



STAR-CROSSED



A TOLKIEN FANFICTION SERIES
BY TYELLAS

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Series Notes and Author Introduction

Disclaimer: This is a work of fanfiction that has been written on the basis of “Fair Use” as a work of satire, distributed without profit. It is in no way meant to infringe upon the Tolkien Estate copyright of Middle-Earth or the characters therein.

Warnings: This work of fanfiction is for adult readers only, those over the age of 18. It contains the following content, which some readers may find distressing: Incest, Slash (male/male) Eroticism, Graphic Sex, Violence, Horror, and Supernatural Elements.

Dramatis Personae: All the named bipedal characters in this series are sourced from *The Lord of the Rings* for this fanfiction interpretation. The series protagonists, Elladan and Elrohir, are the twin sons of Elrond of Rivendell and brothers to Arwen. The following horse characters are not from *LOTR*: Arroch, Losbrindel, Mithrim, Rascanod, and Brindel.

Author's Introduction:

I admit it. This series began because of a challenge on a slash writers' mailing list. A list poster dared list members to slash –that is, to create an erotic/romantic relationship between - the twin sons of Elrond, Elladan and Elrohir. My first thought on reading that was a landmark of shallowness: “Hey! I could slash some *brunettes* for a change!” From this beginning, the resulting stories have grappled with the nature of true love, sexual transgression, honour, and outlaws' ethics.

I sat down to read about the Sons of Elrond before I wrote a slash story about them. When I emerged from the appendices of *Lord of the Rings*, I had an impression of the Sons of Elrond as classic tragic heroes, with their lonely quest for vengeance. They were also a puzzling absence. Surely such fighters would have been asked to go with the Fellowship of the Ring? Why not? Why weren't the Sons of Elrond greater players in Middle-Earth's politics? Plus, after consideration of a possible erotic relationship between these characters, there was a problem.

It felt like the ghost of Tolkien was looking over my shoulder, disapproving, embodying all the related taboos. I wrestled with the story for several days. At last, I reached a breakthrough, unearthing a reason in Tolkien canon that might support an incestuous, transgressive relationship between these two brothers. With this in place, the ghost of Tolkien let me be and the rest of the story was written.

Ten months later, there are twelve linked stories here about that transgressive relationship. This episodic story arc focuses on my interpretation of Elladan and Elrohir and what might have happened to

them during the War of the Ring. Their romance is a dark fantasy, an idealisation, a fable of the self reconciled with the self. At one point I thought of characters from Wagner's opera *Die Walkure*, Siegmund and Sieglinde, twins and lovers who cared so much for each other even the gods wanted to forgive them.

This series has substantial erotic content. Nancy Friday's landmark book about sexual fantasy, *The Secret Garden*, discusses the power of the fantasy of incestuous lovers. She reassures her readers that it's possible to enjoy this fantasy and others, while recognizing that incest in real life is taboo and has negative repercussions. I'd like to say that I recognize this as well.

I put this e-book together a few weeks after the story arc was concluded. Each reader who has contacted me has a different interpretation of these stories, and different favourites from within the series. So I won't say any more. Readers can draw their own conclusions – whether these characters are moved by true love or erotic compulsion, good or evil, if they are curse-bound or free, even, in the end, doomed or released.

Please contact me at Tyellas@hotmail.com with comments and feedback. You can visit my adult Tolkien fanfic website at <http://www.ansereg.com>.

To Drive the Cold Winter Away

Elladan and Elrohir know they're wrong, but at least they don't frighten the horses.

In fall, they hunted hart and boar; come winter, they hunted the orcs. Winter made the evil creatures desperate, both more of a threat in their daring and less hardy. Coming down from the pass of Caradhras, the pair of warriors had cleared out several orc-dens already, with arrow, fire, and sword. Two might seem few for such deeds. But these were the twin sons of Elrond. They were elf-kin lean and strong, riding on wise horses that were weapons and allies themselves. And they had sworn an oath together that any orc that dared block the path to Lórien, who might be of the kin who had snared and tormented their mother, should die.

Now, they were destroying a third orc camp. The ground was wet and stony, and they had not been able to trap the orcs with brushfire. They harried them with broad swords and wordless cries of anger. Whoever watched would have thought it a cruel slaughter, save for the loathing that twisted the goblins' faces further. Those that did not flee fought against inevitable defeat because they wanted to spear the hated warriors' bright eyes.

As the crebain-crows flew down to await the carrion, the two elf-kin slew the wounded and stabbed each corpse one last time. Before they rode away, they cleaned their swords and swiftly checked the camp's tattered remains. Astonishing plunder had been found in the hands of the orcs at times; swords of old, jewels of name, books whose pages were half gone from foul use but that were worth saving. But they found nothing of note, and left after little time, riding fast and far.

From the foothills of the mountain Caradhras, they rode over bare highlands, down into brushwood of pine and holly. Before the two riders were born, this had been a country of the High Elves, the land of Eregion. There had been more trees then; still enough remained to give good shelter. They found a hollow in the hills where they had camped before, ringed in with thick holly trees and bushes, a blessed shield from the winter wind. There was even some grazing for the horses.

Elrohir spoke first, and to his horse, as he undid his gear. "Arroch, good one, strong one, our hunt is done. You may rest this night, and then we ride back to Imladris." The horse Arroch whickered and nudged his shoulder happily, and the other horse, Losbrind, tossed her mane.

Elrohir turned to his brother. "Yes, our hunt is done, and ill done this day. If half that clan did not elude us, I am an orc myself. I told you we should have ventured fire!"

"Fire with what? The carrock of their camp was bare and wet; all the brush went to their own goblin burnings. Not all my lore can kindle where

there is nothing to burn. We did the best we might." Elladan's grey eyes were sharp in the blue dusk.

"We'll find them there again in the spring," growled Elrohir, "and we must do our work twice."

Elladan shrugged. "Of course we will. That is the best camp on that trail. I say we take them again next year, in the waning summer, when the hills will burn at our bidding."

"It is ill hunting in summer. They have too much cover from the gorse and thorn."

"Elrohir. I am too tired to quarrel. No fire for our camp tonight, do you think? We're still close to the pass." As his brother made a noise of agreement, Elladan took off his helm, then bent at the waist to peel his mail-shirt off over his head. Elrohir began to remove his own gear of war. They were arrayed alike, both dressed in grey, and each had braided the other's long, dark hair in one solid plait. The only way to tell them apart by looking at them was to watch their movements and how thoughts showed in their handsome faces. Elrohir pounced like a hunting hound. His twin Elladan was more cautious and slow, like a great wildcat.

"One thing is certain," said Elladan, "I am not telling Father how badly that went. He will seize any excuse to keep us bound to Rivendell."

Elrohir nodded. "Especially since we rode to the war in Rohan against his wishes. Perhaps we might meet him in the middle, and take more riders with us. If any are brave enough to come. Mother was the Lady of Rivendell. Men and Dwarves start wars for the honour of their kin. Why shouldn't we?"

Elladan moved to a sheltered spot in the hollow and sat down, speaking clearly. "We two are young beyond the youth of our fading people. There are hardly enough warrior-hardy in Rivendell for a muster, and Lórien barely maintains its own marches. Besides, I am loth that another should die on our errand of revenge."

Elrohir came and sat beside him. "You are always right," he said.

Elladan placed his hand upon his twin's shoulder. "My heart agrees with you, even if my thoughts do not."

"Just as when we were children." Elrohir covered the hand on his shoulder with his own. Looking at his twin's warm glance, and feeling the hand resting peacefully beneath his, intuition rang in him. This was the night to venture his desire, with all the wilds to guard them. Even if he failed, there was still the long ride home on which to make amends.

"I still owe you an apology from our youth, you know; for the time Lindir came on us close together and chided us."

"I'm surprised you remember that particular mischief," said Elladan, "considering all the times Lindir had cause to scold us."

"No-one is here to chide us now. We may be as close as we please. Do you take my meaning?" He folded his hand around Elladan's, rubbing his twin's wrist sensuously with his thumb.

Elladan took his hand back with a frown. "You are only hot-blooded, Elrohir."

"No! It is more than that. I am not as fine-tongued as you, so I thought long before I spoke. It has come to me many times when we lifted swords, that I prayed it would not be your death."

"I am glad you are so confident in me," Elladan snapped.

Elrohir went on, though his voice dropped to a whisper. "And when I touched others, my thoughts turned to you, whether I would or no."

"There are so many others for you," said Elladan. He turned his face away so that his twin would not see the yearning behind his harsh words.

Elrohir stood up. "No! Maybe. But you do not listen to me. I -- I -- forget I spoke!" He drew in upon himself and stalked away to stand by the horses, pulling his cloak tight around him.

Elladan watched him. Elrohir looked very fair; tall and sad, framed against the deepening dusk and the bright-burdened holly. The two horses did not hesitate, but came up to their friend, and he greeted them with gentle touches. The blue evening was silent around them. Elladan saw the peace and beauty before him clearly, and plumbed the depths of his own spirit. He breathed deeply and stood, having made his choice.

"If our good steeds do not turn from you, perhaps it is because you seem innocent to them." Elrohir looked up at his twin's forgiving words, and bounded over to where he stood. Elladan did not meet his eyes or move away. Elrohir embraced him, trying to warm the one with the willing heart and the chill mind with his caresses.

Elladan closed his eyes as his brother's hands roamed over him, and though his shoulders were rigid, he leaned towards Elrohir. The smooth planes of their faces brushed together. Elrohir turned his twin's mouth to him with a gentle hand. The two sank together into a deep kiss, drinking of the pleasure of kissing until they reeled. They did not feel the cold, or the hard ground when they sank down in their rib-cracking embrace.

Elrohir was nearly wild to cram his body against Elladan's and feel their shared arousal. He flung his fur-lined cloak upon the ground beneath a great holly and urged Elladan down with him. Without preamble, he grabbed Elladan's crotch and rubbed the hardness he felt through the grey winter wool. "You, too," he said, drawing his twin's hand towards him. Instead, Elladan came forwards and lay on top of him. Elrohir was charmed to see what a tight match they were, inch for inch, able to press their hardnesses beside each other like pieces of a sundered cup. Elladan was stricken by the intensity in Elrohir's face, until his brother smiled and rolled away.

"This is ever the awkward part," laughed Elrohir, as he pulled away as little of his clothing as he might, between desire and the cold night.

"Oh, come now," chuckled Elladan. "You ease disrobing with some words. I fain wouldst see every inch of you; I must have at thee now; do not deny me; wait, I have a few other old chestnuts to make flour of for these moments..."

"Take them down! There are my words!"

Once Elrohir had his will in this, he grasped Elladan at the root. Even this was strangely like to himself. Curious after seeing his twin shudder at the same touches he himself preferred, Elrohir leaned over and used his mouth for something he thought better than speech, more delicious than song. Lordly though he was at all times, there was always a joy in this sensual act for him. To bend so to Elladan primed the well of a deep hunger in him.

"Turn about, lie over here, and we shall please each other thus," said Elrohir. As soon as they lay head to feet, they slid closer along and each took the other in orally. Elrohir was doubly delighted to be caught into such a circle of pleasure. For all Elladan's discretion about whatever lovers had come his way, he was skillful, using his mouth and hands equally. Even as Elrohir reached up to add his own hands to his twin's pleasure, he jolted in unexpected, hot release, overwhelmed by the long desire made real.

Elladan did not demand his own satisfaction. He turned beyond the cloak on which they lay, and coughed and spat, throwing a guilty glance at his twin as he murmured an apology. "It is no matter," said Elrohir, pulling the sad one back into his arms to lean sitting against the bole of the holly-tree. They looked at each other, faces pale against the darkness.

Elrohir tucked one of his arms around Elladan's shoulders, and tried to kiss the mouth that had given him release. Elladan first shied away, thinking that such a kiss would besmirch his brother, and then his eyes lit with an idea. Out of a pocket he pulled a flask of miruvor, the cordial of Imladris, and freshened his mouth with a small sip of it. Now he came willing to another kiss. The heat of the clear metheglin-liquor gave his lips extra fire and sweetness.

"Your mouth is hot to burning," said Elrohir, sending his embracing arm's hand burrowing under his brother's tunic, to stroke the top of his chest. He sent his other hand below the waist, to find that Elladan was still yearning and needful. Elladan's shoulders were still tense in his circling arm, and his eyes were closed again. So Elrohir spoke to ease his new lover's heart first, hoping to pass the wards of his inhibitions. "I am sorry now for all my other lovers, for they only made my path to you longer. Nobody else feels like you, so balanced between smooth skin and a touch of pelt."

"There is one other, and that is you. There are none like us of mingled blood and twinship. We are alone in kind, save for each other."

"That is why I would have no other, even though we are kin. You are so good to me, to accept this."

"Think you that you stood alone in this wanting, deep-seeing one? I spoke of innocence before, as if our lust was some play from boyhood. But I have mused on this long as well, with the hot and brooding mind of a man. My thoughts are scorched with desire for you!" Elladan opened his eyes, and they were dilated dark in the shadows.

"Elladan!" said his brother. The clasped elf-man melted into the transgressive embrace, and joined his hand to the hand that held him so intimately.

"Yea, my dreams marred my thought. I reasoned against our laws that little could be ill about the love of one so close to me, that like should turn to like. My twin, my self made braver and warmer in you!" Elrohir kissed him gladly at that, but Elladan turned to speak more, soft and fierce. "That is only a pretty lie. It is wrong, for you are my brother." Elladan's breath steamed the cold air for moment, as he drew courage. "But since you turned to me, I am beyond heed of laws. My heart and body will never be sated with anything but our incest."

Shaken, Elrohir whispered, "What did you think on for so long?"

"I searched the books of lore, seeking a tale of any twain such as we who loved with any blessing. There were none. So I lost myself in visions of what your touch might be; sweetest hallow of passion, compelling curse of lust. How I ached to hold your strength and boldness in my arms! I longed to have every part of you to the full, wanted you to pin me down and take me. Yes, to have you take me hard. Elrohir, Elrohir, do not deny me. Do not leave me!"

Elrohir felt his twin's arousal come near the peak as he spoke, heated by his own words. He crushed Elladan's shoulders to him with the embracing arm, and let his stroking hand pace fast. "Leave you – never. I will not let you go! I will take you, and please you, until you will have no other. I'll take you this very night, though I pain you, to show you I speak true!" Elladan turned his face into his brother's shoulder, and moaned his brother's name as he came.

They stayed still until they felt the chill of the winter night again. For the first time, they wrapped both their cloaks around both their bodies together, craving the warmth of each other's closeness. "Whence from here, Elrohir?" sighed Elladan.

"We go on," Elrohir said, picking a dead holly leaf out of Elladan's hair. "With everything; our oath and our love." They both fell silent for a moment, at the soft, momentous word there was no denying.

"And the one will strengthen the other," agreed his twin. They kissed again. "We may be discreet in our father's house, when we have all the wilds for our pleasure on our errantry," said Elladan.

“You are right yet again. At least we have a long journey yet, and being free to hold you, I do not feel the cold. I should tell Arroch we will be riding slow and easy.”

Elladan gave him a lambent look. “Especially if you mean to keep your promise to me.” The crisp holly-leaves beneath the cloak whispered and crackled as they moved together again, even as the first stars were full-lit in the sky.

