized Rider's helm slid down over his eyes.

Behind him rode Éowyn, resplendent in a gown of deep blue, her head held high. As they approached the wide stone steps of Meduseld, both dismounted from their horses and turned to face their citizenry.

"People of the Mark!" Éomer's voice rang out into the gloaming. "I and the Lady Éowyn and many Riders of the Mark have returned. Our great King Théoden was slain on the fields of Mundburg, and only our finest minstrels shall have the words to do justice to his brave acts. His body shall be returned to us in due time." As he said those words, he raised a gloved hand to motion to the barrows. "At that time we shall mourn his passing and celebrate his life. But now," he looked around at the brave men of the Mark, and the joyful expressions on the citizens of Edoras, then looked at his sister whose face was unreadable, and returned his gaze to the city. "Now is the time for feasting and reuniting!" At that there was a roar as a thousand men, many of whom were still outside the city gates, dismounted, and putting helms in hand, went off in search of their wives and children.

Éomer went up the tall steps, cheerfully greeting the guards and gratefully accepting a large tankard of ale. From a distance in the crowd, Fréalas stood, Tóswífan's hand on her shoulder even as she fondled her knife. He had raised an eyebrow at this when he saw her mere moments before, as she was still wearing her leather war vest and her blade tucked into her belt. She had spoken quickly, "One never knows when defense will be needed." Now they stood still amidst the ensuing chaos as people began searching out the food and wine, children making the most of their night of freedom, forming little clusters and playing their own games.

"She is a regal vision, is she not?" Fréalas asked Tóswífan.

He shrugged. "The color suits her, I suppose," he said, nonchalantly. "So," he asked. "Are we rabble invited into the royal hall?"

Fréalas didn't answer for a moment. "There's something wrong," she said, then gasped. "She isn't wearing her sword!"

Tóswífan leaned in to nuzzle her ear. "We are no longer at war, my fiery locks."

Fréalas continued to look at Éowyn, even as she stepped alone up to the stairs into the Golden Hall. "No," she replied. Leaning her head backward, she peered keenly into Tóswífan's eyes. "And no." As she resumed her gaze on the now empty steps, she continued, "Rabble is not invited."

Taking Tóswífan's hand, she led him away from the large stone building to a cluster of people who were enthusiastically helping themselves to a rare imported white cheese and some crusty bread.

Several hours later, Fréalas found herself in a small garden attached to the royal house, a place unbeknownst to her that Théodwyn had frequented while she lived, but whose plants and flowers had now grown mostly wild. After mild protestation, she had sent Tóswífan off to visit with those others of the *eored* who had returned, many of whom he had fought alongside with on the Pelennor.

A cup of wine in her hands, she looked up at the canopy of stars, identifying the constellations despite herself. "Fiscere... Eofer..." she breathed out the names even as she formed the figures in her mind's eye, making recognizable patterns out of the seemingly countless and chaotically-sprinkled lights in the midnight sky. As she heard a sound at the gated entrance to the garden, Fréalas stood, instinctively putting her hand again to her knife.

"I hope that I may explain my actions before I find a knife at my throat."

The voice was familiar beyond measure, and yet to Fréalas' ears it contained far more melody than she

could remember hearing, even in distant memory. She stood still, fingers remaining clutched at her knife-hilt, awaiting Éowyn's next words. Éowyn walked quietly into the garden, her heavy brocade dress trailing behind her on the tiled path, making an odd swishing sound over the stones suddenly loosed in her wake. She stood before Fréalas, a golden circlet on her head, holding a silver chalice etched with intertwining knots barely visible in the starlight.

"Fréalas," she spoke softly even as she looked into her friend's face. Silence hung in the air even as the small luminous lights of a few fireflies danced around them, appearing and disappearing in an unchoreographed dance in the night sky.

"I betrayed you. I left you all without thought to what you would endure in my absence. But loyalty and kin- " Éowyn stopped for a moment until she recognized that Fréalas would hear her out, then continued. "I rode for Rohan. I could not see a future day, I could only see death, and yes, I wanted mine to be in battle, not left to burn in the Golden Hall, the very fires of darkness licking the wood of our houses, our beautiful horses running mad, our people enslaved or killed."

She paused and took a sip of wine from her cup. "You will find me far less proud than I was, my *sylcidesweoster*."

Fréalas continued to hold her gaze, then spiteful words rushed forth. "Well, that would not take much, now would it?"

Éowyn looked stung, but did not reply.

"I will not judge- I cannot judge. I am but a commoner, one of the Rohirrim grateful to be alive, but Éowyn!" Fréalas stepped back, taking in the warm air in laboured breaths. "I have loved you, and tried to protect you, and I felt that you were bound to this land, these mountains, these endless skies, just as I am." Her words came quickly now, as though she were afraid of them being burrowed away forever as in a rabbit's warren, hidden, never said.

