

CELESTIAL QUARTET

1. Númenor

Erendis stood at the ocean's edge, the balmy water of late summer lapping at her bare toes. Though it was a new moon, the stars overhead were so bright that she could see far off to the horizon. Her long silvery hair, the colour reflective of the sands behind her in the bay of Rómenna, blew about her head in the breezy night. The sound of waves crashing near the shore no longer caused her teeth to grate, nor made her eyes shut in distaste as it had through her life. Indeed, the repetitive ocean song now seemed welcoming, inviting.

You shall have your revenge, at the last.

She lifted a blue glass phial to her lips and drank deeply of its contents, ensuring that she had ingested it all. After replacing its carved stopper, she leaned forward and gently flung it into the water, a ghost of a smile flitting across her face as the bottle began its inexorable journey away from her.

She waited for a few moments until she was sure that the draught was beginning to take effect, then waded into the water. Soon she found herself floating on her back, the current easing her from the shore.

Looking up at the stars Erendis formed a last, bitter, dim thought.

Now shall I be true to Aldarion's ill-naming. Uinen, take your new Lady of the Sea, as I am welcome nowhere else.

Despair had not always been her closest companion...

A man walked down a short corridor, its stony surface mostly void of decoration. Small torches blazed brightly in the hallway, having been lit earlier as the sun was setting. He stood for a moment before the sturdy oak doors, five-pointed stars carved into both sides, representing the isle over which the man inside the room was ruler. Then, he knocked.

'Yes, Caltan?' The fifth King of Númenor was surprised when his devoted servant interrupted him at his solitary meal. His wife, Almarian, knew that he had planned to spend a few days of respite at his tower in Forostar, but she did not often visit him there, preferring to remain at the royal city of Armenelos.

The servant respectfully bowed his head. 'I apologize for the intrusion, my Lord, but you have a visitor.'

Tar-Meneldur nodded his head to indicate for the servant to continue.

'It is the wife of your son, Lady Erendis.'

'Erendis!' the King exclaimed, dabbing at his beard with a cloth. 'Show her in, by all means!'

Meneldur was taken aback, and hoped that her unexpected journey did not portend ill news. He stood back from the table and went to meet his guest. He was almost at the door when Erendis entered. Though sixty-six years had passed since she had first come to his court, Meneldur continued to be held spellbound by her beauty, and he was grateful that his obstinate son had finally wed her after what he considered to be an improper amount of time.

'Erendis!' He enfolded the raven-haired woman in his arms as she clasped her arms around him.

'Atar aranya,' she replied with affection, then stood back from him. 'How farest thou, father?'

'Well indeed, and pleased to have your company. But Erendis, what errand brings you hither?' He embraced her hands in his as he looked at her worriedly. 'Does Aldarion or the Queen send you with unfavorable tidings?'

Smiling, she shook her head. 'No, Tar-Meneldur. Tis nothing that should make you anxious.' A mischievous gleam came into her grey eyes. 'Well, that statement may not be wholly true.' Meneldur motioned for her to join him at his board. 'I will ask Caltan to bring us some more food and wine, but then I must insist that you tell me what has brought you to this isolated retreat.'

Once the servant had been summoned and then again dispatched, the King sat down across from his daughter-in-law and looked anxiously at her.

'My dear *aranya*!' she laughed. 'Please forgive my decided lack of decorum. I have come here of free will and with warm greetings from the King's Heir. I do bring news, it is true.' She stopped for a moment to look down at her hands which were intertwined on her lap.

She raised her gaze to Meneldur's once more, then said quietly, 'By the grace of the Valar, Aldarion shall have an heir this spring.'

Meneldur beamed. 'Ah! This is joyful news indeed!' Then his face grew troubled. 'But surely you did not need to bring such word yourself, now that you are expecting? What if you had been injured?'

Erendis' lips upturned. 'I do not wish to insult the King, but surely he realises that he is speaking to no child, and the risk involved in travel is minuscule.' She held a hand over her abdomen. 'I wished to tell you in person, as well as avail myself of your extraordinary view of the heavens. I have found that the nights come and yet I do not sleep well, and so I hoped perhaps to spend a few days with you and learn some of your vast knowledge of the star patterns. If I must be awake during these night hours, most assuredly I could be learning from the wise Star-watcher!' A hardness came into her voice as she continued, 'Perhaps the granddaughter or grandson of the King will set her or his eyes to the inky skies above and the wooded plains of this fair isle, rather than being called away by the Sea.'

Meneldur nodded in assent, though his smile had faded. 'My son has been always thus called, even to the point of heeding Her wishes over that of his father.' He sighed, then reached out for Erendis' hand. As she placed it in his, he said more warmly, 'But now surely he shall remain for long years in Númenor and in your home in Armenelos, assisting in the raising of his heir. And in his continued cultivation of woods.'

At this, Erendis blanched, but said nothing.

'Do you not accompany Aldarion to his ever-growing forests? From our discussions over the years I know how fond you are of wooded glades and the peace that they bring you.'

Erendis shook her head, then turned quickly as Caltan entered, carrying a small platter of smoked fish, herb-roasted vegetables, and a flagon of sweet white wine that was commonly served in the royal home.

'Ah! Thank you, Caltan!' the King's baritone voice boomed as the servant placed the items on the table. As Caltan bowed to leave, Meneldur reached out and put his hand on his servant's arm. 'The Lady Erendis brings with her most happy tidings,' he said, then raised his cup. 'Eru be praised - she is with child!'

Caltan smiled as he looked at her, placing his hand to his chest above his heart. 'By the Valar, long may the line of Elros, son of Eärendil, continue on these blessed lands.'

Erendis nodded in return. 'To my eyes, this is a most beautiful land. The rolling hills, bays teeming with fish, the joyful bleating of lambs - ' She stopped for a moment, then continued on defiantly. 'These should prove more than satisfactory and restrain even the most wilful of hearts from constant sojourning from our silver-sanded shores.'

An almost imperceptible glance flickered from servant to King, then Caltan said, 'I am most happy for the King's Heir and his wife. And now, if I am no longer needed..."

Meneldur nodded, and Caltan left the room. Erendis busied herself with a glass of wine, then took a few delicate bites of fish. Putting down her utensil, she said heavily, 'Father, I have not joined your son at his tree-harvesting for some years. I find what he does there distasteful. Seeing him grow trees only to cut them down for his ships leaves me in a wretched state. So I go there no more.'