Story Notes:

- **“Since we rode to the war in Rohan against his wishes....”** Notes from “The Making of Appendix A,” *The Peoples of Middle Earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, mention this, along with the description of them as “Elladan and Elrohir rode also in that battle...two great horsemen, clad in grey, unlike all the others, and the Orcs fled before them...” Third Age year 2510, battle of the Calenardhon. Story is set in Third Age year 2513, for other canon fanatics out there.
- **Arroch** = Noble horse.
- **Losbrind** = Snowfoot.
- **Lindir** = Elf of Rivendell.

Three Black Keys

In Rivendell, after four hundred years of their questing, Elladan and Elrohir reveal much and little of themselves to their friends.

"Later, then," said Elladan, as his brother turned to go.

"Here?" asked Elrohir. They stood in Elladan's chamber, a loremaster's study where the bed seemed a mere afterthought.

"As always," Elladan replied. "I am meeting him here soon." Elrohir nodded and lifted a hand in parting, then walked into the halls and the summer evening beyond. When he was gone, Elladan opened a small coffer and took out a black key on a silver chain. He put the coffer back in its place carefully, and dusted the shelf around it with his hand. The dust was deep enough to darken his palm. He had spent little time in Rivendell over past four hundred years.

While waiting, Elladan straightened the stand that held his mail and armour, newly repaired by the smiths. It was ready for him to don when he and Elrohir rode out again on their endless quest to avenge their mother's torment and dishonour at the hands of the orcs, and to keep the passage between Rivendell and Lórien safe. There was little orc-hunting to be had in midsummer. The evil creatures could find food without troubling good folk, and they hid in their holes against the bright sun and the brilliant summer stars. So he and his twin brother took a respite from their questing at this time of year, staying for a few weeks in Rivendell, enjoying the summer festivals and returning briefly to their old work. In this season of safer, easier travel, the White Council met, and Elladan, loremaster and son of Elrond, was one of those with a voice there.

Elladan was about to succumb to the temptation of finishing a piece of writing when a series of hard raps rang at the door, as if someone knocked it with a wooden staff. "A moment, Mithrandir," he said, and joined the wizard in the hall. Mithrandir, the Grey Pilgrim, had also been combining rest and work in Rivendell. In a rare concession to the summer heat, he had taken off his hat and cloak, and he wore a silver sash about a slate-blue robe. "You look well," Elladan said, politely.

"And you look like you've had a quarrel with your inkpot, good loremaster," said Mithrandir, wrinkling like the last apple in a store-barrel as he smiled. "I hope you came out the winner!"

Elladan did not laugh at the teasing, smoothing his grey tunic, marked with black ink and traces of red paint. Its short sleeves were taut around his swordsman's arms. He wore it with the same tight dignity that he carried in formal robes, not a strand of his chestnut hair loose from its single plait. "What use are fine clothes when I am hardly ever here? I would not be wasteful. Come, and I will give you the books you seek." Elladan looked back at the wizard carrying a briar pipe, and his own handsome,

clean-cut face was severe. "And remember you ought not to light your pipe in the library."

"You're the fourth elf to say that to me today," Mithrandir laughed. As they walked, Elladan contemplated correcting him; the sons of Elrond the Half-Elven were not Elves. Nor, with their mingled kinship, were they mortal. But to correct Mithrandir in this would be to say yet again that he and Elrohir were the sons of Elrond, and isolated in that, a truth keen as a blade to him every day. Elladan let the comment stand for the nonce, deciding he would say something if the error was made again, wishing that Elrohir was there. He would have liked the wizard's banter. Everything, he thought, came back to Elrohir.



Mithrandir watched the straight back of Elrond's son as they walked into Rivendell's main library, the room's graceful lines lit only with a few blue elf-lanterns before arcing into shadow. He was curious that Elrond, kind as summer, had a son who always managed to be as cool and forbidding as winter. Elladan was always distant to Mithrandir, yet was one of his staunchest allies on the White Council of Elves and wizards, along with his grandmother, Galadriel.

It struck him as odd that this ally was not his friend, especially when they had a good deal in common. Cantankerous himself, Mithrandir liked Elladan, seeing that Elladan was sharp-tempered because he was not inclined to suffer fools. Elladan was also the only elf-lord on the White Council who roved the world like he did. The wizard did not really need to review the lore of Sauron tonight; indeed, it was better to think of such things in the light of day. He had asked Elladan to help him with some volumes so that he might try and unpick some of Elladan's mystery.

Elvish mirth had fallen flat with Elladan, so Mithrandir tried another gambit. "Tell me, Elladan, I know all you elvish loremasters have your specialties. How did it come about that you are the keeper of Rivendell's darkest lore? I suppose, being Elrond's son, and of the Eldar, you have many arts."

"I would not say I was purely of the Eldar. Elrohir and I are kin to both Elves and Men; we have one foot in each." Elladan said, with a long-suffering air.

"Apologies, my friend. But that does not answer my question," Mithrandir said.

Elladan shrugged. "I did not sit down one day and say I would master all the lore of our enemies. It happened little by little. I read one book of the darker lore when I was finishing my apprenticeship; then I read two. I noticed that one of those old books about the collapse of Númenor needed rebinding, and I took care of it. Nobody else cared to. For the evil of their contents, they are still books, and deserve the same care as the brightest tales of Valinor," he said. "And we need their lore more than that of pretty old legends at times. The books of dark lore used to be scattered

about, some on low shelves where a child might find them. So I collated them and ordered them." Elladan took the key from around his neck and unlocked a cupboard. "This is a better way to keep them by far. Under control."

Mithrandir wondered why a young apprentice would have been reading such a book in the first place. "Only you have the key," he noted.

"I leave it here when I travel out, but yes. Now, here is what you wanted; everything we could glean about the Necromancer of Dol Guldur." He handed Mithrandir a scroll and two slim folios.

Mithrandir let Elladan lay them out at a table in front of him, beneath one of the blue lanterns, and took a seat. He did not open the books just then. "Your father is quite strong-minded, as well. Are you a healer like he?"

"No, not like he is. I have forfeited that gift for the sake of vengeance." Elladan did not sit down. "You know, of course, the gift of healing is lost to those who hunt and fight. There would have to be long years of peace before it returned to my hands."

"And your brother?" Mithrandir asked.

"We ride together. But he keeps more of it than I do, I dare say, and he has much lore of healing and herbs. Every creature is gentle to his hand." Elladan smiled a little as he spoke.

"So that is his gift, then," Mithrandir muttered.

Elladan hardened. "You do not know him well. Just because he is not of a will to sit on the White Council does not mean he is foolish. He is my twin, not only as sharp-minded as me, but better than I am in many ways, healing gifts least among them."

Mithrandir lifted a placating hand. "Don't be so hasty! I meant nothing against your brother. Only that I have seen that you have a way with lore of power, and now you tell me that beasts like your brother. Creatures were like that to Lúthien, as well, and she too was a loremistress. Her name means 'enchantress.'"

"I know that," snapped Elladan.

The wizard sailed on. "Your gifts show that you two are not so far sundered from her. Some of her blood is in your veins." For a moment something seemed to shine through Mithrandir. Neither of them spoke of what they both knew; that Mithrandir was a Maia, as Lúthien's mother had been. But Elladan understood when the wizard added, "That makes you my kinsmen, in a way."

"Elrohir and I are either kinsmen to all or to none," Elladan said, dismissively. "The noble past is done and gone, and we live in diminished days." He gave Mithrandir an approving look. "At least you wander about and help as you might, instead of staying fast in a safe place, like Curunír does. And others."

After that tart statement, Mithrandir waited, expecting Elladan to unburden himself of some grievance. But Elladan said no more, and the wizard was troubled. The most taciturn Dwarf would spill his troubles to him, the close eagles talk, but there was a wall to Elladan that never came down. He let the matter drop, and tried a third tactic to win Elladan's trust.

"It might seem odd to you that I wish to look at these scrolls now." Elladan still said nothing. Mithrandir was reminded of Galadriel, who often used such leading silences, and he spoke on. "I have had counsel with Galadriel and Curunír. The rest of the White Council does not know yet; not even Elrond. In two years or three, we will move against both Dol Guldur and the Worm of Esgaroth. They are readying lore to use against the Necromancer, and I have a few tricks up my sleeve for the Worm," he said, with a wry smile.

"So there will be war." Elladan's eyes flickered and deepened. "Then the rest of you join my brother and I."

"I suppose we do," said Mithrandir, mildly.

"I am glad to hear it. It is about time Curunír ceased this endless delay. Let us know what we might do to aid in this."

"Us?" asked Mithrandir, though he knew the answer.

"Elrohir and I." Elladan locked the cupboard, more slowly than he had to. He half-turned about before leaving the wizard to study, again giving Mithrandir an odd look, reserved yet approving. From a desk, he took a small bowl, meant to hold clips for loose papers, and placed it on the table. "It is our rule not to light anything in here, but nobody is around. I suppose it won't hurt those books, if you smoke – have that for your ashes. Return these books to me on the morrow, and I will lock them away again."

Mithrandir, surprised, said, "I would not have you break your rules for me, Elladan."

Elladan smiled again. "Such a little rule. Think of it as but a kindness to a kinsman." Mithrandir looked at the bowl for a moment, but when he turned back to Elladan, the loremaster was gone, melted away swift as a huntsman. Or a fugitive.

Mithrandir, alone, sighed with compassion for the man of strange fate, ever at war and ever on the defence. A strange gesture of friendship Elladan had chosen, one that broke the laws of the Elves. A kindness to a kinsman, he had said. Mithrandir put his pipe down unlit, resting it in the elegant little bowl. Although Elladan's words had made him crave a few mouthfuls of smoke, it would have to wait. The rules of Elrond's house were still the rules, and good ones. One wayward ember would be a doom of fire to all the wisdom of the Eldar treasured in the library.

Mithrandir thought about this, and the ordered books locked away, the yearning to war, the hints of grudges that were very personal indeed. The only thing about their conversation that had not been shadowed in some way was Elladan's fondness for his brother – and thanks to that

fondness and his own clumsy words, Elladan remained wary of him. He turned to the books, so that Elladan's help would not be wasted.



The horse-doctoring stable at Rivendell was set well away from the main stable, appropriate for a place of quarantine and death. Elf-horses were healthy and strong, so the separate stable building was often a quiet place. Two people and one grey horse were there tonight, and the small building was merry, for Elrohir was bantering with one of his friends.

Glorfindel leaned on the edge of the stall where his horse, Mithrim, was peering out, the horse quiet and tired. He had mentioned at the evening's meal that Mithrim was itchy and restless, and nothing would do for Elrohir but that he look over the mare that night. Glorfindel approved, for this was his way as well; to do the right thing, and do it right away. Still, aware he was setting Elrohir to work, he said, "I do not mean to keep you inside on a fine night like this, Elrohir. It could wait until the morrow, I am sure."

Elrohir shook his head, laughing, half his chestnut hair about to fall out of its one loose plait. "No fear! I wouldn't make you nor Mithrim wait. It's the work of a moment, and I'm used to it. It is nothing, for a friend." Glorfindel relaxed as Elrohir said that. He had seen so little of Elrohir in the past four hundred years, even when he was in Rivendell, that he had begun to think Elrohir had set him aside. Their friendship had been a simple one, of a sort to be found between men of all kinds, based on a shared fondness for horses, sword-play, and good wine. But free hours for riding and sparring had ended when Elrohir took up his quest for vengeance with Elladan.

Elrohir went up to Mithrim, looking at her teeth and eyes. "Eleven hundredweights, is my thought, and in good fettle otherwise. I'll have to half-poison her to cure her of worms." He took a black key from around his neck and used it to open a cupboard fixed to the wall, full of glass bottles and stoneware jars. He reached up to the highest shelf and took down a bottle of blue glass.

Closing the cupboard, he went to a bench at the side, chatting away as he mixed a draught. "Quiet a moment, I must figure the measure; enough to kill the parasites but not the horse. There. Now, some water, and a few more herbs. It is especially important in the summer to keep your steed free of worms and such. The woodmen are good folk, but I'm fair certain Mithrim picked up these worms in their stables when you took shelter there. If you ride through the eastern mountains, have a care, we've seen..." Elrohir went on, in a light tone. Glorfindel realized that between fond natter about animals he span together a web of knowledge, from his own questing and the facts he had gleaned from the riders who had passed through Rivendell in the past several weeks.

"I will take your advice, for your words are as sound as Mithrim will be when she is healed," Glorfindel said, heartily. "You know, it is a worthy

task to care for our good beasts. But I think more than they would benefit from your healing, and your knowledge of the lands about. We have been friends for a long time. I always wondered: why do you not sit on the White Council?"

Elrohir laughed merrily. "Who, me? Surely you jest. You speak to the wrong twin. I am not the sharpest sword in the rack, compared to Elladan. He's the wise one."

"A sword may be sharp, and it may also be well-balanced. I would rather wield the latter. Promise me that you will think about it," said Glorfindel. A fresh voice would be good with how contentious the White Council had been lately.

"Father has asked me many times, every time the White Council sits. Really, I don't think my opinion is needed. What would I do but agree with Elladan all the time? His voice on the council speaks for me."

"Not necessarily," Glorfindel said.

Elrohir gave him a suspicious look. "What, you want me to disagree with my brother?"

"Not at all. But this is not about your brother, it is about you. You may come to your own ideas, and it would be easier to defend your own interests."

Elrohir snorted as he swirled the cup of healing poison he mixed. "My interests are few. Dogs, horses, hunting out, and the oath my brother and I have sworn. I asked you to ride with us to the fighting at Calendharon a long time ago, and you refused that, just as I refuse you now. So let us let bygones be bygones, eh?"

"I am here to defend Rivendell and aid Elrond, not to fight the battles of strange mortals –"

Elrohir interrupted. "Truly, I cannot bear to quarrel with anyone I like. Another reason I'd be no good at your council. Let me treat Mithrim, now, so the good lady can rest. Come and hold her head, will you?" Glorfindel held his horse stable as Elrohir poured the black draught down the animal's throat, risking his hand in the horse's jaws. Then they both fussed over the mare as she quivered.

Elrohir rubbed the horse's shoulders and then, as she shied away, took a piece of birch-sugar out of a pocket. Mithrim came back and took the sugar from Elrohir's palm. "She'll be pure as the Brunien once she's dunged out those worms," said Elrohir, satisfied. "I will check her straw tomorrow – she may not need a second dose. And I shall ask Elladan to say a few charms over this harness of yours, for keeping and good luck."

"You favour me greatly, my friend," said Glorfindel. "First you heal my horse, and then you offer me fair fortune."

Elrohir cocked a brow, amused. "I doubt it will do much good, but it does no harm, certainly. Anyhow, Elladan likes doing it; he has a mind for superstition."

“Does he? I do not count it as little to have my horse healed by one of the sons of Elrond, and blessed by the other. It brings me some of the fortunes of legend.” Glorfindel saw Elrohir look down at that. He clapped Elrohir roughly on the shoulder. “You do me more honour than you know. I thank you.”

Elrohir laughed anew, and there was a bitter note to it. “Honour! Do not speak to me of honour. I scrape up what I can, after the dishonour my house has suffered.”