"How could you? Was it Aragorn? Why?" She looked Éowyn straight in the eye. "And yet," she said more measuredly, "we continued on without you. Simply because we must. But Éowyn, if you have any love for me at all, if you will think fondly of the family of Frithmund in the years to come, please do not depart again without bidding me farewell. That injury was the hardest to bear."

Suddenly a white glow flickered behind some towering clouds, and both sets of eyes turned to the sky. Lightning began dancing across the midnight blackness, bright trajectories of blazing light illuminating some distant grey clouds. The two women stood silently, watching the unexpected play of brilliance and dark as the sky was lit again and again across the horizon.

"You would have tried to stop me."

"Yes, I would have."

The wind picked up and an air of electricity hung in the air as the show of fantastic searing bolts continued to light up the now-approaching clouds.

"I saw him, Aragorn, at Helm's Deep." Fréalas took a sip of wine, then turned to look at Éowyn. "Were you seeking him? How could he have become so important to you in so short a time?"

Éowyn pulled her hair back from her face in the ensuing breeze before replying, "He declined my request to join him, and for that I felt utterly abandoned. Useless. Worse than useless. I did not seek Aragorn, Fréalas. I sought the end. Death became a far easier master to follow, almost as though I already knew the way." She continued to look up into the sky, the stars now mostly covered by swiftly moving clouds, lightning still providing bursts of brightness as they spanned the heavens.

"I love another now. He is unlike any I have ever known..." here her voice trailed away, and she looked at Fréalas. "No one can be as Frithlíc was, when we were younger, and I have dreamt about him often. But Faramir is different, and I am different too." She moved her chalice to her left hand,

and with her right, tenderly loosened Fréalas' fingers from her knife, taking them into her own. "He is intense in his earnestness, and has suffered much. Nonetheless he has found himself smitten by one as me, and though at times everything seems so sudden, yet my heart knows that it has found its home."

The unkempt flowers in the garden were now bending in the ensuing wind, and wild shadows were being cast in the garden as the flames in the tall torches outside the garden walls bent wildly from side to side.

"You are leaving, then," Fréalas spoke plainly, even resignedly, as lightning continued to crackle through the sky.

"I am. But I shall return often. I was rescued from death in Mundburg, hardly a place where I would ever have expected to find comfort of any kind. But Fréalas," she held their hands up to her heart, "I cannot stay away forever from Rohan. Éomer will certainly need to have at least one set of eyes on him for awhile, and I must say that news has reached me of a certain Rider who has set his sights on a particular woman who, shall we say, held the reins of leadership when her appointed leader had departed."

She cocked her head at Fréalas, who returned her gaze, a hint of a smile on her face. "I am not meant to rule," Fréalas said softly. "But I did. That was your role, though it is only now that I can understand how you chafed under it." Fréalas looked back into the sky, smelling the oncoming rain.

"I plan to return to the Firien Woods. Tóswífan does not know that, and we will discuss such things in the future if they are still appropriate. I know that you will have many obligations and responsibilities as the..." she faltered, unsure of what Éowyn would be, exactly.

"Princess of Ithilien," Éowyn murmured. "Queen would hardly suit one who wishes to undertake as many endeavours as I have in mind, many of which involve being on one's hands and knees in the dirt, planting things."

Fréalas had to chuckle at that vision, then she clutched at her friend's fingers, even as raindrops began to assail the ground. "I hope you will be a frequent and honoured guest, even if our lodgings are far less pampered than those of Gondor, which I have now heard about thanks to Tóswífan." Wiping rain from her eyes, she looked at Éowyn.

"We are a bit old for rain dances now, and you must look after your fine gown! Shall we go inside?"

Éowyn smiled and said, "Yes, though I hate to miss a summer storm such as this! And someone should look in on Éomer and the other Riders - they are probably in need of more ale!"

The rain began to fall in earnest as Fréalas and Éowyn hastily made their way back to Meduseld. Fréalas stopped at the bottom of the steps, her dress raised above her feet, Éowyn starting up the stone stairs.

"May I join you?"

Éowyn turned, then nodded solemnly. "I should have had you do so many years before now."

As the people of Edoras ran from shelter to shelter in the summer shower, the figures of two lithe women, their hair blowing in the wind, could be seen entering the Golden Hall through its heavy carved stone doors, the latter lingering for a moment as she traced a pattern with a pale finger before entering the royal hall.

19. Passion's Ghosts

Meduseld*
Spring, 3020

The sky was churning. Off to the west, heavy grey clouds sluggishly meandered in the wind, like sheep being herded across the hills. Swaths of almost black mingled with menacing dark yellow light.