In the silence that followed, Meneldur chose not to look at her, but instead at the fire blazing across the room in its hearth. He knew well of the fiery personalities that both his son and daughter-in-law possessed, and while he intended to command respect from the two, he knew also that the bounds of a marriage were held alone by the husband and wife. Though he ached at his daughter-in-law's obvious pain at his son's actions, he was resolved not to be party to the taking of sides in such matters.

And so, even-handed and wise ruler that he was, he changed the subject.

'Your white sapling, the gift of the Eldar - that flourishes in our garden, does it not?'

Erendis nodded in assent, her bright grey eyes shining with hope and happiness. 'Yes, my Lord, however even after two years it looks to remain a sapling forever. Though to those who are immortal, its growth must seem quick indeed.'

She laughed at this, though Meneldur knew his daughter-in-law well, and could hear the undercurrent of sadness in it. For all of her beauty, Erendis was of the line of Bëor, and not Elros, and thus her lifespan would never reach as long as that of Tar-Meneldur and his progeny.

'The birds, also, *aranya*, they sing contentedly the days long and are pleasing to all who hear them.'

Meneldur smiled, grateful that despite the many ill-advised sea journeys and years of waiting, his son had finally married, and his wedding had been blessed by the Eldar themselves. Full of joy with the news that within the year he would have a grandchild, he told Erendis, 'Come! Let me show you to the top of this tower, and there you shall behold the work of Varda in her most splendid glory.'

As Erendis stood, he took her by the arm, saying, 'Your visit was opportune indeed. I have made many calculations of the stars in their courses since my youth, and I believe that tonight will be an evening of particular beauty. Tis why I made this visit myself, though my dear Queen begrudges every night that I am away from her side.'

The pair left the room, leaving one of the doors ajar, then went to another thick wooden door, set back into a rounded archway. Tar-Meneldur released Erendis to reach under his cloak for a small gold chain to which a rather ornate key was attached. He unlocked the door, then pulled it open, its hinges silent.

Erendis had only been to the King's star watching tower on a few occasions, but it had always felt welcoming and comfortable her. As Erendis followed Meneldur, climbing the dozens of stairs that spiralled to the top of the tower, she reflected that despite its very rustic qualities (for a lodging-place of the King of Númenor, it was very undecorated indeed!), it was an appealing place. The daylight views of the island were splendid, but it was at night when the ingenuity of the builder was most apparent. From the top of the tower, on an unclouded night,

the firmament of stars blazed overhead, the air at the northernmost spur of the isle being the clearest of all.

Erendis had begun to regret her decision to accompany the King up so many steps, not only because it was taking place at the end of a long day of riding, but also since she was into her fourth month of pregnancy, but then she saw with relief the stone door that opened out onto the tower landing. Meneldur grunted, jerking the door open which appeared to wish to remain stubbornly closed.

'I have not been here in many months!' he exclaimed, then extended his arm to Erendis. She grasped it, and after five more steps, she found herself once again on the smooth stony floor of the high tower of Tar-Meneldur Elentirimo. She closed her eyes for a moment, greedily breathing in the heady air of the northlands. As her heartbeat slowed to its less strained rhythm, she opened her eyes, and gasped.

The bright stars seemed close enough to touch, hanging low in the sky. She tipped back her head, drinking in the impossibly bright swaths of lights twinkling in the placid ocean of night, forcing herself to blink to ensure that she was in no dream.

'Aranya,' she murmured, 'you are a strong-willed man indeed if you are able to tear yourself away from such a vision as this.'

Meneldur chuckled from a near distance, then said, 'Come this way, daughter.'

Erendis walked carefully along the edge, holding onto a waist-high edging which ran the perimeter of the tower. Meneldur was standing with his back to a small torch, its flickering light casting dim shadows on the walls.

'Look that way, to the east,' he suggested, raising his arm in that direction.

Erendis scanned the heavens, then said, 'The Valacirca! It is so bright - and there is Helluin, as well!' She shook her head in wonder. 'Would that when I lie awake at night, I could see such visions as clearly from my window.'

She gazed at the Sickle of the Valar for so long that she began to feel a bit drowsy in spite of the vividness of the sparkling patterns suspended in the black sky. All of a sudden, a quick movement caught the corner of her eye, and she turned her head to look past Meneldur, who was nodding his head.

Thinking perhaps that she had imagined it, Erendis began to look again at the semi-circle of stars when she saw it again: a searing flash of light, streaking down as though to join them on the earth.

'Father!' she cried in confusion, 'What are they?'

Meneldur draped his arm around her shoulder. 'They are *éli lántala* - falling stars.' Embracing her, he spoke softly, 'My calculations have proven correct! Keep your weary eyes open for just a few moments longer, and you shall see quite a display of them, blazing their quick journeys from Eru's realms.'

The pair stood silently for a while, Erendis placing her hands on her belly as she snuggled closer to her father-in-law, grateful for his warmth in the chill air. Above them, stars darted across the skies, a veritable shower of cascading celestial lights.

The King turned his gaze from the showy spectacle to look down at Erendis, noting his son's betrothal gift bound around her head.

'You are aptly named, Tar-Elestirnë,' he said quietly.

Erendis smiled softly to herself, even as she held her eyes to the stars' dance in the heavens.

'I do not think on it often, though I suppose that is true. Now that I bear a new soul of the line of Númenor, I must think of her - or him - and decide how to hand down both things and thoughts.'

She was suddenly overcome by anxiety for the future, and clenched her eyes shut, so tightly that tiny, unreal phantoms of light danced before her, then she snapped her lids open again. Only the benevolent dark sky greeted her as she continued to gaze upward, an occasional shooting star providing a unique backdrop to the more common and yet still humbling vision of the night sky.

'Are you ready to depart, my daughter?'

Tar-Meneldur's resonant voice echoed through her, and with a start she realised that she had accidentally begun to fall asleep.

Vigorously shaking her head, she replied, 'I would stay here as long as I could. I have never seen such glories, and I am loath to depart.' After shivering in the cold for a few moments despite huddling under Meneldur's cloak, she continued, 'Yet, perhaps your suggestion has much merit.'

The wise King nodded his head in understanding, and taking Erendis by the hand, they leisurely made their way back to the door that would take them back to the base of the tower. Erendis went first, holding tightly to the stair rail, but the Star-watcher turned his head and tarried at the top step for a few lingering moments before closing the door, his eyes sparkling as he saw yet another brazen light streaking across the sky.

'For you, Queen.'

The seventh ruler of Númenor bore an irate expression even as she accepted the small package and parchment scroll. It was late, and she had not wished to be bothered. She scowled at the messenger, and he bid a rapid retreat from her chamber.

What is this, that is could not wait until the morn? she mused, then looked idly at the seal.

She sat up straight.