Glorfindel said, “Sad fortune is not dishonour, and all your actions following it have been meet.” Glorfindel saw Elrohir look away again, and spoke to praise and reassure him. “I remember you a thousand years ago; light-hearted, bent on a hundred pleasures. Did I ask you then to join the White Council? No. But you are changed. I see you grown dutiful and continent. And you are modest, too, where you used to boast your prowess. You do much good.”

“I could not do so without Elladan. And I want nothing to come between him and me. So I will not risk it,” Elrohir said, firmly.

Glorfindel recognized his stubborn look. Any more attempts to persuade Elrohir would make him resist even further. He sighed. “Well, if you change your mind, seek me out. What else does Mithrim need this night?” Their talk never recovered its earlier ease, even when Glorfindel tried to engage Elrohir in a conversation about which studhorse might be best to sire a foal on Mithrim. Glorfindel offered to close up the stable so that Elrohir might enjoy the evening, a rare respite from his endless riding. Elrohir accepted the offer, but declined to say if he would meet his friend later among the revellers, where they might share a cup. Then Elrohir left.

Glorfindel watched him go, sad but resigned. Elrohir’s questing had changed him, not all for the better, despite Glorfindel’s words. It was troubling to see him abdicating from the influence that was his right, setting himself below his brother. More, there was a false note to his good humour, his averted glances; a wrongness that Glorfindel could not fathom. It was not the first time Glorfindel had felt a friend slipping away amidst the vicissitudes of time and fate.



Elrohir went to the bathing pavilion and scoured himself quickly, then took the path back to the Last Homely House, carrying his tunic. The summer evening was still warm, alive with song and with dancers down by the river. He passed them by, hearing his father laughing among them, glimpsing his sister Arwen dancing all in white beneath the blue dome of the night. As he walked, he looked up to the stars shining through the chestnut boughs. One star shone brighter than the rest, and he paused. Eärendil’s star. Glorfindel had spoken of the old legends, but that did not make them seem any more real or close to Elrohir. How could one absorb the strange tale that a star was one’s grandfather?

Walking uphill, he came to the House and saw one room lit: Elladan's room. He whistled. His brother appeared at the window and nodded, and then the window went dark as a curtain was drawn. Elrohir went there.

Like all the library rooms, Elladan's study faced south. The rooms were warmer in winter without fires that way, but they could be stuffy in the summer. In the airless room, Elladan had taken off his stained work-clothes, exchanging them for a black robe of dull, lightweight silk.

"You are early," said Elladan, quietly. "The key is in the lock."

Elrohir locked the door where he had just entered, then handed its intricate black key to Elladan. The two looked at each other. There was no mirror in the room, and they did not need it, each with an identical grave expression and the same anxious crease along their brow.

"Glorfindel said he'd watch over his horse, so I came," said Elrohir.

Elladan nodded and said, "Mithrandir had some news. Important news." He moved to sit on the bed against one wall. Elrohir joined him, and listened sombrely to the news of war.

When Elladan was done speaking, Elrohir said, "That is good to know. Two or three years. Little enough warning, and they shall ask much of the hostlers. I should start to prepare."

Elladan touched his brother's shoulder, cautious. His robe bowed open over his lightly furred chest; he too wore no tunic. "Be subtle. Few know, as yet."

Elrohir sighed and leaned forward, the crease in his brow deepening. "Can we talk about it more in the morn? Glorfindel would do nothing but talk of politics, and your news explains why. But I'm not in the mood for any more of that tonight. It is very fair outside." He glanced sidelong at his brother. "Hardly anyone is indoors."

"Is that so?" said Elladan, turning to face him.

"Yes," said Elrohir.

And together, they sank into an incestuous kiss.

Story Notes:

- Three Black Keys is set in The Third Age, July 2933, 8 years before *The Hobbit*.
- **Mithrandir** – The Elves' name for Gandalf, which Elladan and Elrohir would have used. Curunír is the Elves' name for Saruman.
- **The collapse of Arnor** – Kingdom of the Dúnedain in the north of Middle-Earth, in Eriador, the region around Rivendell. This kingdom ended in 1974 T.A.
- **Curunír's endless delay** – Further delay took place due to Saruman and the battle against Dol Guldur was in the autumn of 2941.
- **The herb** – A variety of wormwood, levant wormseed.
- **A star was one's grandfather** - Elladan and Elrohir are the sons of Elrond. Elrond's father, Eärendil, is mentioned in *The Silmarillion* and in "Many Meetings" in *FOTR*, via Bilbo's poem "Eärendil was a mariner..." He had the unusual fate of carrying a light-bearing jewel called a Silmaril through the night skies as a star.

The Burden

After a tragedy as they fight orcs, Elladan and Elrohir question their errantry – on all levels.

The grass in the scrublands between Rivendell and Eregion was still green, waiting to dry brown in the first winds of winter. Through the ragged sward, two riders trotted along; then one turned back, calling to a third horse that followed them. It had been very fine, for November, with bright sun and no breeze. The warmth of noon lingered through the day. The hindmost rider, Elrohir, shouted to his brother, “Another fine day like this, and our errand is ruined.”

Elladan turned his own horse back and joined his twin, looking at the long bundle slung and tied over the third horse. “Not so much ruined, but ill done. If carrying a friend’s corpse home can be a good errand at all.” He gazed up at the evening sky, trying to read the weather. “No sign of clouds. But the night will not stay warm, and it will be dry. Let us ride as far as we can, and camp on high ground. Come along, girl,” he said, urging his mare forwards with a gentle touch. Elrohir whistled again to the third horse, following without halter or lead.

They rode slowly out of kindness to the third horse. The steed was restive under its perished rider, finding the dead weight harder to bear than its living, guiding master. They had journeyed with the corpse a day, and were still seven days hard riding from Rivendell. At this pace, it would be nine or ten days before they arrived.

It seemed a fitting penance for allowing the chieftain of the Dúnedain to be slain in their company.

When the last glint of sun had gone, the brothers camped under some scruffy pine trees in the lee of a stony hill. Their first task was to relieve the suffering horse. Elrohir spread a blanket out on a large, flat stone, then went to help Elladan haul down the corpse. “I hope Arathorn’s kin do not mind that we gutted him,” said Elrohir, for the thirtieth time.

Elladan, trying to be patient, still sounded irritated as he said, “What else could we do? Let him rot from his stomach out? At least this way we have a chance of bringing him home with a face his folk will recognize.” They had not had this dread task after elvish battles. Elves did not cherish corpses, burying the dead without any marker in the woods, or with only a green mound amidst fields. The twins had used their huntsmen’s skills to bear Arathorn home resembling himself, bleeding and gutting him. Done with that, they had then given the body every honour they could, even binding his wounded right eye, taking out every shard of the fatal orc-arrow. The heavy, smooth-woven cloaks off their own backs cocooned Arathorn’s corpse.

Their work of preservation made the corpse more fragile, and time was having its effects, for all their attempts. “Careful now, he has gone lax

again,” said Elladan. They laid Arathorn on the draped stone as gently as they might. The mortal man had been tall and strong, in the prime of his years, and he was a heavy burden in death.

With the body laid down, the twin brothers made camp, dully following their routine of centuries. Elladan unloaded the horses of their remaining gear while Elrohir scoured his hands in a cold, sandy stream nearby. Elrohir tended them while Elladan washed his own hands. Afterwards, Elladan held a packet of waybread out towards his brother, offering, but Elrohir shook his head. He put the packet away unopened. Both stripped off their travel armour. Elrohir unrolled a blanket, without his usual flourish, and sat on one side of it, leaving the other half clear for Elladan to join him. Both seated, they embraced, tense at first, then sagging into each other.

Elrohir spoke first. “I am so weary of it all. Do we do any good on our endless ride?” he asked. He lowered his arm to ring Elladan’s waist, turning and leaning his body against his brother. The shifts changed their touching into that of lovers. “Or is it just our excuse?”

“I do not know myself, any more,” said Elladan. “I used to think it was worth it if our oath and travail saved but one maid or man from suffering at the orcs’ hands. Now someone has died because of our oath – died because he was brave, and had a care for his folk, and for his long friendship with us.”

The brethren had gradually spent more time with the Dúnedain than with the Elves as the years went on. For the Dúnedain also ranged forth from the wrecks of their ancestors’ fortresses on errantry against evil. Besides, if the Dúnedain thought the twins strange, or overly close, they ascribed it to their being of elf-kind. Of late, mortals of the Dúnedain had ridden against evil with them. Arathorn had joined them early in the hunting season, for he had wished, like most Dúnedain, to be home for Yule.

Elrohir said, “At first, I was so angry. Slaying the orcs was the only right thing to do.” Elladan nodded in agreement, and the glint in their eyes was the same. “Then you let me love you...The orcs got a respite that first year, eh? We spent more time in each other’s arms.”

Even Elladan had to laugh a little at that, before he said, “And then we truly began our work.” Their long vengeance had settled into a measured campaign. It was not a simple thing to be venturers, and it grew harder every year. Evil’s creatures multiplied. Besides orcs, the brothers found themselves striving against corrupted wolves and mortal brigands. Even the weather had become harsher. Elladan muttered, “Our work of endless war. It seems as if the world has grown darker to spite us.”

Elrohir nodded, looking very like Elladan had; they had picked up more of each other’s mannerisms through the years. “It has been like this our whole lives, you know? Elves leaving. The kingdoms of Men going to

pieces from plague and war. Remember when the tower stood tall at Weathertop?"

Elladan gazed beyond their camp, seeing memory. "Amon Sûl. The mortals built it tall and fair. The Elves used to climb out of Rivendell's valley to see its beacon shine over the foothills. It has fallen like the kingdom of Arnor. I used to ride from Rivendell to Lindon through ordered lands."

"Yes. Mama took us to Lórien as children along the path we ride today, and through the halls of Khazad-dûm. I would not take a boy through these wilds now. For even a doughty man like Arathorn can find his death here." He glanced at the still body mummified in grey, and his voice grew hard in anger. "It has been worse since Sauron took the south of Mirkwood. If these wizards are so mighty, why do they skulk in fear of Sauron? Did you hear any more about a strike against Dol Guldur?"

"The last Mithrandir said was that Curunír still wishes to delay somewhat."

"Why listen to Curunír? Why is he their leader, if he is such a craven?"

"His power is the greatest, both for deeds and persuasion. He keeps his own counsel behind his reasons. I shall have some curt words for Curunír when the White Council meets again." He paused. "Say nothing of that to Father, will you? He and I will differ on this."

"I will not." Elrohir tightened his arm around his brother's waist. "Look. Eärendil's star has come out." He pointed; a star with a sharp-edged, changing twinkle pierced the sky. "The star of war shines on your words, as it shone for the fall of Morgoth. A sign of luck for that."

Elladan leaned into him. "I hope so. But..." He looked up at the distant star. "All the good I - we - strive to do would be counted as naught if others knew our sin."

Elrohir took his brother in both arms and kissed him. "That would only be because they do not understand us."

"You always say that," said Elladan, not returning the kiss. "Why does our incest not trouble you as much?"

Elrohir took a deep breath. They had had this conversation in a thousand different ways, whenever Elladan's conscience pricked him, or their quest fared ill. Elrohir felt drained at having to endure it yet again. "Do you have to use that ugly word? I kept the secrets of a hundred other lovers before I gained ours. We are not so different from them."

Elladan pulled away, calm but edgy. "Yes, we are. That ugly word describes us."

"With the world the way it is, what does it matter if we have our secret? That you and I love each other is the smallest flaw of our broken times," said Elrohir.

Elladan declared, "The law we break, the law of Elves and Men, has its purpose still, to save the vulnerable from ill-use. We weaken that law by breaking it."

"Elves never force anyone to acts of lust," said Elrohir.

"That is the tale of it, but is it the truth? I wonder. Besides, what of mortals?" Elladan stood up, angry now. "Are your eyes sealed shut, Elrohir? There are dark deeds hidden in some of the wood-hamlets we pass by; bitter women, silent men, children ill-gotten, foolish and weak. We had a choice. They did not."

Elrohir winced, both at the cold truth and at the verve that showed Elladan was awake enough to debate for half the night. Trying to forefend that, he said the words this hard conversation always came to. "Well, we will stop, then, if that is your choice." Then he braced himself for whatever Elladan would say next.

But Elladan did not rant about the philosophical meaning of choice, or anything else. He had crossed his arms around himself, and his glance fell where Elrohir's had been drawn all day and night, to Arathorn's corpse. He shook his head, speaking quiet. "You are right about this world being marred. Fate may part us at any moment." He sat down where he had been before, folding himself against Elrohir. "If we are riven, it will not be my choice. It will be by..." He did not finish the sentence. There was no need.

Elrohir, relieved at this unwonted acquiescence, replaced his arm slowly around Elladan's shoulders. He murmured, "Truly, it is different with us. I cannot think of you as the same as – the hapless ones." Elladan let his brother's arm remain as Elrohir spoke more. "We are both grieving. Do not let it drive us apart. Are you troubled by Arathorn's passing?"

Elladan said, drily, "Of course I am. There will be political chaos when we return. The Elves may lose the swords of the Dúnedain against Dol Guldur by this. I know Arathorn would have brought them to our aid." He looked at the stars again. "Alas for our friend! Bereaved of his father at the cudgels of the Trolls; our brother when it came to avenging his kin. Now we have another lost kinsman to avenge...If he had had his rights as the king of Arnor in a realm at peace, he and I might have had more time for lore. He liked to learn of the stars."

"I thought you seemed woeful. Let me console you." Elrohir knelt behind his twin and began massaging his shoulders. The firm, digging touch made Elladan roll his head back with a groan. He said no word of assent, but he leaned into Elrohir, relaxed at first, then listening to his brother with alarmed awareness. "You are as stiff as a dead man yourself," said Elrohir. "I could not sleep last night, after we prepared him. Our friend, you say, and I gutted his body with my hunting-knife, and slit his throat as if I bled a boar. Foul work to bring him home fair. I saw it before me all the ride today."

Elladan felt his brother's grip shaking as he murmured on. "He was such a good man. And his wife, and his tiny child, clever as an elf-bairn..."

Elrohir clasped the hand Elladan lifted back to him. "I feel so guilty. For his death makes us free on this journey again. Free for this." He kissed his brother's hand.

Elladan knelt up and, turning, put his hands on Elrohir's bent shoulders. "We have both been hit by orc-arrows, too. This death was an ill chance, an ill fate. Nothing we can do now makes any difference. We can only go on ourselves." Elladan pressed Elrohir's shoulders downwards. "You look haggard. Lay down with me for a time. Then I will take the first watch."

Elrohir pulled him closer, roughly, and they embraced kneeling. They started at the sound of a night-bird, and Elladan saw his brother smile for the first time that night. "A good sign. Nightjars do not sing if orcs are nigh. I never finished with your back." He ran his hands down the length of Elladan's spine, the balls of his fists pressing out more tension, his spread hands working back up to soothe and separate tight muscles. Elladan closed his eyes so that there was nothing but darkness and his brother's touch. Blind, he started at his brother's first kiss; not on his lips, but on his right eye. He blinked and looked full at his brother, their shared grief piercing him like an arrow. It was with his eyes open that he leaned up and kissed Elrohir.