Éowyn stared out the window. Fréalas made a disapproving noise as she crossed the room to stand behind her. "What horrible weather for your wedding day!" She shook her head in disbelief at the menacing view.

"It looks quite as though the ocean and sky have traded homes!" Éowyn said as she turned, smiling as she brushed her hair out of her eyes, as it was being blown around even in the confines of the room. "Oh Fréalas, you know I love thunderstorms. What could be more wonderful?"

Fréalas threw up her hands. "But for the rest of us," she looked accusingly at her friend, "we prefer not to attend such grand events looking like sodden field mice."

At the anguished expression on Fréalas' face, Éowyn laughed out loud. "Fréa, you seem to think that I asked for this weather!" Throwing her arms around her friend, Éowyn warmly embraced her companion. "It will be a splendid occasion, whether under sunny skies or in pouring rain and howling winds." She stood back, then taking Fréalas' face in her hands, she kissed her on the cheek. "But now you must not look so morose or Faramir, who spends too much time in serious thought already, will become even more anxious about this day."

Fréalas had to laugh at this truism. "Yea verily, dear one, it has been a surprise to me that it is a man of the mind who spirited away your heart. Come, you need to get ready. But before you do, I wish to give you your gift."

Éowyn looked puzzled. "But Fréalas, I thought we had agreed that your standing with Éomer at my side was gift enough! What is this about a present?"

Fréalas took Éowyn by the hand away from the window to her bed, where they both sat down. "Open your hand." Éowyn did, her palm open on her friend's skirt.

"Should I close my eyes, too, like when we were children?" Éowyn asked, her voice full of amusement.

"No, we needn't get ritualistic about this. You will have enough of that later today." Fréalas placed a small round disc into her friend's hand. "After five centuries, it is time for this stone to return to its home, and belong to the last Steward and his wife from Rohan. I hope when you look on it you will think fondly of the two of us, of our years growing up together in Edoras, of summers near the Mering Stream, and even of that stranger in the woods that I met years ago. How could I possibly have guessed that the dishevelled man who I faced with my child's bow would end up being so integrally involved in your life, and now be King over all!"

Éowyn took Fréalas' hand and clasped it in hers atop the disc, tears welling in her eyes. "Dear Fréa, this is the most wonderful gift I could have besides your friendship, which I treasure with all my heart." She sniffed, then smiled. "There have been truly dark days in our past, but the joy that I feel now almost overpowers me." Éowyn opened their hands to look at the stone for a moment, then held Fréalas fiercely to her again. "Do not think that because I will no longer be living in Rohan that you will never see me again! I couldn't bear it, and I am sure that Faramir will understand when I return to Edoras to see Éomer and you on a frequent basis." She nuzzled her head in her friend's unruly red hair. "I am so happy," she said softly. "I wish such joy for you as well."

Fréalas felt a tear roll down her cheek as she replied, "Thank you."

The wedding was a joyous one, followed by dancing and music through the evening. The most threatening part of the storm had passed, but, as Fréalas had feared, the wind and rain continued through the day, though the weather could not dampen the spirits of those in Edoras for the

ceremonies. Friends and family of the couple stood by and their hearts were made glad by this joining, though there was knit together with the joviality a respectful solemnity, marking the keenly felt absence of many souls beloved to Faramir and Éowyn. The two newlyweds, both orphans now, were still able to feel a profound happiness in their union, and the gratitude for their new life together and for those who had travelled to be with them could be seen in the radiance of their faces, the warrior princess of Rohan and the recently crowned Prince of Ithilien.

There were celebrations indeed! Éowyn in particular seemed to light up the room as she joined Master Meriadoc Holcwine in a rousing rendition of a hobbit drinking-song, and even Faramir had to laugh to see his new wife singing lustily with a group of hobbits from Buckland who had journeyed down with Merry for the wedding. The golden-haired bride had been especially thankful that Meriadoc and his entourage had made the several weeks trip, as he had been insistent on attending from the time the invitations had been sent. She had laughed aloud at the written reply that had made its way from the hobbit lands down to Rohan, waving the paper at Éomer. "Master Merry is coming!" she exclaimed, delight shining in her eyes. "And he says that he will bring several others, and they will stay for a fortnight at least, but he doesn't wish to be an unwelcome guest." She put the letter back in front of her face and read, "I shall be true to my words to Dernhelm during that long ride. If you will not come here for me to treat you to a pint, I will bring a pint to you. Or several kegs, more like, to add to your wedding celebrations. Faithfully and honourably yours, Merry."

As the musicians took a well-deserved respite, Tóswífan guided his dance partner toward the table where there were awaiting glasses of ale, taking two as Fréalas fanned herself, her face flushed from the exertion of vigorous dancing. "Shall we go outside for some air?" he asked, and she nodded in the affirmative.