It was from her mother. Brows furrowed angrily, she almost tore the scroll apart, wondering what under Eru she could have to say to her after so many years.

Quickly scanning the words, she found that the hair on her arms stood up straight, then despite herself, tears unbidden came to her eyes.

High-language, of course! Ancalimë thought bitterly, quickly restraining her emotions as she read the words again, more deliberately this time, the Old Elvish having been taught to her as a child.

To Ancalimë, my dear daughter -

I am, at last, had by the Sea.

Keep this diamond as your legacy and as a reminder of the mother who loved you above all else.

*Farewell,
Erendis*

With pale, trembling fingers, Ancalimë unbound the expertly wrapped parcel. Delicately she pulled out a thin, silver chain, a bright diamond fillet bound to it. Almost idly, she pulled the chain between her fingers, causing the star-shape to chase from one end of the necklace to the other.

Then she hurled it across the room.

atar aranya- father my-king
Tar-Meneldur Elentirmo- Star-Watcher
Tar-Elesterinë- Lady of the Star-brow

All words are Quenya

2. Buckland

A fire crackled merrily in the kitchen hearth as the hobbit-woman eased her hands into the tub of hot, soapy water and began scrubbing dishes.

*'Cross meadow and valley
The flowers wave gladly
The wind in the willow
Brings tears to my eye...*

Mirabella Brandybuck was always singing songs under her breath, a habit she had inherited from her mother.

*Merigold and the bluebell
Fair rose and cockleshell
King's keys and snapdragon -*

She was suddenly cut off as her husband swept in, his heavy feet pounding the earthen floor. He stood for a moment as she looked him up and down, taking in his attire which included his grandfather Madoc's seldom worn, fur-lined coat.

'Gorby, where are you going?' Mirabella asked, still swabbing plates and then dunking them in the adjacent tub to rinse them.

'Meeting,' the burly hobbit replied. 'Hamish Goodpasture and Giles Hamwidge say that their animals have been acting all skittish, and they think it will be a right cold winter to top it all off, after such a bad harvest this year.'

His wife regarded him quizzically. 'But you are no farmer - why must you go?'

She stacked a few of the plates and then began rubbing a skillet with great gusto.

'I am going to show that the Master of Buckland cares about the affairs of his people.' He said the words assuredly, leaning back against the doors of a pantry, then dabbing at his forehead with one of the dishtowels. The kitchen was rather warm, and he was overdressed.

Mirabella sighed. 'And I suppose this meeting is taking place at The Stonebows?'

Gorbadoc nodded. 'Yes, my dear. It has been awhile since I have sampled Frelibert Brewer's ale.'

She raised her eyebrows, then replied, 'The Master of Buckland cares much about the ales of his people.'

He laughed and patted his rather large belly. 'I am merely doing my part to assist in assuring that our reputation for spirited hospitality remains intact.'

He leaned over, kissed his wife on the forehead, then turned to leave the room. 'It may be a late evening,' he said, glancing back at her. 'You know how the farmers are once they have a listening ear beyond each other.'

Mirabella shook her head even as her husband walked purposefully out of the kitchen and made his way through the many corridors of Brandy Hall that would take him to the front door. She had a nagging sense that something did not ring wholly true in their recent exchange, but she was not by nature an unnecessary worrier. So she resumed her cleaning and her song, though now her brows were lightly furrowed, the words of their conversation running in the background of her mind, even as she kept singing.

*'Cross meadow and valley
The flowers wave gladly
Bright sun in the morning
Brings joy to all hearts.*

A motion out of the corner of her eye caught her attention and she stopped washing, then stepped back from the tubs, wiping her hands on her apron. She walked a few steps over to the window which was open just a smidge, then her eyes widened with surprise.

Snowflakes.

She closed the window, thinking, *Only my Gorbodoc could pick a wretchedly cold night like this and insist on going to the tavern, even if it is under the pretense of business.*

She suddenly felt very alone. She took off her apron and hung it on its hook, then went to find Rori, her nine year old son. Maybe she would let him stay up a little late tonight to keep her company.

Gorbodoc was humming to himself even as he closed the front door. *That story was so convincing, even I believed it for a moment!* he thought as he readjusted his coat, readying himself for the walk to The Stonebows. It was bitterly cold, and after he had made only twenty or so steps from the Hall, he noticed flakes of snow landing on his shoulders and hat. He shook his head.

You are a glutton for punishment.

The thought swirled through his head, but he pushed it aside even as he kept his steady pace down the road.

Ah yes, but as well there are pleasures for those who continue down the path.

He took this one to heart, and began humming again, striding resolutely toward the tavern, imagining the reception he would receive, the blazing fires, the fine ale...

The rest he would not imagine, but wait to experience upon his arrival.

The tavern was doing a brisk business despite the cold and the time of the evening. There were a dozen or so hardy souls still partaking of Frelibert's unique peaty ale, and when they saw Gorbodoc, a great cheer went up.

"Broadbelt" Brandybuck was much-loved by the hobbits of Buckland for many sound reasons, but one in particular pleased the tavern-owners most, and his less munificent wife least: more often than not, when the Master of Buckland appeared at The Stonebows or The Horny Stag, he would buy a round of drinks for all present. He was in an especially jovial mood this night, and with a knowing wink as he shed his heavy coat, Gorbodoc motioned to Anson, Frelibert's nephew, to pour a round for the assembled company.

Gorbodoc walked to the bar and a mug of freshly poured, fragrant ale was soon thrust into his brawny hands. He thanked Anson, and turned so that he could quickly let his gaze rove around the room. With a start he saw Farmers Hamish and Giles indeed sitting together, talking.

Of all coincidences! he thought as he raised his tankard in their direction. They waved for him to join them by the roaring fire, but Gorbodoc tilted his head toward a door which led to the stairs up to the second level and some private rooms. Some folk thought it was a bit odd, but

there were some occasions when the Master of Buckland simply wished to have his pint and retreat, alone, to one of the several small furnished chambers on the second floor. When he did stay to wander through the room, chatting with them about the ups and downs of life in their more particularly perilous regions of the Shire, his personality was so amiable and gregarious that folk did not begrudge him his time alone. Though only officially named Master in the past year, his father's health had been declining over the past decade, and Gorbadoch was the Brandybuck whom the hobbits had become accustomed to seeing around farms and inns.

"That's a lot of responsibility a-lying on Broadbelt, and a man's allowed some thinking time away from home, even if it is under Brewer's roof!" some said.

"From hearth to hearth, he keeps a watchful eye, and we're safer for it!" said others.

One hobbit knew better.