Elrohir leaned gratefully into the kiss, not breaking it even as they slid down to lie diagonal across the blanket. He was so exhausted that the hard ground felt as good as Elladan's hands. Lying back, he let Elladan's mouth explore his, weariness and desire mingling to dull his grief. The repeated kisses soothed him like draughts of poppy-syrup, helping him still his flashing thoughts. "I am too tired to please you," he said, when his mouth was freed. "But we might ease ourselves. Anything is good, with you." Elladan slid away from half-mounting his twin to lie beside him. Their near-quarrel and the corpse close by shook him out of his complacency. Elladan's hands sweated as he realized what a routine this was become for them.

"Rest a moment," Elladan said, reaching to undo his brother's garments. Elrohir sank back, smiling, clearly thinking him kind. That was not why Elladan unbuttoned breeches and shifted linen. He scraped to feel some flicker of the wrongness he knew in this deed, testing himself to see if their passion was still worth the deceit for him. He set aside caresses for the hard evidence of lust, taking Elrohir's cock in his fist. The chamois softness of that flesh turned stiff and satiny as he touched. He reached lower and stroked the heavy sac, furred like his own. As he leaned close, Elrohir's scent came to him, salty from the sweat of the day, with a tang like the living sea.

These tired, raw touches with his sibling inflamed him more than any artful lover. Knowing himself seduced and downed, he knelt and tongued his brother at the root. Elrohir reached down with a groan, stroking his brother's hair. "Not tonight, I cannot match it. I'll please you like that in the morning if you wish." said Elrohir. "Might I watch you?"

Elladan drew back to lie beside Elrohir and take what he could. Soon, his own cock and hand were hot with friction as he watched and was seen. Lying on his side, he realized that he was off the blanket, in the loam and dirt beside. Elrohir's eyes were locked to his, so he did not shift save to press the side of his face against the soil. It was what he had come to, what he deserved, for the desire that compelled him beyond honour.

"You're quiet. All right?" asked Elrohir. He nodded, and let Elrohir draw his head and shoulders closer. They lay together like two matched lines of a rune. "Be close to me when I spend."

"You're going to come?" asked Elladan. His cock grew harder in his hand.

"Yes, I'm going to come, watching you stroke yourself. Ai, Elladan, my – mine –"

Elladan's eyes were narrowed in shadow, his voice a burning rasp. "Go on and say it, Elrohir. Your brother." Admit it, he thought, remind me, don't let me be alone in this.

"You, my brother, and I yours..." breathed Elrohir, even as he came. The sight of the white shot of seed, the heady scent of desire, and the lawlessness of it all smote Elladan, and he spent as well, turning his face down to stifle a growling groan.

Elladan recovered quickly. Pleasing himself never took Elladan down as far as Elrohir's ministrations. Ever fastidious, he pulled a square of cloth from a pocket and scraped the wool beneath them clean. Then he rolled beside Elrohir to hold him, saying, "Shift over; you're angled like a fallen tree." After a moment, he realized Elrohir was nigh asleep after spending. He shook Elrohir's shoulder lightly. "Elrohir. I will take the first watch, as I said."

Elrohir roused partway at that, opening his heavy-lidded eyes to speak. "Wait. Are you and I all right? It is bad fortune for lovers to sleep upon a quarrel."

"After what we just did, you have to ask?" said Elladan.

Tired and dogged, Elrohir said, "You might have just done it to please me. What you said before...maybe you feel ill-used. I do not mean to do that to you." He half-leaned up, rearranging his clothes. "Do you want to talk more?"

Elladan saw that Elrohir fought against exhaustion to try and set things right as he could, in his way. "We are all right. Go on and rest."

Soon, Elrohir had sunk into the sleep of mortals, eyes fully closed. In mortals' songs, bards spoke about the beauty of a dreamer's face, but Elrohir was not a lovely sleeper. His eyes were twisted tight shut; he breathed hard and muttered. This restlessness reassured Elladan greatly. If Elrohir had lain calm, he would have thought even more about what it would be like to see his brother a corpse like Arathorn. Given the choice of losing him or having him too close, he chose the latter, every time.

Elrohir's swift fall into sleep made Elladan rue that he had talked on so long, keeping his sibling awake. He decided the first watch would be the only watch that night. It was his turn to be guilty and wakeful. He paced the glen of their camp, forcing down a piece of waybread in dry bites. He would make sure Elrohir ate something in the morning; would speak to him, distract him, be loving to him to drive the fell images from his mind. Picturing what had haunted Elrohir ruined his faint appetite.

Done eating, he stood by the stone where Arathorn lay. Their burden required constant watching, lest beasts or insects trouble Arathorn's body more. It would have been easier far to build a stone cairn for the body, bringing home Arathorn's empty armour and the news, but the twins knew how much store the Dúnedain set by burying their dead in state and honour. It was one of the few traditions they kept from the Númenoreans of old. Elladan looked up bitterly at Eärendil's light in the distant heavens, wondering that the Valar and the one who created them could let the world fall so far, for so many thousands of years.

Elladan heard that the horses were restless and peered around, listening sharply. Nothing was in sight, but the howl of wolves echoed among far hills. He cursed softly. If the wolves smelled the spoor of the corpse, they would think the party of travellers was weakened, fit prey. Elladan loosened his sword in its sheath and stood vigilant, waiting to prove the wolves wrong.

Story Notes:

- The Burden is set in the Third Age, November 2933.
- **Arathorn** – Aragorn's father, noted in the Tale of Years, *ROTK* to have been slain while hunting Orcs with Elladan and Elrohir, "an orc-arrow pierced his eye..."
- **Amon Sûl** – The watchtower of the realm of Arnor on the hill of Weathertop. Destroyed in 1409 as part of a war against the Witch-King.
- **Since Sauron took south Mirkwood** – Noted around 2060. At one time South Mirkwood was part of Thranduil's realm (*Unfinished Tales*.)
- **Arathorn's father** - Arador, Arathorn's father and Aragorn's grandfather, was "slain by Trolls" in 2930. Vengeance for this might well have been Arathorn's motivation for joining Elladan and Elrohir upon errantry when he had a wife and child at home.

A Beautiful Thing

After the Council of Elrond, Elladan and Elrohir have an intense discussion about the One Ring.

Although Elladan and Elrohir had returned to Rivendell from the wild in the midst of a feast, there had been little rest and no revel for them. They had both been galled to find that their father would wait until after the feast to speak with them beyond a fond greeting. At least Aragorn had given their news of the wilds its due. Their endless errantry and long absences, which kept Rivendell a refuge and not a prison hemmed by enemies, lessened their power in their home. The irony of it was bitter to him more than to Elrohir. But this time, even Elrohir had been annoyed and saddened. "Sometimes the little things mean the most," he had said, and Elladan had been aggrieved all the more.

The next day, at the Council of Elrond, Elladan read the tensions among the mingled people there, understanding why his father had chosen diplomacy in the great halls over his sons. But politicking was set aside for wonder when the Halfling, Frodo, took out the One Ring. When Elladan saw it, his face betrayed none of the hope that struck him for a moment. It had not been difficult to be discreet. Elladan was used to hiding the passions that moved him.

He was glad of this as the Council progressed and the Ring's strangeness was made clear. He had thought that Mithrandir might take up the Ring; then that Aragorn might claim it; then that it might be sent to the Sea. Then Elrond and Mithrandir laid their curious plan to have a Halfling carry the ring to Mordor to be destroyed. Elladan ached to protest, haunted by a sense that there was a better way, if only they sought hard enough. He kept his seat and his silence among the counsellors of Elrond's household. In fealty to his father, he did not feel it was meet to disagree with him before so many strangers. Others had been quiet as well, and he sensed more buried differences of opinion than his own. The Dwarves took Elrond's word gruffly, and the man of Gondor was visibly sceptical.

Everyone dispersed quickly when the Council was closed. Elladan took the daymeal with the other loremasters, then went to his study, thinking all the while. Much of the lore at the Council had been new to him. He had volunteered to add the new tales to Rivendell's records of Sauron's darkness, and he set his worktable to the ready swiftly. As soon as he was done, he would tell Elrohir everything that had happened. If nothing else would do, he thought, he and Elrohir might guard and guide the desperate errand with Aragorn. Their errantry had fitted them for that much, at least. He cut a fresh tip to a quill, dipped it in ink, and began to write.

In a fresh folio, he wrote the strange tale of Gollum, and the news from south, east, and west. Lastly, he wrote down Isildur's words about the One Ring, as translated by Mithrandir. For this rare tale, he used the

calligraphy of fine legends, strokes caressing each letter he wrote. The final lines of Isildur struck him powerfully. *But for my part I will risk no hurt to this thing: of all the works of Sauron the only fair. It is precious to me, though I buy it with great pain.* The phrases evoked his passionate love for his twin Elrohir. He knew it a transgression, a sin of incest, yet his heart still found it fair. "Precious to me, though I buy it with great pain," he murmured, understanding how Isildur could value the fell jewel, see its beauty despite its evil provenance.

Elladan put the quill down. Was he only projecting his long conflict about their passion, and his and Elrohir's desire to fix and change things in the wider world, onto the Ring? At the Council, it had been said that only one might wield it. In contradiction, it was also said that no one will could master it. It came to him that he and Elrohir had joined their wills together for many deeds. The two had acted as one for a very long time. If they bent their two wills to master the Ring, they could succeed.

It seemed the perfect solution.

He tidied his worktable carefully before he strode off, rethinking much of what had been said at the Council. It was time to find out what Elrohir thought. Somehow, it slipped Elladan's mind that the Ring was powerful enough to draw even Saruman into temptation and a deep fall by merely thinking of it.

Just as Elladan had immediately gone to his father's councils that morn, Elrohir had joined in the work of the scouts and warriors, debriefing guards and giving scouts advice about the lands and paths. This work was done out of the guards' house and stables. When Elladan arrived, he was told that all the work there was done for the day. Elrohir had gone where further tasks waited, the horse-doctoring stable.

Elladan walked a little way to come to the small building, half stable and half surgery. Six horse-stalls, their paraphernalia ordered around them, led into a broad tiled space equipped with the tools of surgery and a pharmacopoeia of salves and herbs. A few odd sticks of furniture were scattered around. Elrohir was shaking out a sack of pine wood-shavings in one of the stalls. A shaggy pony that had been quiet on its tether nickered when Elladan entered.

"Well met! Let me just settle this little fellow. He was so ill-used at one time that he thinks any straw is feed, and will eat straw bedding. I think Aragorn's got him sound, but I want him away from the other horses a few days more." Elrohir untied the pony and it trotted after him into the stall, then turned to watch as he shut the stall's half-door. "The hostler left the stall bare, to save himself this work. Nor did he leave me a note as to why, so I set a stable with straw, and must clean it out now that I know what this lad does. I know they have been busy these past days, but still - not the way I like to do things." He nodded towards a stable that had a bed of fresh oat straw laid down, then turned to Elladan.

“Your mood matches mine. I was thinking much the same,” said Elladan, leaning on the doorframe between two stalls. “Hearken to this; you heard that Bilbo’s kinsman was stabbed with a morgul-blade? They were so hasty to destroy the evil metal pieces that the blade’s fragment and hilt were melted in the main smithy, not in a separate brazier – and the largest forge was tainted. Father and Erebor both had to go there and clear the place of the malfeasance.”

Elrohir shook his head, frowning. “That poor Halfling. What a terrible ordeal, to endure the servants of Sauron. It is a marvel he is not dead.” Elrohir would not shadow his stable with even one word of the Black Speech, not even the word Nazgûl.

“I think the ring he carried gave him the strength to endure it,” said Elladan. “It was brought out before us at the Council today, for but a moment. Isildur bore it once, we were told; his weregild seized from Sauron. Never have I sensed such power, not in the oldest swords or jewels.”

“It must be mighty to help a mere Halfling endure the Ringwraiths.” Elrohir looked at Elladan, expecting the Council’s news from him.

Elladan delivered. “The Council is going to send it to Mordor, that it may be destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom. But nothing was decided, save that the hapless Halfling shall bear it thence.”

“What!” cried Elrohir, outraged. “He’s this tall! He looks like a lad! It will be his death and our failure! This – this is simply typical of the Elves here, is all, shunting the errantry of our times onto others. First the Dúnedain and now even the Halflings of the West.”

Elladan leaned back, equally exasperated. “This deed is meant to be a feint. Sauron expects it not, says Mithrandir.”

“And Father agreed with this? And you?” said Elrohir. “Elladan, it is too cruel!”

“I have a different idea. But I wanted to speak with you, first.”

“You think we should be the ones to take it,” Elrohir said. Elladan smiled silently as his brother went on. “Yes! Our time has come. We will go with it, and face the Wraiths, and...” Their eyes met, and they paused; it felt almost as if thought flew between them. Elrohir went and stood over Elladan. “Our father wields a ring of power, too, bound to our home. Would it destroy Rivendell to ruin the Halfling’s ring?”

“I do not know,” Elladan said. “At the Council, they hoped it might free the Elven-Rings, but it is more likely that you are right. The One Ring is bound to the power of the rings Father and our grandmother bear.”

Elrohir raised one brow and said, “How does it work, this Ring?”

“It is beyond elvish creations, for the power of a Maia is bound to it. A very great Maia. I think the Ring would give that Maia’s power to every deed, turning the world’s will to the wielder. It was said it gives the bearer power according to his stature.” They stared at each other, two identical

warriors, strong-thewed yet lean, tall even among the Elves, sprung from the noblest lines of Elves and Men.

"We might do great works with such a thing," said Elladan, standing beside his brother. "The two of us. I felt its might. It only waits for direction. They said at the Council that no one will could master it, but what about the two of us, together? Backed by this Ring, our twinned wills might cleanse the lands of evil. It would be easy to persuade others to our banner, with the Ring gilding our words. What do you think?"

Elrohir's thought flew to what he most wished to fulfil, and he frowned. "Why us, and not Aragorn, Isildur's heir? It would be good to see Aragorn raised to his kingship – and him and Arwen free to wed at last." Elrohir paused briefly. "Mind, the realm that is Aragorn's due is wide. We might aid them here in the North."

Elladan smiled, slyly. "That would be good, but why merely aid? Are we not of the same line? Is not Middle-Earth wide enough for two great realms? I am weary of being ever the son of Elrond; I would be a lord in my own right. Do not misread me; I love our father. But I envy mortal princes in this, that they know kingship comes to them in time."

Elrohir shrugged, uneasy. "Some of that could come to us if Aragorn gains his birthright. I am content to aid him." He shifted. "Not that I would not do some things differently, if I might. I..." He fell silent as Elladan slid beside him, far closer than they normally dared in such places.

Elladan reached up and caressed Elrohir's face, a gesture they had shared many times before, but he let his hand linger sensuously. He whispered, "But if we wielded it instead of Aragorn, had we that lordship, we might change a law or two."

His brother froze. Then, very slowly, Elrohir smiled. "You mean it."

"Yes," Elladan breathed.

Elrohir grabbed a fistful of his twin's tunic, pulling him close. "At last, at last you understand me. Our love is unblemished save for the laws that forbid it."

Elladan exulted, "We would have our love and more; our oath to our mother's honour fulfilled, the realm of Arnor restored, our friend of long years and our sister joined in love's joys. Between their union and ours, there shall be a double dynasty for Middle-Earth, with the mingled blood of Elves and Men to rule both kindreds! The world will have peace and order thereby."

"Order." Elrohir smiled again, guileless yet fell. "I like that. So many run their lives so foolishly. Idle elves here, ignorant men to the West of us. It is one thing you and I always agreed on, not to waste the days."