They made their way down the familiar stone steps of the Golden Hall, passing many other revellers also seeking relief from the warmth of the high-roofed room. They made their way down the main path, Fréalas as always with her head turned toward the stars, admiring their beauty as she beheld them, bands of light that on this now-clear night glittered as though thousands of diamonds had been cast up into the heavens.

Leaning back gratefully into Tóswífan's arms, Fréalas rested, drinking some of her ale. "They seem happy, do they not?" she asked rhetorically, knowing full well that Éowyn was happier than she had seen her in many years.

Tóswífan responded by trying to tickle her, running his fingers down her belly, her fancy velvet dress now sticking to her with sweat due to her enthusiastic response to the call of violins, drums and flute. Fréalas wriggled away and rounded about, wagging her finger at him, though the glee on her face would have outshone the sun. "None of that, young man, none of that!"

"Young man?" he cocked one eyebrow, then took another sip of ale. "Yes, I suppose I am not yet a dotard." Snaking out one arm, he grasped Fréalas by the waist and pulled her to him. "Marry me," he breathed.

Fréalas stood stunned, staring into his eyes, the colour of golden corn kernels, and time seemed to stand still. "Pardon?" she asked.

Tóswífan repeated himself. "Marry me," he said urgently into her ear. "Share yourself with me... let us make a home where your heart will want to return every day, where I can find solace, where our half-wild, red-haired children will want both to raise sheep and carve stone, where I can find my spirited wife transfixed by the sunset, her feet dangling in the river..."

"Yes." Fréalas answered. "Yes. And yes. And yes." Her cup fell to the ground, forgotten, as she clasped her hands around his shoulders. "But I wish to return to the Firien Woods, now that all wrongs have been made aright. There is still so much to tell you..."

"Where else would a carver want to live than near the woods?" He leaned in, and kissed her passionately until they broke apart, gasping for air. "Have me, Fréalas," Tóswífan said, stroking her hair. "I shall carve a bed for us where all your dreams will be sweet, where I shall awake to your kind

face every morning."

"I accept!" she replied, her face filled with joy. "And yet there are others joined this night who need to be celebrated... shall we not return?"

Tóswífan nodded, then pulled Fréalas to him once more, his tongue enthusiastically plundering her awaiting mouth until they pulled apart again.

Breathing heavily, Fréalas tried to make sure her clothes were as straight as possible as she patted down her gown. "This is their night," she whispered into his ear, as they climbed the steps back into the revelry. Claspng Tóswífan's hand tightly, she continued, "I will let Éowyn know later, when it is appropriate." Fréalas looked at him, this man whom she had known for many years, and yet her desire for him burned more fiercely now than it ever had. Stopping abruptly, with a voice husky with emotion, she said, "My love."

In that moment, Tóswífan knew that whatever befell them, she would be able to fill their lives with grace, and the surety of that made him dizzy. "Let us make our suitable homage to the Prince of Ithilien and his wife from Rohan." He willed the words to come forth, trying to be as appropriate as he could be, wishing more than anything that he could simply run away down the hill to a copse of willows where he and Fréalas could be alone, to...

"Yes." Fréalas looked into his hazel eyes. "They will have missed us." She leaned into him, rubbing noses, feeling as though every pore were aflame with desire. "But there is much to discuss, alone, after the guests have left and we have some quiet." Moving back, she gave him a knowing smile. "I do not think that the new bride and groom will mind if we slip away for much... conversation."

Tóswífan gave her a mischievous grin. "Well," he said, "let us do what propriety deems, and then by all means allow me to escort you to your privileged lodging and we shall talk further."

After a lingering farewell to her brother and then her dear friend Fréalas, who bore a particularly noticeable blush across her face, Éowyn took her new husband by the arm to lead him down the great hall to their bedroom. As some serving-girls began picking up plates and chalices, Éowyn turned and with a wink, said, "That can wait til morning. You have worked hard all day!" Gratefully the attendants sat in a small group, pleased to be off of their feet. "And help yourself to some of that wine and sweets! They dare not go to waste!" Éowyn's voice floated back to them from the corridor.

"She is a generous one!" a dark-eyed young woman exclaimed, hopping up to partake of some of the party food.

Up in their room, the newly-wedded pair looked at each other almost shyly. "Well, what say you, my beloved?" Éowyn took Faramir's hand, and guided him to a long plush couch near the window. After they sat, Faramir turned and took Éowyn's face in his hands and kissed her gently but firmly on the lips.

"I shall never tire of tasting you," he said quietly. Looking down, with his long fingers he spread out her right hand. "We have been so busy," he murmured, "that I do not think you have had a proper look at your wedding band." Éowyn smiled as she heard the note of pride in his voice.