Mostly hidden in the dark, since the only light in the room was provided by a small fire and a taper on a bedside table, Gorbadoch stood at the window for only a few moments before he heard a surreptitious knock on the door.

'Come in,' he said gently, without turning from the curtained view before him.

The door shut quietly, and the latch locked firmly into place before he rounded to greet his visitor. Holding out his arms, he said admiringly, 'Luna, you are a vision for sore eyes!'

The object of his affections walked forward to meet him. There were many reasons why Lunella Merriweather had caught his eye, and she had played all of them up to their advantage this evening. Her uncommon grey-green eyes were set off by a mossy coloured skirt and bodice, the tight lacing of the latter creating inviting shadows which danced across her bountiful cleavage in the flickering half-light. Dark chestnut curls were pulled away from her face with a ribbon, strategically tied so that only one pull would release her hair down around her shoulders.

It had all been carefully calculated. Lunella was a very clever young woman, and while she did indeed enjoy the affections of the most powerful man in Buckland, she was of an age now where she needed to think seriously about a marriage. She planned later this evening, with honest regret, to say that they should no longer engage in these secretive trysts. But she would certainly enjoy herself one last time prior to such a dismaying message that she knew would not sit well with one who so obviously adored her.

'Dear Gorbadoch,' she began, as she held his hands and with mock shyness, lowered her eyes to the floor, but quickly raised them again, 'you have been away for ages!'

He embraced her warmly, then put a finger under her chin and placed his lips on hers. They kissed softly at first, but soon did so more hungrily. Differing passions affected them: For Gorbadoch, it was lust, heavily tempered by tenderness as he knew that she had come to him uncoerced; for Lunella, it was his power which irresistibly drew her, yet also her gratitude that he allowed her to explore her sexual nature which she had come into rather young, and if she had acted on it in the open, she would have been shunned. And so, this equally advantageous situation had somehow arisen. If they had both been honest with themselves, however, it was the added layer of the fact that these meetings were illicit which more heatedly stoked their already smouldering desires.

A rousing cheer from the main room filtered up through the floorboards, and they broke apart for a moment, laughing at the souls below, caught up in their own very earnest issues, or in this case, jovialities.

Gorbadoch let his large thumbs play against Lunella's insistent breasts, now pressing against the moss-coloured fabric, as he breathed into her ear, 'I have a gift for you.'

She couldn't help herself, but she shuddered nonetheless, both in anticipation and under his very focused attentions. 'Yes?' she queried, running her fingers through his silver-streaked hair.

'Yes,' he continued, and then he gathered her into another passionate kiss. Stepping away from her, he motioned to the bed, a rather homey quilt topping the sheets and sturdy woolen blanket that was sure to be found between the layers. 'Please, my dear, make sure that you are comfortable.'

Lunella was rather unsure what to make of such comments, but did as she had been bidden. Given the chill outside, her feet were quite cold, so she rubbed them quickly as she sat on the edge of the bed, even as Gorbadoe walked toward the fire and warmed his hands for a few moments, then returned to her.

'Close your eyes,' he bade.

She did.

With toasty warm fingers, he gently put his hands around her waist and raised her from the bed so that she was standing, then slowly raised his hands under her skirt to remove her under-drawers. Once she had stepped out of them, he moved away from her. She could hear him moving things around, but it wasn't until he took her by the hand that she realised what he had done. He had taken the quilt and the blanket and laid them on the floor, near the hearth, and now cradled her around the waist to lay her down in the warm bower near the fire. He also seemed to have removed most, if not all, of his many fine garments.

'Please lie down, my beloved.'

She did.

Lunella was now beginning to wonder what on earth the Master was up to, but then she ceased her questioning. With an intent but tender tongue, Gorbadoe began making a trail from her inside ankle up her left calf, and then up further...

She found herself shivering, though not with cold. This was gift indeed!

He continued in his focused attentions, his meaty, familiar fingers exploring parts of her in a way that was both common and yet also unexpected, until a rather different sensation surprised her in her most intimate senses, and she -

Lunella half sat up, and exclaimed, 'Gorbadoe!'

'Yes? Does this displease you?'

She luxuriated backward. 'Oh, no,' she purred, now allowing his tongue to more freely explore places that she thought of only when with him, but this was altogether different...

Heats and need and wanting and tensions ready to burst all focused, and then unexpectedly, she found herself moaning in a low voice as her hands grasped at the quilt, her hips jutting brazenly toward his giving mouth, and she shuddered as she was wracked by waves of pleasure that she had never felt before. She continued to clutch at the bedcovering, even as she felt the much more familiar sensation of his most private and thick part of himself filling her, then he gently rolled them over. He was, after all, much larger than she was. She looked at him in wonder even as his eyes were closed, and she moved in familiar patterns that she knew would bring him pleasure.

They did.

As they lay for a while by the fire, Lunella realised that she was still wearing most of her clothes, and somehow that was a reassuring thing, despite the astonishing intimate gift he had bequeathed to her. She didn't want to know where, or how, such new ideas had come to him, but as she basked in the orange glow of the fire, she was grateful that they had been shared with her. She could never be seen with him in public, and yet she knew that he was very, very fond of her.

After a while, she disengaged herself from him as soothingly as possible. She tended to herself with a small handkerchief placed thoughtfully by Gorbado, a small but meaningful gesture, donned her under-drawers, rearranged her skirts and petticoats, then spent a few moments staring idly at the curtained window. When she heard the Master of Buckland rise, she kept her eyes toward the window in a gesture of modesty, and was rewarded when he came and surrounded her in his broad arms.

'I have a gift for you,' he breathed into her ear, even as he pulled the ribbon that allowed her hair to tumble down around her shoulders.

She felt her most tender areas throb again, even though she knew she needed to get home. And more importantly, this was to be the night when she brought these meetings to an end.

Would that my body did not betray me! she thought.

'But you have given me a gift already,' she murmured, enclosing his hands in hers.

'Yes, I have. But that was not the gift that I spoke of.'

At this, she turned, puzzled.

'Close your eyes,' he bade.

She smirked. 'You already had me do that, Gorbado!'

He gazed fondly at her. 'Do it again. It will be worth your while.'

Lunella pondered this for only a very few moments, then closed her eyes. She found her right hand taken in his, and a piece of cold metal placed in it. Startled, she stared into the palm of her hand. Situated there, still with Gorbado's fingers on it, was a gold ring with a diamond.

A diamond! She held her breath for a moment.

Had she not been as sophisticated a hobbit as she was, her mouth would have hung open. Lunella being Lunella, she only gazed at it, then picked it up with her dominant hand, and turned it in the light.

'Gorby,' she whispered, 'What is this for?'