Elladan raised his eyebrows. It was not like Elrohir to speak so bluntly. It came to him that his brother had a certain appeal when he was forceful. "Exactly so. Our lands might surpass the rich realms of old, were affairs managed well."

“With the most important affair of all,” said Elrohir, closing the gap between them, “being ours.”

They stared at each other, both lost to deep hungers. Elladan parted his lips and tilted his head slightly, in invitation, and Elrohir fell upon him. They staggered down together into the stable still bedded with hay. The fresh golden straw curled and rustled around them as they clung to each other, heedless of the straw’s harshness and the slight breeze through the open stable door.

After breathless, wet, throat-deep kisses, Elladan collapsed back into the hay. “Nobody understands me as you do, for all our differences. I should never have touched anyone else in all my time.”

Elrohir thudded down beside him. “That’s right, you’re mine.”

“And you are mine, every hard inch of you. I never knew both love and passion until you turned to me, until you took me as I asked...”

“I’ll take you again now; some of what we shall have when we bear the Ring,” said Elrohir. He leapt away and roughly pillaged the cupboard with the horse-doctoring supplies. He eyed some of the things that lay there, and had wicked thoughts of how to use them later, when their first lust was spent. In a moment, he was beside Elladan again, carrying a jar of grease laced with numbing herbs, used when doing embarrassing yet necessary things to mares and stallions.

Elladan looked to be lying there for the taking, dark, fey lust in his face, his shame and pride burned away by the desire for the Ring and for their consummation. Elrohir kicked Elladan’s legs open. “Are you going to play your taunting games with me?” he snarled.

“Maybe I will, if it means you use me hard.” He spread his legs further before Elrohir slammed down onto him, flattening him in the golden nest of straw.

“I’m sick of it!” Elrohir shouted, inches from his brother’s face. “Sick of you denying me with your mind all the time, you wretched hypocrite. You gut me every time you start with all that.”

Elladan shouted back, “Hypocrite yourself! You ignore what doesn’t suit you, you tell yourself half-lies. We’ve been so wrong, so wrong...but we won’t be, any more.” He opened his eyes wide, light kindling in their depths, and dropped his voice to whisper, “We shall be beautiful.”

And for that moment a terrible beauty did illuminate the pair of them, a glimpse of what they would be if they took up the Ring. Strong with virile strength to make an elf despair, bright with fairness to make a mortal weak in envious worship, their perfection too much for being doubled and united in passion, their love beyond law, their united will impossible for any to defy. They saw it in each other’s faces, and an awful confidence came to them both. If they were so fair, they thought, who would deny or blame them? In one of those moments when it was impossible to say who had reached first for the other, they kissed. Their desire for each other was magnified with their want of the Ring, and lustful fury took them both.

Again they grappled, writhing against each other, feeling themselves painfully erect. Elrohir pulled his brother's tunic again. "Take it off," he growled. Elladan stripped it off, then yanked his leggings down, a few buttons snapping loose. Elrohir flipped him over before he could take his boots off and free his legs entirely. Elladan knelt still after he was hauled up onto all fours, shifting as he waited for the familiar pleasure of being entered. This, this was the first thing he wanted. Once they were done, he knew Elrohir would aid him for the second. In that gilded hour, it felt delicious to be so shameless, to arch like a pleased animal when Elrohir ran a hand down his back. He heard the click of Elrohir opening the jar he had carried, followed by a wet, sliding sound. "Feel beneath, Elrohir, I am as hard as stone for you," he panted.

"Doesn't matter if you are or not," said Elrohir, behind him. "I'd use you anyway." Elladan convulsed in shock as Elrohir stabbed his cock in at one go, greased and buried to the root, and they both cried out.

Elrohir thrust in three times, hard, and then looked down. He was collected enough to say, "I must have torn you going in, hit you at an angle inside. You're bleeding."

Elladan spat out of his mouth to say, "I don't care. All the better."

Elrohir seized Elladan's braid and pulled to see his face. "Are you – you are serious. You like that."

Elladan gasped, "I'll take anything from you, corrupt or perverse, all of our incest is beautiful to me."

Elrohir let go of the braid to pin Elladan beneath him, flattening him again, far less articulate as he thrust. "I'm nigh-forcing you – and you like it – I should have, long ago – we were born for this." Elladan moaned in assent, and Elrohir threw his restraint aside, hammering the tight body beneath him. Every past coupling of theirs seemed as nothing, over-gentle and childish, before this physical fury on the brink of power. Elrohir thrust as if to punish his brother for every word of hesitance or denial, and Elladan whimpered beneath it as if he had yearned for this chastisement. Lost in their lusts, neither understood this side of what waited for them if they took the Ring; corruption from their own shadows unfettered by ethics, love set aside, hunger and grudges fermenting evil.

Suddenly, Elladan twisted with a cry, torn beyond what the numbing cream would hide, and he spent half in pleasure, half in pain. At his tightening, Elrohir shuddered and came, groaning loudly. He drew out so suddenly that Elladan felt empty and nauseous. The pain seemed worth it when he saw Elrohir's sated expression. "That was fantastic," Elrohir gasped, "I can scarce wait to take you like that when wearing the Ring."

Elladan sat bolt upright. "I knew it would come to this. The Ring called to me first. It wants me as its bearer." He reached out and touched Elrohir's throat, tender yet threatening, and silence stretched, grew thin. Elrohir reached up to grasp his brother's wrist, his face starting to cloud with anger.

They were both shocked by the sound of a sharp bang, the scream of the alarmed pony. Looking up, they saw the stall half-door swinging, blown hard by the wind from the open main door. Elladan, appalled, cried, "No! I forgot to lock –" He dragged his breeches up, then staggered and slammed the stable's door to, closing its latch with fumbling fingers. Elrohir stood up in the straw. "Ai, Elladan! If anyone saw, we would be lost!" he said, fastening his own clothes again.

Elladan's eyes were dilated as far as could be. Shaking with fear, he still pinned the latched door closed with his body. "Maybe someone did see."

Elrohir peered into the stall beside him, where the pony glared. "I – I don't think so. That pony, he hears an elf, he neighs. I think we're all right. Are you all right?"

Elladan shook his head, for all the Ring's evil had come home to him through the heedlessness it had inspired. "About that Ring, it would not have been only us that was lost, if we were seen."

Elrohir leaned weakly against the stable's dividing wall. "Father! It would have destroyed him to find out about us now."

"As we stand on the brink of war. Thinking about the Ring, I forgot everything else." Elladan stood away from the door. "I was wrong. Forget, forget everything I said. We shouldn't."

"The Ring, you mean?"

"No. I mean, yes, the Ring. Like the man of Gondor, I did not believe what Father and Mithrandir said, that the Ring corrupts." He stepped over to Elrohir, cupping his brother's face in his hands. "Corrupts that which is not evil. After my foolishness, you were drawn in, too. Elrohir, forgive me!"

Elrohir touched him gently, all mercy. "If you forgive me. I was ready to fight you for it."

One thought came between them as they drew close again; that to forswear the Ring was to forswear any possibility of redemption, to remain mired in their sin. Elrohir shook his head, as if to clear it. "The Ring might make our love lawful. But we would hate each other, in the end."

Elladan nodded. They both stood, brushing the glittering golden straw from each other's garb and hair, until their clothes were simple and grey again. As Elladan pulled his tunic back on, he said, "For the time being – instead – perhaps I should ask if Father needs errand-riders while he decides his counsel."

"I will ride with you, if need be," said Elrohir.

Elladan stood silent, absorbing that. His voice was steadier when he said, "I will ask him tomorrow. Speaking of aid, do the march-wardens need any extras this evening? I would rather not go back to the House, just yet."

Elrohir said, "A double watch is on, they'd be grateful for it. You have keen eyes for the dark."

“Too keen,” Elladan said, his face still shadowed.

Elrohir forced a smile. “Same as mine, really; we are twins.”

Elladan glanced at the door, making sure it was still locked, and gripped his brother’s arm. “Elrohir. That you do not turn from me, after what I would have done this day—”

“I would have done it with you,” Elrohir reminded him. “You thought twice, not I.”

“I do not know about that,” he said. But he squared his shoulders again as they went together to unlock the door.

Story Notes:

- A Beautiful Thing is set on October 25th, 3018, the same day as The Council of Elrond in *FOTR*.
- **Was Elladan at the Council of Elrond?** He might have been. He and Elrohir arrived back in Rivendell the night before, and not all the “counsellors of Elrond’s household” present at the council are named. They were in Rivendell while the Council took place and left soon after on their errand riding down the Silverlode. Part of this story is based on the fact that their “schedule” of activities in Tolkien canon might, possibly, be construed as them avoiding the presence of the One Ring.

Rider's Reckoning

Elrohir finds himself placed in an unfamiliar role – that of spokesman – and struggles with hard truths as he and Elladan ride south with the Dúnedain.

Elladan and Elrohir, returned from Lórien, stood in their father's study, dread tight around their hearts. They knew what their father would ask of them that night, and that their reply would disappoint him. Elrohir glanced at his twin, who was telling the tale of their scouting to Lothlórien with less than his usual smooth assurance. It was not like Elladan's mouth to be unsteady, and he should know. His brother's kiss had been firm against his lips but the night before. As ever, Elrond was so pleased that his sons were back alive that relief swamped his keenness, and he sensed nothing amiss about them. Even one who perceived hearts clearly could have a blind spot, thought Elrohir.

"Galadriel did not come forth to meet you at the border? Unusual. Were there any messages as to why not?" Elrond asked.

Elladan tilted his hands upwards. "Nobody knew. But you and I, Father," he turned to his brother, "and you, of course, know that she strives at times against Sauron. Since she was not there, we gave sealed messages to the guards, that she and our grandfather know of Frodo's errand."

Elrond smiled and said, "It is well that you were discreet. The Company of the Ring shall be of varied folk, but if you will walk with them, the borders of Lothlórien will surely be opened."

Elrohir started. This was their chance. But Elladan said nothing. After their pause had stretched out a moment too long, Elrohir took a deep breath and spoke. "We thought about it already..."

"Excellent!" said Elrond.

"No, father, wait. We shouldn't go." Elladan remained drawn in, so Elrohir, acutely conscious, stammered on. "It's, well, we talked about it. This errand needs a certain kind of people, and we – " He heard Elladan breathe, and felt a soft touch on his arm.

"Spare yourself, my brother. Do not say 'we'; it is not your fall that bars us." Elladan turned his harrowed face direct to Elrond, speaking cold and clear. "It is not that I should not go with Aragorn, no – nor that I fear the gates of Mordor. It is that I should not go with the Ring." Elladan clenched the fingers of his left hand, as if missing a ring he had once worn, as he confessed, "It has called to me, and calls me still." Elrohir stared at him sharply. They had put their temptation behind them on their ride to and from Lórien, or so it had seemed. Elladan had not told his brother that he felt it anew on their return.

Elrond looked at his grim-faced son for a moment, then reached out and touched Elladan's cheek. "It is well that you told me the truth of it

yourself; yes, that is well. Had Saruman been so honest, our leaguer might yet be unbroken." Shadow fell deeper on Elladan at their father's mercy, but Elrond had turned to his other son.

"And you, Elrohir? Will you go?"

"If he does not go, I do not go, either," Elrohir said, bluntly.

Elrond fiddled with the ring on his own hand. The jewel of Vilya was gleaming, and some of its light sparked in his eyes. "If you will not be riven, there may be other errands that call for you," he muttered. "I will not say yet that my sons are spared from the Black Gate." Elrohir bowed, feeling exposed that his father had been swept by foreseeing to look on him. He quailed at what else his father might perceive, the falseness in one of a hundred small lies about their errantry, or the deep unspoken truth that he and his twin were lovers. But the moment passed.

When they had said good night, the sons of Elrond left their father. Elrohir walked close by his brother; their paths would go together for a time, before they separated to go to their different chambers. "That went all right," said Elrohir. Elladan walked ahead, not replying. "Elladan?"

Elladan turned to him. His voice was still cold. "Why did you refuse to go? What was your thought?"

"When we discussed this, we didn't think he'd ask only one of us – everyone knows better than that! You want me to leave you?" Elrohir spluttered.

Elladan said, "I want one of us to have some honour."

"I keep telling you, that cursed Ring called to me, too," said Elrohir, forcefully. "What is the problem? You were not troubled on our ride."

"*Called*, you say; so it calls no more. Whereas I still feel its lure. It would never have touched you had I not thought about it, I am certain." He glanced up and down the corridor; it was empty. Nonetheless, he whispered his next words. "The same way that you might never have touched me, had I not said we ought to ride out together to avenge our mother. In seeking to foil evil I have fallen afoul of it; in seeking to honour our kinship, I have dragged it down."

"We said we did not want this to come between us. If desire of the Ring is gone from me, surely it will cease to trouble you soon." Elrohir shrugged and said something that had soothed his brother once before. "We are twins; how different are we, really?"

Elladan was silent as he pulled his cloak about him. When he did speak, all that he said was, "More than anyone understands. Even you, I fear. Until the morrow." He walked away briskly, leaving Elrohir standing.

Elrohir flushed with anger. First withholding, then placing him on the spot before their father, and now the final insult of those patronising words. "Superior wretch," he growled, throwing his own cloak back, ready to follow after him and pick a fight. Then he stopped, remembering the last

time such anger at his brother had flooded him, in the hour when the Ring called to them both.

Elrohir turned and leaned his forehead against the cold stone of an archway, breathing deep to calm himself. Not that way, he thought. Not that way, ever again. As he cooled, he reviewed everything his brother had said to their father and himself. The chill of December pierced him when he realized his brother's parting had not been the most hurtful words of the night. No, it had been worse when Elladan said: *Do not say "we."*



Elrohir tried to ground himself amidst the chaos of the month that followed. The strange Company of the Ring had gone forth three days after the twins' return to Rivendell. The scouts kept up their comings and goings. The valley's guard was doubled. There was a sensation when the proud Dúnedain refused the offer of the shelter of Rivendell, accepting the risk and defence of their fortress-remnants, which also sheltered Men of other kindreds. The counsels around this preoccupied Elladan, just as the extra riding in icy winter kept Elrohir busy doctoring horses. They would have been granted an hour, even three or four, away from their work, but each claimed duty to keep them separate.

Then came the summons from the South, calling the Dúnedain to Aragorn's aid: *Now is the hour when the Lost shall come forth/And the Grey Company ride from the North.* It seemed sent by the Valar for Elrohir's relief. As soon as he heard, he declared that he would ride to the war and to Aragorn. Elrond had smiled on him again. "You and Elladan agree, as ever. Two more grey cloaks for the Grey Company."

"Yes," said Elrohir, smiling with an empty heart. Elladan had not come to him with this news. He had thought to speak to Elladan after gaining Elrond's blessing, and urge him to ride as well. It had seemed a safe path to reconcile them. A good idea, useless now. He trudged off to the stables, doubting both his anger and his yearning towards Elladan. Every night, alone, he had struggled with how to clear the air and heal the gap Elladan placed between them, without using force of anger, nor the persuasive words he had used in the past – words that might have been half-lies. He did not know, anymore.