"You speak the truth, fair one!" Éowyn brought her hand closer to inspect the silver band. It had been a whirlwind day, and while she had taken in her ring with more than a quick glance, appreciating the two stones set in it, truthfully she had not been able to give it a more thorough inspection. They had both agreed to design the bands in secret. This was not a tradition in either of their cultures, but they did observe one of Rohan, and each of them had bestowed a gift from their family to the other. Éowyn's had come far earlier, for as she said to people later, 'I did not know it at the time, but once I had been clad in the blue cloak of Finduilas, the fate of my heart was sealed.' Faramir had been deeply moved when his betrothed presented him with a circular cloak clasp with a running horse on its face, intricate weavings around its shield shape inlaid with small dark green stones. "My mother had it

wrought for my father," she had said, handing it to Faramir. "There is not much else of his now, and this was his only adornment, aside from his own ring, of course."

Now Éowyn looked closely at her ring. It was silver, growing wider in the middle where two oval stones nestled against each other, set on the diagonal. One was a milky white color with flashes of rainbows in the light, and the other a yellow-green.

Éowyn wrapped her arms around her new husband, then smothered his face with kisses. "It is beautiful, my dear heart! And I have not seen such unique stones before... pray, what are they?"

"The one on the left is an opal, representing the stones of Gondor and our white sands to the south which I need to show you one day. The other," he held her fingers to his lips, then stroked her hand, "is a peridot, to reflect the colour of the grasses of your beloved Rohan. The beauty of both of our lands, now joined, shall forever catch your eye." He smiled at her and continued, "It is a good thing having such strong relations with the craftsmen of the Dwarves!"

Éowyn laid her head on Faramir's shoulder. "And now you, my beloved?" She took his hand and held it up, and he turned his band in a slow circle around his finger. His also was of silver with twin braids across the top and bottom. There were also thin vertical lines on its surface. "Tis beautiful," he murmured. "Did you mean for the patterns to bear a message?"

"Yes indeed." Éowyn sat up and turned to face him. "The braids are our intertwined hearts and lives, from this day to the end of days. And the lines," here she smiled even more widely, and almost blushed, "those are for the pages of books, since I know how much you value knowledge and would prefer to spend your days with a tome in your hand rather than a sword."

Faramir was quiet for a few moments and Éowyn looked at him ardently. "Does it not please you?"

His face showed contentment and joy as he replied, "Yes, my love. It could not be more exquisitely suited for me than is its giver."

He kissed her tenderly, and she responded with a passion that amazed him in its hunger. After a few moments, he drew away and after taking a deep breath, said in a low voice, "We have waited for this night for many months. Let us be held back from each other no longer." Faramir stood and gently pulled Éowyn up, and once they were standing, Éowyn leaned into him, embracing his back with her arms. She nuzzled her face in his hair, then his beard, then she took her tongue and began to trace it from his jawbone up to his ear, which she then placed between her teeth, breathing into his sensitive organ.

Faramir let out a shuddering sigh. He had placed his hands at the small of her back but at these unexpected ministrations, he put them on her buttocks and pulled her tightly to him. "Éowyn," he murmured as she continued to suck gently on his earlobe, "I am tempted to think that while I was in councils, you were visiting our library and studying some of the more - exotic texts that can be found there!"

She drew back and with a look of desire tempered with mischief, began to undo his silk shirt. Faramir's face bore an expression of bliss, and he closed his eyes to savour every sensation that her fingers would bring. Button by button she opened his chemise, pulling the bottom of it out of his trousers so that she could slide her fingers under the shirt to his abdomen, up across his chest, rubbing her fingers in the curly brown hair that she discovered there. When she grasped a nipple in each hand, Faramir gasped and his eyes flew open.

"My love!" he exclaimed. "What have you been reading?" He looked at her, intrigue in his gaze. "I did not expect a maid, especially a shieldmaiden who had been so distant when first I met her to be so practiced in what brings a man pleasure!"

Éowyn lips turned up in a coy smile. "My dear husband," she began, "a shieldmaiden I was. Books of the kind of which you speak have not been my reading, though I think now I must go in search of them when we return." She continued to caress his chest, letting her fingers play across his hardened

nibs. "But maid I am not."

The face of the Prince of Ithilien fell. A rush of expressions flitted across it: disappointment, fury, hurt. He placed his hands on hers, and clasping her fingers to his chest with strong fingers, he looked searchingly into Éowyn's grey eyes. "Not a maid?" he repeated dully.

Éowyn gazed back, confusion and anxiety emanating from her. "But Faramir, I told you that I had loved before, in my youth. Now I carry a precious memory of a brave son of Rohan, slain many years ago. You and I have spoken of that time. I did not mean to distress you."