He shook his head. 'No questions. I was fortunate enough to buy it from a Dwarf who said that he had purchased it from one of the northern Rangers who was down on his luck.'

She looked keenly at him.

'I am not so down on my luck. "Broadbelt" is doing quite well, and as you and I can only share these occasional times together, I wished to give you something so that you would know how honest my affections are for you.'

Lunella fingered the gem in her left hand, feeling the gold warm under her fingertips, gazing at the jewel, its finely cut facets glittering brightly though lit by only meagre light from the now underfed fire.

'It was strung on a necklace, but I thought it would suit you better as a ring,' he said assuredly, his deep voice as smooth as silk.

She placed it on her fifth finger, and admired it in the fire glow.

'You are the best gift-giver that I know,' she said humbly.

Gorbadoc made himself presentable for going back through the main area of the tavern, then returned to the window to bid Lunella a reluctant farewell.

'You will know...?' he asked.

'I always do,' she finished, then traced a finger down from his brow to his chin.

As the door shut behind her, she moved to spend some more time before the fire, looking at this very unexpected and surely very costly gift. Then she made her way to the window, peeking from behind the gingham-checked curtain.

It was snowing. There was already a half-thumb's amount sticking to the ground, which was uncommon. Despite the warmth in her body, she gave a small shiver. It was a few moments later when she heard a very distant call of a wolf to its kin. Then she shivered all over, and raced to the quilt and wrapped it around herself, shaking.

The Fell Winter had begun.

3. Rohan

'Yes, you are a very clever young man. If you continue in my tutelage you will go very far in this life. Very far.'

I had almost blushed, surely, at the compliment. Thinking back on it, I recollected that day and the praise proffered to me, unasked for and certainly unexpected. Once back in the sanctity of my home and comfortably in my solitude, I knew that I had smiled when remembering the Wizard's words. Would that my father had yet been alive to hear such praise; the man never did think that I would amount to anything. Arrogant Gálmód, so sure that I would want to follow in his footsteps as a crafter of leatherwork, as though only my hands were of use and not my mind. *Now, Father, I had considered, I live in a blessed quiet, your ill-concealed disapproval and verbal digs about my learning to read and write as silent as you are in your grave.*

Odd how such a moment has come to the forefront of my memory, now that I stand on the edge of my leavetaking, the wide vista of my future as boundless before me as the featureless plains of my birth.

Rohan.

A land of interminable sky, of unrelenting mundanity. Sheep. Horses. Flies. Barley.

A people who are heedlessly proud, forever living on the feats of our ancestors. So why, then, do we always answer the beck and call of Gondor? Are we not our own people? Leave the southern remnants of the insipid, bloodless, failing line of mythic Númenor to their own devices. There is enough work and self-preservation here to occupy us for many generations.

Looking down, I now see that I am twisting the ring on the last finger of my left hand, and I force myself to stop. It is an irritating habit, but I give it one last twist so I can see its gem in the dim glow of the room. Set in gold is a shining diamond which even to my eyes when a child seemed to harbour an inner glow. As a rule, men of Rohan do not wear jewellery of any kind save betrothal bands, but my father had been especially proud of this gem, and he wore it unabashedly. 'Purchased it at unbelievable price from one of the crafty Dwarves, I did,' my father would say, even as he put the bauble to his mouth and breathed on it, then rubbed it on his trousers. He insisted that there was a much longer story behind it, but neither my mother nor I cared to hear about it. And yet, I wear it still, a legacy of the line of Gálmód, leatherworkers seemingly from the mists of time.

Walking to my hearth, I put a cloth on my hand and gingerly lift the steeping tea from above the flames, pouring it into my cup. On the board near the fire is a bottle of brandy, and I allow myself a generous hand with it. This is a day of celebration. As the tea is too hot to drink immediately, I put the cup on the table.

As I look around the room of this simple homestead, I realise that I will not miss it for an instant. Let interlopers take it, I care not. I am off for far greater realms than this mostly-forgotten area in the west, known only (and rightly so!) by the influence of its most wise resident, the White Wizard, Saruman. Thanks be to whatever wretched forces rule our fates with invisible hands that I was discovered, and nurtured, and not left to be yet another nameless drone, a worker bee for the greater cause of the royal house of Rohan. With my own knowledge, and the seemingly unlimited wisdom of the esteemed Wizard who graces these lands, I shall savour the sweetness of power.

Smiling, I take up my tea, and walk to the window. I am greeted by an unlikely sight: the moon, hanging heavily in the sky, an odd shade of orange. A harvest moon. I sip my potent hot beverage, and am grateful for its warmth as it courses through me. I put the cup down on a table near the window to let it cool for awhile longer, and find myself reflecting back again.

It had been a good night, aside from the incessant noise of neighbours celebrating a wedding in a nearby homestead; the ruckus of violins, drums and flutes carried easily through the windless sky. I had been invited, of course, but I was not in the mood for such festivities. And besides, my heart's delight, Hærwyn, had taken a fever, and I did not much care to attend without her at my side.

Thinking of her, of her fair face, I had retreated to my bedchamber and decided to allow my imagination to run its course. It would not be long before I would ask her to become my wife, providing Saruman the Wise also thought that an astute decision.

Or perhaps, I had thought, I would ask her regardless.

She was beautiful - long, shining golden hair, blue eyes that seemed to reflect the sky when it was at its most perplexing and compelling shade of twilight, a mouth full of promise. Perhaps her family had taken pity on me since I was an orphan, though I was already newly in my adulthood, but I thought not. Even now I am a handsome man, after all, though not as brawny as many of the men of this land and not as prone brazenly to offer to skewer whatever foe has appeared on the horizon. I was handy enough with a sword, and though it surprised some, my aim with a spear was deadly. And I am clever, a trait that is only appreciated over time, so my mother had told me. Hærwyn and I would have time, I thought.

Back in my chamber I had helped myself to a large chalice of fine wine from Ithilien. Though I had inherited my father's distaste for all things of Gondor, this particular acquiescence to the fact that the Rohirrim would never be purveyors of decent wine had not escaped my keen eye. The further South whence it came, the better the vintage. And with no-one else - yet - on whom to lavish my not-inconsequential funds, I had this indulgence.

I had settled myself into a cushioned chair, the piece of unexpected furniture further evidence of my father's penchant for imagining himself above his station. It was certainly comfortable, and I was glad of it. As I had sipped the heady wine, I had felt my limbs loosen. After a few moments, the cacophony of noise from the nearby wedding no longer distressed me; rather, it encouraged me to let my mind run to flights of fancy about the wedding that, destiny willing, I would be celebrating within the year.