What he did know was horses. He went to choose the steed that would bear him to war even before seeing to his weapons and armour. As he drew near the stable, he heard the nickering and shifting of the horses; a person was there before him. Arriving, he saw that, with unconscious consonance, his twin was intent on the same errand. Elladan stood before the stalls of the two horses he rode, but he looked towards the door at Elrohir's entry.

"Elladan, well met; I wished to speak with you, anyway."

Elladan said, "Regarding?"

Elrohir's heart churned. "Father said you ride with the Dúnedain. I ride as well. Which horse are you taking?"

Elladan looked down the row of horse-stalls. "Starfoot, I think. He is come to the fullness of his strength. And you?"

"I was thinking of riding Forty-Three." A grey mare looked up brightly at hearing her name, and seeing her favourite person attending to her.

"Old grey Forty-Three? Is she not come to the end of her time?" said Elladan.

"Not yet, I wager, and I reckon she is the horse for this. This ride will bring many strange things. She has seen much and fears little - she is even bored here, I think. Wise as one of the guards, smarter than me sometimes. And she and I, you know how it is, when you care...for the one you ride." Elrohir flushed, abashed at his double meaning. He might as well speak his mind after that slip. "If you wouldn't ride before, why do you ride now? And why did you not tell me?"

"We are summoned, Elrohir. *Now is the hour when the Lost shall come forth.* Who is more lost than we? I knew you would come; and I needed to speak with you, too. Father has given me messages for Aragorn. Will you take them, and speak for Father, instead? I will be busy enough on this ride. If we are to meet with Aragorn in Rohan, I will be scrying for the place and time of it. You know what that means, do you not?"

"Yes," Elrohir muttered. His brother meant that he wished to be celibate, before and during the ride, so that the scrying would be unclouded. He crossed his arms. "You know I am clumsy at things like messages. It's not like I shall not have a thousand tasks myself."

"Still, will you?"

Elrohir said, "I will, if you tell me why."

"I am not one to speak for the good of Rivendell anymore," said Elladan, voice dull and sad.

"This is still about that, isn't it? About the Ring." Elladan nodded as his brother snapped, "Father forgave you - even Saruman the White was tempted, and Father said you did better than the wizard in this. It was more than two months ago. Can you not put it aside?"

Elladan recoiled, shoulders shrinking. "You do not understand. I knew you would not. This is why you have stayed far from me, is it not? So that I would not taint you again with my weakness."

"It's not that at all! You were avoiding me. For the sake of your precious lore, I suppose."

Elladan raised his hand, as if to say something, and then closed his mouth tightly, shaking his head. "I suppose," he muttered, and said no more.

Elrohir waited, suddenly anguished. "I'll get Starfoot ready for you. You might as well go, get the messages, whatever." He flinched a bit, hearing his words ring harsh, and added, "Starfoot needs winter horseshoes, and that takes a while."

He heard his brother's footsteps over the stable's boards. At the safe distance of the door, Elladan turned back, face pale, brows drawn. "Elrohir. Thank you. For – all of it."

Elrohir did not reply, watching him go. Why did he have to do that? Why be so cold, and then give him a look that made his heart wheel, a word that praised everything between them? A reason came to him. His rider's bones ached with the same feeling as when he looked on a wounded horse and knew that the horse's death was nigh. This was the break he had ever feared, at last; words that sent him away; not as he had expected it at all. He ought to have seen it coming. It was as clever of Elladan as always, the timing, the way. Elrohir leaned over the half-door of Forty-Three's stall as this change sank through him, like a weight into water.

He looked up to see Forty-Three's long-faced regard before him, her dark grey nose flecked with white hairs. "Ready to go to war?" he asked. "One last time; the last time that pays for all."



Elrohir drew strength to go on, despite his heart's dismay, from the muster and ride of the Grey Company. There were rough-haired horses to tend, and the appreciative company of the goodly Dúnedain. Aragorn's horse Roheryn, drawn along riderless, came under his guidance and care. And there was the endless rhythm of riding a favorite horse, feeling the ground flying smoothly beneath them both, his pleasure from boyhood.

It was easy to let thoughts go blank while riding, to lose the mind in the moment. Elrohir let this happen on the first week of the ride, as they picked their way down the foothills of the Misty Mountains. Once they hit the gently sloped lands of Hollin, the ride eased. Forty-Three was surefooted on the paths she had taken for years. The sight of the holly trees made him think of when he and Elladan first joined as lovers. The memories made his eyes sting, but they all rode face on into the winter wind, and Elladan did not look back to see his brother's eyes narrowed.

"Hai, Elrohir!" Elrohir started. The leader of the Dúnedain of the ride, Halbarad, had drawn his horse up companionably.

"Hai yourself! How does it go?" he replied, in Westron.

"Speak to me like an Elf would, my friend. I want to practice my Sindarin in case our riding brings us to Gondor. I would not have them say we of the North are unlettered."

"All right," Elrohir called, in the Elvish language. "Of what shall we speak?"

"Why did you name your horse Forty – I mean, Forty-Three?" Halbarad had caught his own mistake pronouncing the number-word *rascanod*, saying it first with a hard *s*, then changing it to the correct Sindarin softness.

Elrohir laughed freely. "Everyone always asks! She's the forty-third horse I have had for my own in my life – what could be simpler?"

“Is that all? I thought it might be some elvish spell, some number of magic.”

“It’s not always so complicated. Not with me, anyway.”

Another rider drew up to Halbarad with a question, freeing Elrohir, and he urged Forty-Three ahead a touch. Complicated? No, he thought, there was little good in that. Fate had brought him enough complications, and he tried to keep the rest of life simple.

Forty-Three’s stride staggered for a moment over a sudden dip in the ground. “Ai, ai. Easy, girl. All right?” He patted her neck, and let her find her own pace again, a step or two slower than before. He stroked her mane a little as they jogged along. It was a privilege to have such a fine horse. The affection and trust of animals was delight and refuge for him; creatures never judged as speaking folk did. While animals had their laws amongst their kinds, they did not have a word or thought for incest. It was no sin to them, thought Elrohir; and he sighed, and looked to where Elladan rode.

At the beginning of the ride, he and Elladan, considered hearty among the Elves, had blended in with the Dúnedain. A week later, the Dúnedain were roughened by the wilds, once-shaved cheeks bristling, shoulder-cropped hair flying lank and dusty. The two elf-kin stood out in contrast, faces still smooth, longer hair braided beneath their silver-grey hoods, neat if no longer clean. At the head of the riding, Elladan’s expression set the seal on his elvish air, keen glance cast far, remote with mingled knowledge and intuition in navigation.

Before they had become lovers, Elrohir had desired Elladan long; it had been the one secret of his life. Elrohir had once had a pattern of winning over remote, severe lovers. Inevitably, he had parted from them when he realized that yet another could never take the place of Elladan, the most remote and severe of all, and yet the closest, being his twin. He had persuaded himself that approaching Elladan would scour the desire from him, even as knowledge beyond thought came to him that the confession might bring all his hopes. He had not trusted his intuition in that - but it had been correct. Since that unexpected joy, he had let himself be steered by his instincts.

Thinking too much had made Elladan cold, thought Elrohir, precise to near-obsession, unable to feel any real pleasure. He, Elrohir, had always been the one who sought to smooth their questing and their love; always following Elladan’s lead, never seeking to quarrel, always trying to say the right thing even when he felt sapped, weary of the endless debating. What hadn’t he done, he mulled, for the sake of that ice-hearted wretch?

“What do you think of that, Elrohir?” said Halbarad, beside him.

“Think of what? Apologies – I was not listening,” he said. Halbarad waved and fell back again to talk to the two riders behind. And Elrohir’s failing crashed down on him at his own words. Forty-Three slowed her canter to a trot, and even looked behind, as she felt Elrohir sag upon her back.

Yes, most of his other lovers had been more pleasant than Elladan. But none had been truer or more honest. Elladan had never told him any of the half-lies of lovers in their long years of solid partnership. Nor had the long years made it less thrilling when Elladan said yes to Elrohir's desires, time and again. It was still a heart-wrenching marvel, like a stag in the forest coming tame and trusting to his hand. More, Elladan had trusted him beyond their incest, trusted him as friend and advisor, being honest about his temptation. No, he had not listened.

Elrohir sat up again, resolute; some of the clear grimness of Elladan's glance was in his face. He pressed his knees lightly against Forty-Three's flanks, for they were now last. They caught up, then cantered along past the other riders, up to where Elladan took the point of the ride. Starfoot whickered and slowed to meet them.

"How are you holding up?" Elrohir called.

"All right. The difficult part will begin soon, as we draw near the gap of Rohan."

"You were troubled, before we rode out. D'you want to talk tonight?" Elrohir asked.

Elladan turned his face to the sere wilds ahead of them. "I decided to take your advice in that matter, and put it aside."

"Maybe I was wrong," said Elrohir.

Elladan shook his head. "I will not speak of it more. I would that you would let it be, as well. It is too distracting."

Elrohir read his failure in this chiding of his lateness. "As you wish it. But maybe when this ride, and your scrying, is done?" Elrohir saw Elladan nod at that, and let Forty-Three find her own pace again. They fell back next to Roheryn.

When camping that night, Forty-Three lay down on the ground to sleep, and the other horses followed her lead. She let Elrohir lay close along her back for warmth. This had been yet another way in which Elladan matched him better than other lovers, how they lay together peacefully for sleep. There was little hope in him that they would be so entwined again, for all his yearning; his deep intuition had fallen dumb in this matter.

Halbarad, being the leader of the ride, was doing the rounds. "Last watch for you tonight," he said, looking down at Elrohir beside the mare. "Cold, are you?"

"Yes. Yes, I am cold." He saw Halbarad's friendly regard, and thought how it would curdle if the man had known his mind. "But who isn't on this ride? My hay-burner here shall keep me warm, won't you, girl?" The mare whickered to him with the same call she had used for her colts, and turned her head to give him a nudge. Again, his eyes stung, and he had to force a smile to match Halbarad's amusement.

Elrohir kept his word for the rest of the ride. Elf-kin and Dúnedain grew more anxious together, day by day, as they entered rarely traversed

lands. Two weeks later, as they pounded through the Gap of Rohan, all saw the smoke of war spiral into the sky, from north, south, and east. Elladan pointed to the greatest, whitest plume of smoke, towards the north. In a voice possessed he cried, "The banks of the river Isen will lead us to him. Tonight, tonight we shall meet!"

"That takes us towards Isengard, and the message was that we meet Aragorn in Rohan," said Halbarad.

Elrohir shouted, "That path is still in Rohan's borders! I say we should hearken and ride as he bids."

Halbarad eyed him shrewdly, then cried for all to hear, "I will give the paths of the Isen a day. Ride north!"

Elrohir, amongst the Dúnedain for that foretold meeting, saw their amazement that Elladan had been correct. As Halbarad embraced Aragorn, Elladan swayed on Starfoot's back, the passion of his foreseeing faded. Elrohir paused. He might be able to persuade Elladan to talk, now. But that was not the hour's need, nor the best way to honour the promises he had made to Elladan. When the riders set out again, the Dúnedain joining the company of Rohan, he turned to Aragorn.

Aragorn said, "Elrohir, my brother, well met! What news do you have from Rivendell?"

"Strange tidings. One thing is most important. If you do not understand, I will tell you more by the light of day." Elrohir's voice was clear and confident as it cut through the night. "I bring word to you from my father: *The days are short. If thou art in haste, remember the Paths of the Dead.*"

Story Notes:

- **Story is set between** December 22nd (opening scene) and March 6th, (closing scene) 3018 – 3019, in the *Lord of the Rings* timeline.
- **Horse names** are in reverse translation this time. The twins are speaking in Sindarin, so the Sindar names would have their original meaning in their conversation. Starfoot = Brindel. Forty-Three = Rascanod. This is structured from the prefixes of the following numbers: twelve (rasta) three (canad) seven (odog). The meaning is intended as "twelve threes and seven", to communicate the value of "forty-three" using the Elves' numerical system, which is based on values of 12 (duodecimal) not values of ten (decimal).

Carry a Torch

On the Paths of the Dead, the haunting spirits have a special torment for Elladan.

Elladan lifted his newly lit torch high in the cold grey morning, standing beside Aragorn. They were at the Dark Door opening onto the tunnel of Paths of the Dead. The Paths were a fell road, beset with haunting spirits. But they were the fastest way from the hills of Dunharrow to nigh the coasts of Gondor and the towns in peril at the mouths of the river Anduin. From the Dark Door, there was a constant exhalation of air carrying a dry smell of the grave, mingled stone, dust, and rancid ill-dried hide, a hint of foulness unknown within.

Aragorn murmured only to Elladan as he lit the second torch. "These wights betrayed their alliance with my ancestors. I can command them, when the moment comes, at the Stone of Erech. It is a long path from where we stand to the Stone. You have the lore of both Elves and Dúnedain. Can you ward us against their malice until then?"

"I must march hindmost, then. I shall do all I can," said Elladan, equally private. Everyone was at the limits of their courage as it was, and neither of the two wished to alarm their company further. He turned from the brother of his fosterage, in whom he saw the makings of a great liege, to the brother who was of his blood. All that he said was, "Elrohir, will you lead my horse on this path? I am walking last, with one of the torches." He scarcely looked at Elrohir as he spoke to him.

Elrohir, stricken by the gravity of the hour, only nodded and gestured to Elladan's horse. Starfoot trotted over to Elrohir and grew calmer beside Elrohir's mare, Forty-Three, the least perturbed of all the steeds.

Elladan watched the rest of the Grey Company enter the Paths of the Dead, one by one. First went Aragorn, and others of the Dúnedain followed his fearlessness. Elladan saw their friend Halbarad taken by foreseeing at that dark gate, speaking words of his death, and Elladan shivered, knowing they were true. Then came Elrohir. His face could not be seen beneath his hood and helm, but Elladan read the way his twin moved. Despite the dismay in Elrohir's shoulders and his long pause before the gateway into horror, he strengthened himself and led both his horse and Elladan's inside, calming the fearful animals with horseman's touches. After his passing, Elladan paid little heed to the rest, for the one who had his heart had gone within. He followed.

As they went on the dark path underground, the company fell into a different order. Some marchers quailed and fell back. Others found a touch more courage, or longed to be behind brave Aragorn, and went forward. Elladan stood aside so that Legolas could pass him in the darkness. He heard dwarf-boots following, and held the torch higher to light Gimli's way. Peering ahead, saw Elrohir secure in the middle of the march. He was glad that Elrohir was protected as might be. He had tried to shield Elrohir

from his own shadow by keeping his distance ever since the Ring had called to him a second time. He had striven to take Elrohir's counsel to put his dismay at that aside. But his self-judgement had scarcely been able to accept their willing incest, and the weight of this new guilt was too much for him. Whatever Elrohir said to him, he had not been able to forgive himself.

Once Elladan had marched beyond the sight of the grey light from the entryway, the rancid air grew still. Despite this, Elladan's torch guttered low, as if the lifeless air was stifling the flame instead of feeding it. There was an echo that made it sound as if more footsteps were following behind them in the darkness. Listening to that echo, Elladan sensed the Dead, and he tightened his mouth and raised the torch high.