"What I feel is far beyond distress," he said through thin lips. As waves of anger and distrust washed through him, he thought, *Another has bedded my Éowyn!*

"You are livid that I am not a maid, and yet..." she trailed off as with her strong fingers, she removed her hands from his grasp. He was her beloved, and yet he held his secrets too, and she felt those barbs as keenly as he felt those that she thought she had already pulled out from her past. Everything in her burned with desire, she wanted so to claim Faramir with every pore of her being, and yet Éowyn let go of her husband's hands, then put her hands to her dress, clenching the fabric for a place to regroup herself.

Her fury began to subside, and she continued, "Faramir, my heart's desire, please hear me out before passing judgement." Taking his hand, she led him to their bed, and poured him a half a chalice of wine from the table nearby. She proffered it to him, looking at him steadily, trying to gauge what emotions she could see in his eyes, their colour which seemed to her the very essence of twilight itself. His face was still flushed, but his jaw was no longer clenched. "I am now twenty-six years of age. I have seen many dreadful things." She poured herself some of the wine, then spoke again. "I have faced them all, without fear. Before I met you, before my life and this world itself went through such dramatic changes, I did yearn for a warrior's death and a barrow, joined in the earth with my kin. But many things have happened since then, and oblivion is no longer my pursuit."

They lay prone on the bed, Faramir's shirt still open, Éowyn mirroring his body's position. She leaned on her elbow, putting her right hand behind her ear.

"I loved another. We were intimates, only on one occasion, and until recently he visited both my dreams and my nightmares." She sat up and had some of her wine, then turned to face Faramir. "But you do not see me getting beside myself lamenting the fact that my husband, he whose body I wish to claim for my own, has already enjoyed the flesh of another."

Faramir gravely looked into the eyes of his wife, and found that his skin was burning with a previously unknown sensation of shame, surfacing without his knowledge, and most certainly without his permission.

Though chagrined at being correct about what she had heard, Éowyn felt a gentle wave of smug satisfaction roll through her as Faramir's face changed from scarlet blush to pale pallor and back again.

"Who told you? What? But that was..." The normally eloquent Prince, a master of words and turns of phrases, was spluttering. Éowyn calmly waited, and though still irked, held her tongue to wait and her what Faramir would say once he regained his composure.

Faramir cleared his throat and looked at his bride with a mildly defiant expression. "Dear Éowyn," he began, "it is true that I have lain in bed with a woman before today. Though not proud of it, I visited a particular establishment in Car Gwaloth** and had thought that such knowledge that I learned there would be brought to full fruition when I married." He looked hopefully at Éowyn, and she now saw a bit of melancholy in his visage, but she was unsure what to read into his expression. "I am a man, after all," he continued in a subdued voice, "and I did not have many dalliances. Certainly nothing compared to many others. My brother, for example."

Éowyn took his hand and between the kisses she bestowed on his fingertips, said, "And yet I should

not raise an eyebrow, and should indeed be grateful of the few number of interludes that you have had, since I am but a woman." She stopped, then said simply, "You, who are honest and desire even-handed justice for all, are holding me, your delight, your equal," she paused, "to a different standard." Closing her eyes, she kissed the palm of his hand, then gazed at him again. "That is not fair."

Faramir looked at her with incredulity, then understanding, and as she silently watched, Éowyn understood that she could read the emotions that he felt just as mariners could read the ever-changing seas, both a blessing and a responsibility. He had quite simply never considered the inequality of what he believed to be acceptable for men but not for women when it came to matters of body and desire. "The heart of a warrior is not given lightly, my love," she said, placing his hand to the warm skin of her chest above her heart. "Let us not quarrel any more about what has happened in the past; we belong to each other now."

A sultry look that Éowyn had seen only rarely came to his eyes as he replied, "Indeed we do, and I think that we should begin to enjoy each other without further delay." Faramir leaned over and kissed her fervently as Éowyn took him in her arms.

After a few moments she broke away from him, and breathing heavily she purred into his ear, "I think it is time for you to share what skills you learned, and I have no doubt that I will be greatly rewarded." Faramir's dark hair hung on his shoulders as he smiled, then ran a finger across her forehead, down her cheek and then down and down...

Author's Notes

*Per HoME, Vol. XII, *The Peoples of Middle-Earth*: "It is said also that in 3020 Éowyn Éomund's daughter wedded Faramir, last Steward of Gondor and first Prince of Ithilien, in the king's house of Rohan.