As I had been alone, and warm (the fire I had lit had crackled merrily in its hearth), and a bit under the influence of my wine, I had thought of Hærwyn. Even as I had listened to the joyful sounds of wedding songs, and some raucous laughter, I had felt the most private aspects of myself becoming aroused. And so, I had pleasured myself. It was not an endeavour that I had ever done except in haste, and always in fear of being discovered. But that night, as master of my house, and with my beloved ill, I had taken my time.

After a few more sips of wine, I had unlaced my shirt in order to be able to feel my chest, tugging at my nipples, imagining Hærwyn's mouth on them. Ah, but in my mind's eye, on our wedding-night-to-be, she was delightfully insistent. Denial was an uninvited guest. And so she had ventured further...

Soon I had rid myself of my cumbersome breeches which were only in the way, anyhow, and my imagination-Hærwyn was free to do as she pleased.

And please me she had.

Even as I could almost feel her hot breath on my very hard member - *you are as large as a stallion!* I heard her exclaim in naïve delight - with my own hand I had stroked myself up and down, the fires of desire barely constrained in wanting her. How long would it be before she would truly bless my body with those tender lips which verged on the obscene in their ripeness?

Such thoughts had set me aflame. She was young, it was true, but so had I been. In my mind's eye I imagined her pleasuring me with her tongue, her inviting mouth circling me,

deeper and deeper; taut, young breasts swaying in opposite rhythm to her ministrations on me, so gentle and yet so satisfying... I had tried to make the vision last for as long as I could, but with such a provocative fantasy, it had not been long indeed before I had come back to myself, hand on throbbing self, completely spent. I had sprawled there, in that cushioned chair, dark curly tendrils of hair glistening in the moonlight, my ragged breathing slowly returning to its more regular pattern.

More wedding sounds travelled down to my ears, and I had smiled. *Consummation shall be a most exhausting night!* I had idly thought, then glancing down at the mess that had been made during my flight of fancy, I had risen, cleaned up, and returned to burrow into my fur-covered bed.

That had been after I had checked the closure of each of the two doors, yet another trait which my father had found irksome, and yet which my mother had found equally prudent. Cozy, a bit tipsy, and rather sated, I had drifted easily into sleep.

Willing myself back to the present, I pick up my cup of spiked tea. All of these remembrances have had an affect on me, and I feel a very intense ache in my groin. I am not off to my bedchamber tonight, however; it is anger rather than accompanies my erection, which I only rub at in a vain hope to make it subside. The morning after that night of patient, solitary satisfaction had been a very bad one. I shake my head, and drink some of the potent beverage, which permits me to think much more objectively about that next day, even as I look again out the window at the oddly-coloured orange moon.

The next morning I had been confronted with a scene that brought me to a rage that I hope never again to experience. I had enjoyed a quiet fast-breaking, marvelling at the succulence of the preserved figs my mother had unwittingly left to me in her unexpected death, then decided to ride to my beloved's house and see how she was faring. As I had walked to one of the communal boarding-houses, the clarity of the blue sky struck me, and I had spent some moments standing in the road, admiring the beauty of the chill autumnal light, burying my hands into the pockets of my woolen coat.

I had continued on, but as I entered the stable to retrieve Brémel, I heard noises which were not those of horses. Quietly I had stepped toward the sounds until I had been confronted with the rather unbelievable sight of my Hærwyn engaged in graceless, but still enthusiastic kisses with her neighbour, Ísensmithson. It had been as though all of the breath had been stolen from me, and I do not know how long I stood there, but I had found that all I could do was return home.

The chill now seemed to mock me, and after I had reached the sanctity of my home, slamming the door behind me, my vision filled with a red fury. Looking down, I saw with wrath that I was twisting that ring on my finger - the one which I had intended to proffer to her as a betrothal band. With all of the anger I had possessed, I yanked it off of my hand, and with deadly aim, threw it at the looking-glass which hung by the door. It had shattered with a very satisfying sound, and then silence again reigned in the room.

I refused to clean up the mess of shards for several days.

I had no longer gone to visit Hærwyn and her family, making as many excuses as I needed to stay away. She had called on me several times, speaking through the window, asking what she had done wrong, why was I no longer coming to see her, but I turned a deaf ear. Instead, I had thrown myself into all that I could learn from Saruman.

Looking down into my cup, I swirl around the remaining contents and finish it off. There is more tea, more brandy, and most importantly, more hope. Before returning to my fire, I look again into the night sky, and marvel at the knowledge that as of tomorrow, I will be living in Edoras, serving as an advisor to King Théoden, my way having been laid clear by Saruman's oft-heeded councils. There will be more women in Edoras, far less rustic and cruel than those here.

My future is unlimited. And though I am not completely sober, I do feel outside of those effects of drink that I am on the verge of personal greatness, that something truly life-changing awaits me beyond this small region.

My prospects, my hope, await me in the Golden Hall. My destiny has always been beyond these shepherds and simple folk; it will be with kings where I shall come into my authority.

Brémel- blackberry
Hærwyn- 'joy of autumn'

Both words are of Anglo-Saxon derivation.

4. Buckland

'Master Merry!' Éowyn called, catching his attention despite the clamour of their group preparing to ride away to Helm's Deep. He turned his head and saw her motioning for him to follow her around the eastern side of the Golden Hall. He tilted his head and looked quizzically at her, having already drunk from the stirrup cup and knowing that they needed soon to be on their way. He had put on a brave face about it all, but he was pretty sure that at least one clandestine tear had fallen into the chalice of Rohirric wine.

Éowyn's expression was insistent, so he put his pack on the ground near his pony, being especially careful with the silver horn newly bequeathed to him, then did as he had been bidden. Once the two were out of the sight of the others, she looked mournfully at him.

'I have dreaded this day,' she spoke softly. 'But I will not say good-bye, for I believe with all my heart that I will see you again, so I will only say farewell. And,' here she fished around in a small silken bag that hung from her belt, 'I have yet one more gift for you.'

Merry stammered, 'Lady Éowyn! My pony will be rather unwilling to carry me should I be the bearer of any more gifts from you and King Éomer!' He shook his head and took to readjusting his mailshirt so as to have something to do other than thinking about this separation. He was as eager as the other hobbits in the Fellowship to return home, but the days in Edoras had been especially heartrending for him and he still felt emotionally raw.

'Do not make me command you.' Her face was serious, but Merry knew her quite well enough to hear the underpinning of humour in the comment. 'Hold out your hand.'