Elladan had encountered the wights of mortal souls before, when he had journeyed across the Barrow-Downs between Rivendell and Lindon. They had little power of body. Terror and despair were their weapons, blasting men's minds with a draining fear of death and entrapment, something beyond thought. Looking ahead, curious to see what the Elf among them felt, it seemed that Legolas sensed them not at all. Managing his horse Arod, restive with an honest beast's urge to run held back, took all his attention. Elladan himself half-heard muttering whispers behind him, and saw glimpses of grey and white at the edge of his vision. Once or twice, he started as if someone had touched him from behind. Elladan turned himself to chanting words of warding, exerting his will to bar the Grey Company from the evil souls following.

Much time passed as they marched. Although Elladan took sips from a water-skin, his throat grew raw. He ceased briefly so that he might rest his voice. As the wights were between the dead and the living, so he was between two kinds, elves and mortals. Like the ghosts, he was of liminal kind, in-between, he thought. And like the company of the Dead, cursed traitors, he felt himself cursed as well. The idea that the many curses laid on the Eldar in Middle-Earth might be the source of his desire for Elrohir had helped him reconcile himself to their shared lusts. There was no use fighting or seeking to evade such a fate, and such dooms were apt to be laden with irony. He smiled grimly to think that his incest with Elrohir had brought him the greatest joy of his life.

On a sudden, panic seized him, terrible fear. He nearly dropped his torch, choking on sudden bile, so great was his terror. Horror welled as a thousand malicious wills focused on him. Elladan knew too late the Dead saw his mind clear, through his own duality and the charms he had chanted against them. They read his thoughts; they knew his sinful desire; they saw that he was part mortal, yet linked to what they had worshipped Sauron to gain, the immortal life of the Eldar. As they turned him inside-out, their hate, terrible loathing honed on themselves for an Age of the world, flooded him.

The ghosts' varied mumblings on the edge of reason coalesced in a voice like a void at the back of his mind. *You lust for him, for your own*

brother! was the condemnation of that death-corrupt concourse. It seemed more terrible than the judgement of Mandos. Having entered Elladan's mind, the Dead rifled his memories. Hot glimpses of the passion he had shared with Elrohir flickered through his mind, distorted by being summoned for evil's mockery, still dear to him.

The ghost-speech fragmented into a score of mad voices. *Catamite... squanderer... even we, even we counted that evil... would have bled you on the altars of Sauron...* Every thought of the Dead burning into his brain was underlined by a sense of triumph that one had come among them more wicked and vile than they. Elladan tried to say his warding words again, but his voice failed in his bile-burned throat. All the defiance he could muster was to keep the torch aloft and to put one foot in front of the other.

From the company of ghosts, one dead mind cursed him sharply. *You should despair as we do, to be mired in such a black desire.*

"It is not like that," thought Elladan. "I have foregone my brother to keep him from evil." He was still stumbling forwards.

Another blast of loathing struck him. *The deeds you have done already are too much.*

"Who are you to judge?" he thought. The answer surfaced in his own mind as he remembered the grasping hunger he had felt twice for the One Ring, and the laughter of the Dead rang hollow in his skull.

We judge what we recognize, said the clear wight-voice. *The sins of mortals are unchanged, though the lines of mounds grow long, though the lines of kings fail, though others die, die, die...*

Fighting for reason, Elladan picked out that the one voice had the malice of all of them behind it. That voice was far more distinct, as if the speaking soul had had less time in the dark tunnels to forget the fair speech of living mortals. "You who bespeak me. Who are you? What was your fate?"

You will see. The ghostly voices multiplied again, babbling. *See...wait...behind the door...come to us.*

"Join you?" thought Elladan, blank with terror.

The clear voice dominated again. *Become a shade as us. Suffer with us. It is the only fate for you, damned and cursed, so hungry for kind you lust after your kinsman.*

"The only fate..." There was a terrible compulsion to the idea. Could it be true? Eternity in the darkness, an end to the sins of the flesh, maybe even an end to the fear that had hounded him for all his days, that of having his desire found out. He stood still.

The Dead waited around him, moaning, too many of them to allow the clear voice to focus on him. They cursed him with a hundred ill names, and his spirit bowed in agreement. Did they not say the same that he had thought of himself for long? The more despair he felt, the more the Dead

invaded him, and they plunged down into his greatest fear; that he would be unloved, alone, forsaken for his desire.

The wights did their work of fear too well, for once. The terror that claimed Elladan made his blood run hot, set him ready to fight. It was a fear he had faced many a long night, and then endured every time he and Elrohir rode forth. For being unloved and losing Elrohir were the same thing to him. His mind burned with wordless denial, and his limbs were freed – shaking, not walking, but freed.

To join the Dead, he knew then, was to give up on the endless struggle of honourable life against forbidden love. True evil was at the heart of that, the void-core hopelessness of the Dead, who had given up before their own challenge and so gained their curse. He might never be truly good, thought Elladan, but he could always strive towards it. Nor did he know if he was still loved by Elrohir, after all his own coldness, but he knew how he felt himself.

Even after the battles and terrors that were to come, Elladan remembered the next steps he took as his most difficult deed in all that war. Walking tremulously, he sent his thought back into the haunted darkness. “Yes. I am stained with the sin all speaking folk hold ill, and many a lie I have told. My curse, my perversion, my wrongs, I claim them all. To love the one I should not is my fate. But I am no oathbreaker. Long have I sworn vengeance for my kin’s sake. Aragorn aided my brother and me. Now I am sworn to aid him, by the promise I made at the gate of your dark path.” He lifted his torch high, and began his chanting again, hoarse and defiant.

They all tramped on until the path and airs opened around them, into a wider chamber of stone. As the company clustered in the increased space, Elladan looked around at his fellow marchers. No-one else seemed as wracked as he was; perhaps the Dead had focused their will of horror against him. He breathed in relief. It was better far that he should suffer than Aragorn, all their hope, or Elrohir, all his heart.

There was a mutter among their company as, in the gloom around them, gold gleamed at one side. Aragorn stepped close to examine the gleam’s source, then looked to Elladan, asking wordlessly for his aid. Elladan saw that Aragorn stood by a fallen body, sunk to bones inside dry armour. He stepped up and took Aragorn’s torch as Aragorn knelt to examine the body. He still felt the multiplicity of the Dead, and one shade hovered close at his back. *You asked who I was. Baldor son of Brego. Look on me now! I vowed to walk these Paths of the Dead. I walk them without cease.* In the corpse’s fingers clawing the door, and the broken sword beside it, Elladan saw the madness that had twisted the corpse and recoiled. Then he braced his mind against horror with the twin bulwarks of duty to Aragorn and love for Elrohir.

Aragorn spoke to the whispering darkness behind, loud and clear. “Keep your hoards and your secrets hidden in the Accursed Years! Speed

only we ask. Let us pass, and then come! I summon you to the Stone of Erech!”

Elladan sweated as he felt the Dead cease their muttering and curl their icy thoughts around the words of Aragorn. They gained potency as their doom came on them. The sense of them grew stronger. Elladan gripped his torch and gazed at Elrohir to endure that horrible instant, before he alone heard the moan of the concourse of ghosts: *We will answer.*

And at that, a cold blast blew out the twin torches, plunging them all into the dark of the Dead.

After a few attempts at striking flints in the dark, Elladan whispered to Aragorn, “I do not think they will abide the fire more. Can we march without it?”

“If it means the Dead will follow. We shall not tarry. No torches,” Aragorn called, to the company, “but we move on.” There was a restless shuffle at that; not a one of them liked the idea. They set themselves to it for Aragorn’s sake.

Elladan still walked behind the Dúnedain, resolute against the darkness. He was exhilarated that he had faced such an evil and not been claimed by it – even that such evil was not barred from good service and honour. The Dead were behind and about him, but they let his mind alone, now. Elladan murmured a hymn to Elbereth, the first song he and Elrohir had been taught together. When he fell silent, he heard not the half-sounds of the Dead, but Elrohir continuing to reassure the horses with wordless clicks of his tongue. At that brief, humble sound, he walked sure in the darkness, as if his torch had not been extinguished at all.

It seemed soon after that when they came upon a new sound; the rilling of water. Soon a murmur ran through the line of Dúnedain, for the westwards gate of the tunnel opened ahead of them. The dim light of it was as beautiful as a star to them, and they hastened forth.

Weirdly, Elladan felt panic again. He flinched as the white shades edged his vision, dim faces and shadow-spears. The voice of the prince of Rohan moaned to his mind, *They say, the others say, this lord will free us. How do we know he will keep his word? Not bind us to him to serve him more?*

Elladan felt a terrible pity, perceiving that just as the Dead had poured their own hatred of themselves into him, it was their own awful fear that maddened those who ventured past their gates. “Traitors think that all betray. Aragorn, the lord Aragorn, is true,” Elladan whispered, facing the blackness. “You gave me many foul names, yet I do not break my oath to him. Are you better than me or no?” The darkness was silent. “Your fate and mine will stand at the Stone of Erech. It has been foreseen. Come!” He turned without another word and went on. The rhythm on the edge of sound came again, that of the ghostly host following him. Elladan did not turn back more, nor did he stop shaking until he saw the open sky above him.

Outside, the path opened into a narrow ravine. The harrowed company were collecting themselves in various ways, some men laughing to free their nerves, one passing around a flask. Legolas seemed anxious at last, looking about for Gimli, who staggered out even after Elladan. Seeing Gimli's stricken face, Elladan wondered if he had been the only one the Dead had addressed. They mounted and rode in file again. Elladan kept his place at the last, between the living Grey Company and the dead grey shades.

Riding with Gimli, Legolas spoke. "The Dead are following. I see shapes of men and of horses, and pale banners like shreds of cloud, and spears like winter-thickets on a misty night. The Dead are following."

Elladan smiled. "Yes, the Dead ride behind. They have been summoned." Both the Elf and Dwarf heard the note of grim satisfaction in Elladan's voice, and he saw them troubled. He took the rest of the ride through the ravine to calm himself, but it was difficult with the howling fear of the Dead themselves intense at his back.

Once they came to the Morthond Vale, they thundered through the new-fallen night to the Stone of Erech. There, before Aragorn spoke the words of fate, Elladan watched with hope as Elrohir handed the heir of Isildur a silver horn. It was fitting that the better of the twain aided him at that moment, thought Elladan, but he too might be as his brother, doing fair deeds despite his own deeper flaws.

Aragorn sounded the horn, then addressed the Dead that surrounded them. "Oathbreakers, why have ye come?"

The voice of the Dead replied. To fulfil our oath and have peace.

Elladan saw all save Aragorn struck with fear as they too heard the voice of the Dead at last. Then he listened as Aragorn called the Dead to his service, promising them peace and departure. Listening, Elladan looked ever on Elrohir, and accepted his own fate beside the Stone of Erech.

Story Notes:

- **9 ½ - 10 ½ hours journey**, from an hour after dawn on a late winter day to 2 hours after dusk. For the sake of this story I'm assuming they ran across the corpse of Baldor about 7 ½ - 8 hours into it.
- **Elvish versus mortal ghosts** = There are differences between elvish ghosts and mortal ghosts in Tolkien's writing. I refer to elvish ghosts as "spirits" and mortal ghosts as "souls." This story deals entirely with mortal ghosts.
- **Look on me now!** = This is Baldor, a prince of Rohan who vowed he would "tread the Paths of the Dead." The Tale of Years, *ROTK*.
- **It has been foreseen** = The prophecy of Marvedui the Seer, cited in *ROTK*.
- **Keep your hoards and your secrets...** = This line of dialogue is directly lifted from "The Passing of the Grey Company" in *ROTK*. So are the lines, "The Dead are following..." (Legolas), "Yes, the Dead ride behind..." (Elladan) "Oathbreakers, why have ye come?" (Aragorn), and "To fulfil our oath and have peace" (The Dead).

Stars of the Pellenor

The field of the Pellenor is a field of signs, where Elrohir and Elladan face off against two monstrous foes.

As Aragorn's ship progressed up the Anduin to the aid of Minas Tirith, Elrohir took a moment to draw breath. After riding hard from the Stone of Erech and fighting to win the port of the Pelargir, it was a relief to stay in the ship's hold for a time. He stood amongst the horses loaded into the hold, waiting to soothe any that showed signs of fear. This relative peace was his first chance since the battle at Pelargir to collect his private thoughts.

The ship listed and swayed to one side. Weapons and shields stacked against the wall of the hold slid, clattering across the floor. Elrohir moved them away from the horses, stacking up arms for twenty men, pleased at the count. This battle would be far better than skulking amongst the brush, as he and Elladan had done for centuries, using every canny trick to kill orcs or other folk given over to evil. On that errantry, with no other company save each other, the twins and brothers had become lovers. Elrohir valued that secret bond more than the brightest sword. Nonetheless, his warrior's heart was glad to be riding to open battle at last. It had been half his lifetime since he had known the raw joy of riding with a company of men at arms, all as fired with anger against evil as he was.

He picked up a halberd he had seen Elladan carrying, and replaced it in the heap of weapons with a sigh. Though Elladan had ridden by his side after the Stone of Erech, they had spoken little. Elrohir had sensed his twin's strange bond with the Dead who followed, sensed it and been troubled. As they raced along, Elrohir felt as if the right moment to speak to Elladan about breaking the distance between them had slipped away. Or perhaps there had been no right moment at all. Riding with the Dúnedain, it had been awkward enough to say even veiled words to his twin about the concealed love between them. Joining hundreds of mortals of southern Gondor had taken away any privacy they might have had. He sank down by the weapons and rested his head on his knees for a moment.

Beneath the dry wooden deck where the horses stood, there was another hold to the ship, where those who had once been thralls drove the ship forward with oars. Elrohir heard them chanting the time of their strokes, occasionally breaking out into crude banter and the laughter of free men.

The ladder coming down from the deck above rattled. Elrohir jumped to stand, for it was his brother Elladan who swung down. Elladan still had the same fell, bright expression he had gained on the Paths of the Dead, with a smile for Elrohir. "Well met. Where is the trap-door to go below? Aragorn has given me words for the freed bondsmen of the Corsairs about the coming battle."

“Over here,” said Elrohir, and helped him heave up the wooden slab. He stood nigh as Elladan swung himself down lightly, curious as to how his brother would deal with the goodly but rough ex-thralls.

“The elf, the elf-lord!” Elrohir heard them shout. Unusually, touchy Elladan did not correct them, and his brother warmed at that. If it heartened the ex-thralls to think of the sons of the Halfelven as elves, let them.

Elladan hailed them in Westron, and answered their questions. Next, he said, “I bring you word from the Lord Aragorn. He says none of you need join in battle on the field unless you wish it. There is honour enough in guarding these boats.”

Ten voices shouted at once. “We fight! We fight! We want revenge!”

Elladan asked, “Who here is hardened to battle?”

“I am!” said one.

“No you’re not, you stupid bastard,” said another, “You and I were both wet behind the ears when we got taken as slaves by the Corsairs.” Roars of amusement followed, and he picked out the music of Elladan’s laughter.

Elladan’s voice rose above the din. “It matters not. Listen! This is the counsel of Aragorn for battle, for those who will fight. The men of Gondor and Rohan are our allies. Those in the black and silver, and those who ride beneath horse-banners, aid them with all your might. If you fight orcs, strike to kill, and give them no quarter.” The ex-thralls roared again in approbation.