**read Alon's Faramir-centred story, [Closer to Fine](#), to understand this reference.

20. Epilogue

Eastfold Settlement
F.A. 8

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

A small group of mostly blonde-haired children collectively held their breath as the seeker, a sturdy girl of eight, began combing the hiding places before her with keen eyes. She had a peculiar colour of hair; it was very fair of hue, but tinged throughout with red, a rose pink colour, and wavy. She tread quietly through the tall grasses, toward the bushes and nearby trees, parting the low foliage with her lightly freckled hands.

With a dissatisfied grunt, she gave up and began walking deeper into the forest. A lone child darted up from the ground behind her, running to the safety of the fence-post. "Garúlf!" the seeker shouted, her voice full of frustration. She slammed her balled up fists into her legs, then crouched down to find the others.

Éowyn and Fréalas stood bemused, seeing the mice in their hiding places far more clearly than did the seeker in this particular round of Boar and Mouse.

"She is so determined!" said Fréalas, as she turned and gazed fondly at Éowyn. Fréalas' long deep red hair now sported several stray silvery strands, all of her waves currently pulled back into a manageable plait. She held Éowyn's third child in her arms, patting him softly on the back as he gazed unfocused into the woods, his heavy head resting securely on her shoulder. As though hoping to greet this other new soul in the world, Fréalas' own unborn child turned slightly within her, a comforting yet also bewildering sensation of her, and yet not her.

Éowyn smiled as she said, "And I wonder where she inherited that, hmmm?"

Éowyn seemed to emanate unfettered joy in a way that Fréalas had not seen in many a year. *There was a brief time when she was such a youngling and in love with Frithlíc, she thought, yet this is different, since she is now married to the Prince of Ithilien and has her own children. And yet, somehow, he is still with us!* Despite the dulled ache of thinking of her many years dead brother, Fréalas could see a part of him in Éowyn's headstrong daughter, although Meriadwine was most certainly the child of the princess of Rohan and Faramir alone. *I suppose it is one of those mysteries that we are not meant to understand.*

Fréalas winked at Éowyn and retorted, "I could never begin to guess, oh shieldmaiden of Rohan." At that, her friend blanched slightly, and Fréalas immediately regretted her choice of words. "Oh Éowyn, you know I did not mean it, now that you are a healer... it is just that it is so hard to disregard so many years of history." She stroked the dark brown hairs on the back of the head of Boromir, rubbing her nose in his hair, inhaling the wonderful, unique scent of baby that cannot be emulated by soap or perfume.

At that moment, a sandy-haired child ran up to them, one who wasn't actively involved in the game of hide and go seek. "Auntie Fréa! Auntie Fréa!" Elboron tugged at her dress, his six year old hands trying to turn her attention from his younger brother to his own needs. "You promised you would tell me the story of how you found the history stone...You did! Will I find a stone of history, too, if I play?"

"I suspect not, but one can never be sure!" Fréalas gently returned the youngest heir of Faramir back to his mother, then took Elboron by the hand so that they could walk to a bench not far away. "It has been awhile since I told that tale, and now that I am back in this place, it is fitting that I should tell you."

Fréalas was still hale, but several months along in her pregnancy and did not mind being able to sit on the carved wooden bench that Tóswífan had made for her. After an intimate wedding six years ago, she and Tóswífan went to live near the Mering Stream. As they exchanged vows, the joy on the faces of those assembled only further served to bolster the affections of the couple.

"You have taken your time in marrying, my Fréa, but these have been extraordinary times," her father said, smiling despite some lingering pain from injuries he sustained on the Pelennor Fields. At this Éowyn and Faramir looked knowingly at each other, the royal couple having made the trip despite Fréalas' insistence that they didn't need to.

'After all that we have been through, ' Éowyn wrote in reply to the parchment Fréalas sent telling her friend of her plans to marry, 'you have the nerve to inform me that I need not be at your own wedding? That is absurd. Kindly expect Faramir, baby Merry and myself to arrive several days beforehand. Besides, while Éomer may be the King of Rohan, he is still my brother, and I fear that Lothíriel is far too soft on him. I suspect that regular vigilance on my part will be an added boon to Rohan and her people. For I do remember my oath, *Glédfléon.* '

Now Fréalas sat on the wooden bench, Elboron sitting attentively at her side. "Has your mother shown you the stone?" she asked, absentmindedly running her hand over her swollen belly.

"Oh yes," he answered, nodding vigorously. "I like to hold it. It's smooth."

Fréalas smiled, thinking of how often she had run her fingers over its surface, the secrets of the carvings revealed to her not long after she found it. She had run home after meeting the mysterious man in the woods, holding the rock outstretched in her right hand, her bow in her left, the arrows long forgotten.

"Well," she began, looking at Elboron, "after showing it to my mother, who did not know what it was, I went to the house of an elder who used to live here when I was a young girl."