Lunawyn sat hunched over some papers at her desk, her right hand making a rather unconscious foray from a nearby bowl of sweets to her mouth and back again. Brows furrowed, with her left hand she traced the lines of text as she read them, her lips mouthing the words. As focused as she was on the parchment, she did not hear her older brother come in.

'Grand-Merry is here, Wyn!' he said into the quiet of the room, and Lunawyn jumped out of her chair.

'Wolves' teeth, Borodoc!' she swore at him. 'Must you be so... so... shadowlike?'

He grinned at her. 'It's not my fault that you get so focused on old tales.' As she glowered menacingly at him, he repeated his message. 'But speaking of old tales, granddad is here.'

Lunawyn's face softened.

'And not only that, but the elder Thain is with him! They must be up to no good, those two.'

She cocked an eyebrow. 'Goodness only knows. I'll be there momentarily.'

Borodoc replied, 'They are on their way to Gondor. Must have just felt like stopping by.'

As her brother left the room, Lunawyn tidied up her papers, then popped a last chocolate in her mouth. She was a bit befuddled as to why her grandfather and Thain Peregrin would be visiting them tonight, but she absolutely adored the elderly Meriadoc. This was despite the fact that the effects from his rather uncommon experiences during the War of the Ring had managed to rest upon her by the uncommon name given to her, much to her chagrin. Why her own mother had not stood up to him, even though it was true that Lunawyn had been born during a full moon - Lunawyn did not even sound hobbitish...

She stopped before a looking-glass on the way out of the room, stuck out her jaw, and blew upwards so that her fringe of strawberry-blonde curls was out of her eyes. Sighing, she tried to put the rest of her unruly hair behind her ears. *Why is Grand-Merry here, tonight?* she wondered, then blew out the candle by the door as she walked through the doorway.

He did, and even as his breath caught at seeing the glittering ring she placed there, he found himself thinking, 'Whether as Dernhelm or Éowyn, I would recognize those ragged fingernails anywhere!'

'Lady,' he began, 'I can't take this. It is too precious - '

She cut him off. 'Meriadoc, during those long days of riding you mentioned your home again and again. Your future, Peregrin's future, of the woods, your meandering Brandywine, of happy childhoods. You and I both will be thinking of our own futures, and I want you to have this to become a part of your line. It would make a lovely betrothal gift, would it not?'

Merry tried earnestly not to blush, but under her stern and amused gaze, he doubted in his success. He picked up the ring, and was stunned to see that the gem was a circular diamond, set in gold. Looking Éowyn fiercely in the eye, he repeated, 'I can't take it.'

Éowyn closed her hand around his so that the ring was nestled in the palm of his hand, whether he wished it or no. Her face took on a hardened expression as she said, 'The guards of the Hall found it with many other heirlooms of my house when the Wormtongue was banished. Apparently he had quite a skill for hiding such items in his locked chest.' Then she relaxed slightly and shrugged as she continued, 'Oddly we cannot seem to place its heritage, so I am inclined to think that it is some liege-gift from Gondor, or maybe even from the Dwarves to Eorl's wife, kept hidden away from prying eyes.'

'Don't let Gimli hear you say that!' Merry exclaimed, 'He'll want to take it back!' A capricious look glinted in his eye. 'Perhaps I will go and tell him right now...'

Éowyn's face fell, and Merry quickly became serious. 'No, dear Éowyn. After all that we have been through, even if you showered me with rubies and emeralds that would make Gimli's beard stand on end, I would hold each one dear since it came from you. I will cherish this heirloom of your house as much as the horn of Eorl.' He shook his head. 'Though I am feeling a bit badly for Pippin, as he seems to be returning only with a new set of clothes from the livery of Gondor!'

Éowyn's horsey laughter soon had a bearded face peering at them from around the nearby corner.

'There you are, you scallywag!' Gimli bellowed, then he bowed his head at Éowyn. 'My apologies, dear Lady,' he began, but she waved her hands to stop him.

'No, no, it is my fault,' she said. 'I have kept him, but it is only because I am loath for him to depart, even though this is one of only many partings for him.'

Merry nestled the ring deeply within an inside pocket of his breeches, knelt on one knee, and took Éowyn's fingernail-bitten hands in his. He kissed them, determined to appear as valiant as he could, then stood up. 'We will see each other again,' he said, convincing himself as much as her, even as he heard Gimli clearing his throat nearby.

Éowyn took back one of her hands to brush away a stray tear, then placed it back in his once more, smiling. 'Well, I for one have a wedding that shall happen within the year.' She looked keenly at him. 'And I do not think that you would wish to disappoint King Elessar, the to-be-crowned Prince of Ithilien, and the King of Rohan by not attending. Not to mention the bride!'

Meriadoc Brandybuck and Peregrin Took stood, their poses mirroring each other before the fire in the spacious living room, warming their backs against the early spring chill. Borodoc and his mother, Dernhilda (Hilda, as she was always called) had served the two large, grey-haired hobbits cups of mulled cider, their glasses cradled in their hands.

'Luna!' Merry exclaimed warmly, and handed his cup to Pippin as he strode toward his granddaughter. 'I thought perhaps we had lost you to your reading!' he said, throwing his arms around her in an affectionate hold.

She nuzzled his shirt as she tried to shake her head. 'I would never miss an opportunity to see you!'

After a few moments she disengaged herself to bid proper greetings to her grandfather's cousin, the branches of these two family trees seemingly "as inseparable as a hobbit from good earth," as her mother would often say.

'Dear Thain,' she began, but then her brother interrupted from his leaning-place against the wall.

'He won't put up with such titles around here - I already tried!'

Pippin put the two cups down on a small table, then took her hands in his and smiled. 'You may call me anything you wish as long as you put "dear" in front of it.'

Lunawyn blushed. She was still a tween, after all, and it wasn't always easy living in the shadow of the tremendous deeds of her famous grandfather and his cousin, the Thain, and the recently departed Mayor Samwise, and even "Frodo," a quasi-mythical hobbit who had supposedly gone to the elves... well, it was sometimes all a bit much even for her to believe. But the tall stature of her Grand-Merry and the rather regal presence of the Thain made her feel even more youthful, and she looked at the floor.

'Well, that's a first, embarrassing the steadfast Wyn!' Borodoc said mockingly, but was silenced by a sharp look from their mother.

'Now Pippin, still charming the young ladies, are we?' Merry walked the few steps to them and placed a hand on Lunawyn's shoulder. 'We are both far too old for that.' He picked up the Thain's glass and returned it to him as he winked. 'Just keep your eyes to your cider.'

Lunawyn lifted her clear grey eyes to her grandfather's in gratitude.