Éowyn's son sat still, gazing in rapt attention. "Stæfwis was her name, and though I did not want to give it to anyone after I found it, she said she needed to look at it closely."

Elboron waited expectantly, his grey eyes locked on the grey-green eyes of the storyteller.

"So I handed it to her, then sat on the floor while she turned it over in her hands. I had cleaned it up, of course, but the full meaning of the markings were a mystery to me, and I was afraid that as much as she was holding it, she would make the carvings disappear!"

The little boy's mouth fell open, so Fréalas hurriedly continued, "After a little while, she handed it back and asked me, 'Do you know anything about Gondor, the land to the south?' I said yes, because I had met a few people from there while visiting Edoras, but I was not very fond of them because they would stare at my hair, and I thought that they were rude. 'What do you know about this stone?' she asked, and I told her that I found it while playing Boar and Mouse, and that while I was practicing with my bow a many weeks later a man wearing dirty clothes but with kind eyes had appeared in the woods and told me that it said "R ND R" in the carvings, which meant 'steward.'"

Elboron continued to stare, his mouth still open, since nothing like this had ever happened to him!

"'Do you know what a steward is?' she asked me, and I shook my head. 'It is one who looks after something. ' she replied, then she asked whether I would like some strawberries. I accepted, of course."

At this, Elboron nodded, then wiped under his nose with the back of his hand.

"'Long ago,' she continued, 'Gondor was in very grave difficulty, and they asked for help from our ancestors. The Steward of Gondor- there was not a king, there had not been a king for hundreds of years, and this brave line of people took care of the land until a king would return- sent several messengers to the Riddermark. Each messenger had a rock like this so that when one of the Mark found him, they would know that they had come from Gondor. But,' and then she shook her head sadly, 'only one of them survived. The others were slain by orcs. You found one that must have been dropped by one of the messengers who was killed, many, many years ago. ' Then she handed the stone back to me."

"Well," Fréalas continued, smiling as she saw that Elboron was entranced by the story, "I must admit that I was disappointed. 'No magic?' I asked Stæfwis, and she laughed, which made me angry. I thought for sure that it would do something magical! 'No magic, ' she replied, 'but it is very ancient indeed, which almost makes it magical. ' Then she handed it back to me, and after taking a handful of strawberries, I thanked her and left.'"

Elboron looked disappointed, and scratched his sandy hair. "Not magic?" he echoed.

"No," Fréalas replied seriously, then took his small hands in hers. "But very, very, very old. And little did I know back then that the little blonde girl who visited us in the summers would marry the last Steward, and that she would become the Princess of Ithilien," she leaned in to rub their freckled noses together, eyes shut, "and that she would have you." Leaning back, Fréalas continued, "and that is magic indeed."

Elboron grinned, then with a mischievous look, asked, "Do you want to play tag?" Without waiting for an answer, he hit her lightly on the leg, hurled himself from the bench and ran off. "You're it!" he yelled back over his shoulder.

Fréalas ruefully shook her head, but pushed herself up, belly first, and began to lope towards him as he ran toward Éowyn. *I should not be doing this!* she thought, then put an arm down to cradle her swollen middle and began to run, a smile on her face. "Ready or not," she cried out, "here I come!"

Stæfwis= lettered, learned

~~ the end ~~

Authors Notes

This story is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend and writer, Rosemary St. George. She, like Finduilas of dol Amroth, died untimely, and tragically by her own hand, but her memory lives on.

Boundless bouquets of gratitude to my long-lost 'sister,' Amy. Without her allowing me to sit in on her Tolkien class, I would not have discovered fanfiction and I would certainly never have considered writing any myself. Her encouraging words and a CD she made for me, "Rohan Music for Thevina Finduilas," (delightfully heavy with David Arkenstone!) have been my constant companions over the past several months. My heartfelt thanks also to several HASA members who have provided support and oftentimes much-needed constructive criticism. Nessime tops the list (my *sycldesweoster* and friend!), Lasbelindi (RL has taken her far from the soothing waterfalls of Henneth Annun), Maura Mellon, and Jen from Parma Eruseen, who beta read the whole story. Thank you, dear heart, for catching all of my inappropriate dialogue punctuation!

Anglo-Saxon words

I carried around [A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary for the Use of Students](#) by John R. Clark Hall, London, 1894, for about 6 months, and finally turned it back into the Vanderbilt University Library, though I'm sure I'll check it out again. All of the Anglo-Saxon words in my story came from this book, which is Anglo-Saxon to modern English only, so I've had hours of fun poring through it to finding appropriate words and names.

Peter Jackson

My thanks to Peter Jackson for making the LotR trilogy, and for his brilliance in casting Miranda Otto as Éowyn. Her acting has inspired me all through this story.