'Luna, I should very much like for you to show me what it is that you have been studying.' At this, Hilda turned her head and raised her eyebrows at her father, but Meriadoc only smiled in return. 'I will only borrow her, my daughter. Surely there is some news from your relations in Tuckborough that you would care to ask the Thain about... out of my hearing?'

She chuckled, then waved them along.

Lunawyn tried to divert her grandfather to some poems of ancient Rohan that had been recently translated so that she could tidy up just a bit more before he noticed the true shambles of the room. It almost worked. Merry sat in a well-stuffed chair and read some of it aloud as she stealthily reshelfed some texts.

*Mundburg the mighty, raised on high
by the contrivance of sea-kings, blood-drenched,*

*covered in darkness, stood under shadows.
Marvelous keystones fastened by coils,
firmly fixed by a resolute lord,
the broad fortress wall overgrown by briars,
hall of sea-kings, best of hall-joys,**

After a few lines, however, he fell silent, and Lunawyn found herself unintentionally looking out the window at a starry night, the crystalline lights incredibly vivid in the crisp sky.

'Luna?'

She turned, and was surprised to see a serious expression on Meriadoc's face.

'Yes, grand-Mer?'

'I have something for you. Something old. Older than anything even written about in your ever-increasing library.'

The young hobbit walked to her grandfather somewhat hesitantly. His voice sounded rather final, and it put her on edge.

'You haven't some big secret, do you?' she asked in as light-hearted a voice as she could, looking innocently at him.

He regarded her shrewdly. 'We Brandybucks are full of surprises, you know!'

Feeling much more at ease, she laughed aloud. 'Yes, yes - I will forever have folk looking at me, wondering when I will go running off to far away lands, as ridiculous as it sounds.'

Merry smiled, but there was an aura of sadness behind it, and Lunawyn immediately wished that she hadn't just said what she had.

'So!' she continued. 'In the dark of night, unannounced, you have come and wish to give me something. Sounds like one of the tales that you used to write down!'

He nodded, then placed his somewhat gnarled fingers into an inner pocket in his vest. As he fished about, a motion caught Lunawyn's eye, and she quickly turned her attention to the window.

'Grand-Mer!' she said excitedly. 'A shooting star!'

She ran to the window and leaned her head toward the glass, looking upward to see if others would follow, as they often did. Soon her breath had fogged up the window, but there had been no other flashes of streaking stars. Turning around, she looked abashedly at him.

'I am sorry,' she began. 'It is very immature of me, but they are just so rare...'

Merry motioned for her to join him, and she walked toward him near one of the bookcases. He held something in his hand, but she couldn't tell what it was.

'Many years ago, I was told to give this to one whom I love,' he said quietly. 'In the graciousness of my long years, there have been many to whom I have given my heart.' He held Lunawyn's gaze, and as she tried to appear mature and understanding, she felt goosebumps rising on her arms, though she did not know why.

'But I have held onto this until now. You remind me so much of her - your stalwart spirit, your honesty...' He opened his hand. 'And your eyes. Surely you have wondered why I imposed such an uncommon name on you, my Luna.'

Lunawyn looked down, and saw a gold ring with a shining diamond set in it. Cautiously she sent her fingers out and took it, turning it in the shadowed light of hearth and moonbeam. It was unadorned, aside from the gem, which, while undeniably beautiful, seemed to her cold and distant. She turned her gaze back to Merry for security.

'Grand-Merry,' she mumbled as he enclosed her young hand in his.

'You have Éowyn's fire in you,' the elderly hobbit said gently. 'She would have approved of my decision.'

Lunawyn was agitated. 'But you will certainly tell me the story behind this ring when you return, correct? You are our archivist.'

Merry nodded. 'Yes, I shall.' Then he tilted his head and ran a hand through his grey hair. 'But you, too, have inherited my penchant for writing down our history, much to your mother's chagrin.' A wry smile settled on his lips. 'So consider yourself a co-conspirator, dear granddaughter.'

He stood up and stretched, joints cracking as he did so, and Lunawyn put the ring in her dress pocket.

'Dear Luna, I need to return to my cider, the rest of the family, and the Thain - all before tending to bed!'

Despite her misgivings, she conjured a smile, and threw her arms around him.

'I won't be able to sleep a wink until you come back, you know!' she said accusingly. 'Shall I tell Mother about this?'

Merry shook his head. 'No need for that. You will be coming of age before you know it. You are allowed to keep some secrets.'

He kissed her on the top of her head, then with a last squeeze, he left the room and headed down the corridor to the main living room.

Lunawyn returned to the window and used a sleeve on the glass to rub away any remnants of condensation from when she had stood there moments ago. Though her vision was now blurred, she was still able to see that there were indeed some other stray falling stars. She forced herself to stare at them, even as hot, silent tears coursed down her cheeks, knowing by the intense ache in her heart that her Grand-Mer would never return.

'Merry?' Pippin's voice could now be heard nearing the side of the building. 'Merry, it's time to leave!'

Gimli turned and walked toward Pippin as Merry and Éowyn embraced.

'Your generosity will be my undoing,' Merry murmured.

'Give it to one whom you love,' Éowyn replied. 'Now go before I have to produce some finery for the Master Dwarf in your party!'

The unlikely companions gazed fondly at one another, then Merry attempted a jaunty bow and turned and joined the rest of the entourage.

*This is from HF's poem **Song for the Free People** and is partially quoted here with permission.

5. Author's Notes

Númenor

While the scene that I have written is my own, all other details of this come from 'Aldarion and Erendis' from Unfinished Tales. If you haven't read it, I highly recommend it for one of Tolkien's most fleshed-out marriages. There it is noted: "Of Erendis it is said that when old age came upon her, neglected by Ancalimë and in bitter loneliness, she longed once more for Aldarion; and learning that he was gone from Númenor on what proved to be his last voyage but that he was soon expected to return, she left Emerië at last and journeyed unrecognised and unknown to the haven of Rómenna. There, it seems, she met her fate; but only the words 'Erendis perished in water in the year 985' remain to suggest how it came to pass."

Thanks to Aerinniel for the Quenya 'falling-star' term.

Buckland, Chapter 2

The tune that inspired Mirabella's song is *The Ash Grove*, a traditional Welsh tune. A poet I am not, but I hope that it does sound remotely like a hobbit song that has been around for awhile.

Baskets of thanks to 'my' Hamish: for his Hobbit surname list, his ideas for names of Bucklandish taverns (which I used), and for not minding me inserting his name in this chapter, which seems surprisingly hobbitish.

Thanks also to Mordomin for beta-reading this, giving very helpful comments, and 'getting' all of the disguised Tolkien-canon references scattered through the stories.