Elladan continued. “When you fight the humans who serve Sauron, be they men of the South or the Corsairs who joined Sauron’s forces for this battle, if they surrender, take them prisoner with honour. Do not abuse them, even for your vengeance.” The men groaned and muttered. “It is Aragorn’s word; would you deny him?” At their saviour’s name, the muttering ceased. “But when you fight them, you must comport yourself so that you fill them with fear. The field of battle is a field of signs. You will see that your foemen fight on desperate as long as their banner stands. When it falls, they flee, craven on a sudden. We must seek to make them craven!”

Elrohir listened in surprise. It seemed Elladan had found his silver tongue again. Very timely, he thought.

Someone in the hold asked a question. Elrohir could not hear the words, but Elladan’s reply was clear. “We may well perish on the field. If so, we die with honour! Look at it as the last act of your vengeance, if you fill them with terror as you run brave to your destruction, if you blunt their blades with your own blood.”

“We’ll take ‘em with us! Yarrrrr!” The hold rang with more excited shouts. Elrohir turned away from the hold’s trapdoor, stricken. So, he thought, Elladan was glad because they might perish. Elrohir felt sick and

empty. But perhaps that was the most fitting end for them, to fall in battle. They might end their strange tale with some honour, with the secret of their incest unrevealed.

Elladan climbed back up through the trapdoor, slid the door's slab back in place, then held the stained lower hem of his cloak away from him. "Ai! They sit above the very bilges, and the bilge-water reeks worse than an orc's den. No wonder they had to force thralls in chains to row down there. Did you hear? Did it go well enough?"

Elrohir looked on his brother, disturbed that he was cheerful in that hour, and spoke with his own seriousness. "Very well. I liked what you said about vengeance. It reminded me of our vow to our mother's honour, long ago. I want you to know, that...I am with you in battle," Elrohir said. "To the very end."

Elladan nodded. "Fair spoken. For that is our fate."

"If you say it is so," said Elrohir, "then it must be so." He bowed his head.

Elladan peered about the dim hold quickly. "Elrohir," he said, softly, "We have had so little –"

A cry came from the ship's deck above. "The White City! Minas Tirith! Prepare, prepare!"

Someone blew a horn above; the ex-thralls shouted in the bilges below; and Elladan sighed. "So little time alone all this journey, and now we have none. I should tell Aragorn that I have done his errand."

"And I must ready these horses," said Elrohir. They separated for their labours once more.



They disembarked in chaos, the ex-thralls leaping from the rigging to clear the quays of their foemen. The Dúnedain and Aragorn's companions stared marvelling from the deck at the White City amidst the marred fields, the burned sward of the Pellenor swamped with swathes of dark troops and bright cavalry. With the livery and the banners and the strange engines of war, Elrohir saw that it was as Elladan had spoken, a field of signs easy to read. Even at the quays of the Harlond, the reek of the burning and the dead hit them, and the horses flared their nostrils and neighed for war. Once all the horses were disembarked, and Halbarad carried the banner of Elendil at Aragorn's side, the Grey Company thundered forth again.

At first, none stood before them. The orcs ran craven in the sunlight, and it seemed that the troops of Men bound to Sauron did the same. "The flag of Eómer! To Eómer!" Aragorn cried, and their company turned that way, to succour their ally, isolated on a hill amidst their foes. Elrohir felt himself slide into the heightened awareness of battle, hearing every sound, seeing every movement, at one with the skilled war-mare he rode. The shadow he bore in his heart transformed into a dark joy, and the shame that had haunted him for weeks was lessened. Elladan had been right. If they

would fall, it would be as their finest selves, with honour to their sacrifice. He saw Aragorn at the head of their group, sword flashing, darting on ahead, and lifted his silver horn in salute, keeping his spear in his left hand.

Before he could place the silver to his lips, Elrohir's ears were blasted by a sound like the deepest horn. All turned to see what company or engine rode against their smoke-clouded southern flank.

A small company of Haradrim were there, shouting and banging their brass shields, and of a sudden they parted into an aisle. The earth rumbled. Up between their lines, through the smoke, charged the terror of the field, a great war-mûmak, bawling peering about. Small for a war-elephant, it still towered three times the height of a man, strong and grey as stone. Warriors clung to the platform on its back, one at the front, the mahout, guiding the elephant's fury. One tusk was broken short. It lifted its snaking nose and opened its blunt maw to trumpet its power, and the horses of the Grey Company neighed in fear and stumbled.

With a shout, Elrohir broke away from the company, shame and despair urging him to an act of courage. "Ride on!" he cried, "Ride on to Aragorn and Eómer, and I will draw the horror away!" The Grey Company had no time to reply before their terrified horses shot forward, for the mûmak was horror to them. Elrohir's steed, Forty-Three, shook with fear beneath him, but she would endure near any terror for her rider, and cantered forth. No other horse would have borne him hence.

Other troops fled the mûmak's coming, and he who rode before it seemed a madman. Even the Haradrim scrambled back, not wanting to be in the way of the war-elephant's wrath at this challenge. When he was face to face with the mûmak, Elrohir lifted his spear and shouted, voice lost amidst the din, and Forty-Three added a piercing whinny of fear.

The mûmak rumbled still at that, shaking its huge blocky head; something in the piercing note pained it. From above, Elrohir heard the great beast's mahout cursing, trying to urge it forward to trample him. But the war-elephant rolled its huge head to peer at him sidelong. He saw its tiny eye, like a stone in the muddy folds of its skin, and readied his spear. As he tried to pick a point to strike, the mûmak did the last thing he expected.

For the beast ignored the mahout, curling its odd long nose over him, taking its time. Sniffing. Elrohir remembered a tale of a halfling who had bewildered a dragon with his unknown scent. It seemed he was enough of an elf to smell new to the towering beast. Forty-Three shuddered beneath him, and he patted her, saying a brief elvish charm for soothing beasts, one he used often as a horseman.

The mûmak paused at the sound, lifting its huge ear-flaps and swaying. Every man around waited in fear. It did not charge. Instead, it lifted its nose upwards with a peculiar, sad noise. Elrohir saw the stone of its eye again, gleaming wet, and its sound seemed a cry of mourning, as if the elvish scent had made it think of the green lands of its freedom. They

were still before each other for a moment; the beast of the South and the elf-kin of the North, equally out of place on the field of Gondor.

Then the instant of peace was broken by a harsh, cracking sound and a cruel shout. The mûmak bawled and reared, crashing down to one side, and Forty-Three trembled back. Elrohir looked about and saw that between him and the mûmak rode a black-armored knight, yelling in anger. In one hand he bore a scourge full twelve ells long, a bullwhip tipped with a spike of metal, with which he goaded the mûmak; in the other he bore a banner of the Corsairs, the Black Númenoreans.

"Traitor!" Elrohir cried, "Betrayer of Gondor!" He could hate this foe without reserve. He levelled his spear, ready to charge.

Elrohir saw pale eyes gleam behind the black helm, and heard a cold laugh. The rider of the Corsairs spoke not, but whirled and cast the bullwhip direct at him. The lash wrapped beneath Elrohir's shoulder and arm, its tip snaring his neck. There was a foul power to it, enough to drag him from his panicked horse to fall half-stunned in the Pellenor's mire. Forty-Three stood by her downed rider, but the mounted Corsair struck again at her dappled grey flanks with the lash. Without her master, pain and terror overwhelmed her, and she fled, bleeding. Even as Elrohir went to stand the whip whirled and snapped at him once more. Its blow stunned his vambraced sword-arm like a whack from a spear-butt. A third swift strike cast the fell cable around his neck again, and when he drew his sword to slash at it, the whip's metal-weighted leather resisted him. The rider laughed again and yanked it throttling tight.

The Corsair looked to the Haradrim drawing in about him and cried out, first in a harsh tongue of the East, then in Westron, "Back! Back I bid you! The Northman is --"

"Mine!" cried a different voice, and the whip-cable jerked back, casting Elrohir free. He drew breath and staggered up, bewildered at what he saw. The alley of passage the Haradrim left for the mûmak had let one of the Haradrim's foes through, none other than Elladan, having abandoned horse. He was trying to jerk the Corsair down with a hooked halberd. Elrohir was glad amidst his despair; he had thought aright, and they would fall together. He retrieved his fallen spear.

When the cursing Corsair swung the whip at him, Elladan blocked it with the halberd's length. The leather curled around it like an evil snake. Better grounded than the riding Corsair, he pulled the cruel lash away, then slashed the halberd's hooked double blade at the Corsair's stallion. Now this horse screamed. As the stallion reared in pain, Elladan swung the halberd a third time, hooking the Corsair's banner. Their foeman shouted, pulling back. The halberd's blade had snagged the banner's pole.

In the moments this had taken, Elrohir had gained his feet again, shaking out his stunned arm. Elrohir spared a second's glance for the field about them, lest they be taken from behind. There were few near, and he saw why. The mûmak was still wheeling and shaking, trying to loose the

war-tower from its back in its madness and sorrow. He lifted his spear in both hands and ran at the corrupt Númenorean with a shout, voicing the battle-cry that was second nature to him: *Celebrían!*

“To me, Elrohir!” yelled Elladan, not looking around. The Corsair did look, and let go the banner’s pole with a spitting curse, exactly when Elladan gave a mighty pull to the halberd. Without that resistance, Elladan reeled back, falling to one knee, his weapon tangled in the downed banner of black and blue. The Corsair grinned behind his helm to see that Elrohir sprang from attacking him to defence before the fallen, sacrificing a swift victory.

Battle-heightened, Elrohir heard a thin sound of metal, and knew the Corsair had drawn another weapon. A throwing-knife glittered bright in his hand, caught by the sun. Then the blade was dimmed by a monstrous shadow, and Elrohir shouted – for the mûmak’s dim eyes saw the glitter of metal amidst their fray, and was drawn to it.

The Corsair turned, and without his whip, his shoulders shrank in fear. Abandoning his foes, he whacked his heels to his wounded mount’s side, fleeing. The mûmak bellowed and stampeded after.

Elrohir spun about at a touch on his shoulder; it was Elladan, standing again. The lines of fighting were far from them, for every soldier had fled in fear of the mûmak. There was no knowing if they were victors or merely fortunate, if they had won or if their separation from the van of Aragorn would portend a hideous failure. One thing alone was sure. This was how it had been for them countless times, as they fought together in the wilds; the pair of them tight to each other, working as one.

Elrohir looked at the muddied banner, all they had downed despite their courage, and asked, “Where are the others?”

“I told them I rode to you. I don’t know,” said Elladan.

Elrohir knew that oddly calm tone; it meant that Elladan was collected despite the anger and fear of a fight. “If you rode, where’s your horse?”

“No idea. Starfoot would not come near the mûmakil. I had to run. Forty-Three?”

“Run scared. I don’t blame her. Aragorn?”

“I know not.” Elladan’s stunned calm broke. “Were you trying to perish like Húrin? We are here to aid Aragorn, not to be listed in the songs of the fallen. Do not forget!” Despite these hard words, Elladan reached out and cleaned the muddied star on the brow of Elrohir’s helm, rubbing it with his thumb. “Next time you choose to be a madman, hail me first, so I might guard you,” he added, gravely.

Elrohir grabbed his brother’s wrist, infuriated, incredulous, and blazing with hope. Though the touch was through glove and mail, he felt the arm he grasped welcoming his hand, not flinching away. “To say that –

at a time like this –“ He began to laugh. “Ai, you are as maddening as ever. But it was worth the peril of the mûmak to have you come to me.”

Elladan looked at his brother, wryly. “Did you have to say that? You have called it back, the same one you challenged, by the broken tusk.”

The two whirled around. Not knowing where to run, they braced back to back, armed with spear and halberd. The war-elephant was charging at random. A red rag spangled with brass was speared on its blood-tipped tusk, telling the tale of its destruction among the Haradrim. High aboard the mûmak, they saw one figure clinging to the wreck of its tower, the fearless mahout. In silhouette, they saw the mahout stab a sword deep into the brain of the maddened beast. The creature dipped its head and bawled, a long failing note, the inside of its mouth red with blood, then fell to its knees with a thud that rocked the ground. The mahout leapt and rolled away as the mammoth beast was downed at last.

Elladan hefted the halberd, glaring at the mahout. “He would have slain you. If he stands again, he is mine!” Both watched as the mahout stood up beside the beast, still in reach of its twitching trunk. The mahout lifted off his broad helm and clasped it against his chest. He bowed to the mighty body, a strange salute. The twins heard him begin a wailing chant. By the note in his hoarse voice, they both realized the one who had mastered the war-elephant was weeping.

Elrohir touched Elladan’s arm, holding him back. “He would have slain me, yes. But the mûmak might have been to him as my steeds are to me. Let him be, unless he comes at us.”

Elladan looked at the spectacle before him, and mirrored his gesture, touching his brother’s arm in turn. “Horses first, instead?”

“If we can find them. Then to Aragorn,” Elrohir agreed. “And should we survive, maybe later – later, we can find that little time, of which you spoke.” They started off together. Each guarded the other as they sought their wayward steeds and Aragorn’s starred banner amidst the field of signs.

Story Notes:

- **Half a lifetime ago** = A reference to the Battle of Fornost, 1975 Third Age; at this battle in the North, there were Elves led by Glorfindel. It’s not mentioned that Elladan and Elrohir rode with them, but I’m assuming they did, for the purposes of this story. Tale of Years, *ROTK*.
- **The Northman** = The Corsair can’t tell that Elladan’s mostly Elvish.
- **Trying to perish like Húrin** = *Silmarillion* reference, a mortal warrior who made a desperate stand to allow a host to escape.
- **War-elephants** were highly unpredictable. My elephant information sources were the book *When Elephants Weep* and the following war-elephant URLs. <http://www.barca.fsnet.co.uk/elephants-war-greek.htm>; http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/islam/mongols/elephants.html

Morannon Road

Desperate acts, past, present, and future, occupy Elladan and Elrohir on the road to Mordor's Black Gate.

To be on watch was a sombre thing. Elladan and Elrohir stood like two grey statues in the night, their cloaks drawn close over their mail and armour. They looked about from a stony hill above Aragorn's camp, a watchpoint for those with the sharpest eyes and stoutest hearts. At times they turned to view as much as they could with their keen eyes, seeking torches or movement in the drear lands about.

From the high point, they could see the fell vales of the road through the lands that led to the Morannon Gate of Mordor, dim in the clouded darkness. Along the road that led to Mordor, darkness' forces had written foul runes, or hung high the bones and rotting bodies of fallen men of Gondor. That road passed through a dry land, a dead land, bramble-twined. The plants and very stones grew more troubled and perverted the closer they came to Mordor. Nearer, they could see Aragorn's company before them, diminished by a thousand men. Aragorn had dismissed the faint-hearted that day.

They stood beside each other. The twain were lovers, and such as valued secrecy. Not only were they both of male kind, they were also the closest of kin, being twins. On the ride from Minas Tirith to the Morannon, they had stolen time to set all unease to rest between them. For they knew the counsel of Aragorn's command, and that they likely rode to their death before the gates of Mordor. Much had been said and settled, though they stood quiet now. Both had agreed that they should not be distracted from their guarding duty with words of passion or wayward thoughts. Each found a certain peace in the other's wish to continue with that passion, despite the laws and guilt that barred their incest.

There was no sound in the lands about, not even a breeze to freshen the cold, stagnant air. One of the twain stood with a bow at the ready in his hand, and they both looked upwards at times, tense. They were waiting for the scream of a Nazgûl.

But they heard a crunching on the stony path behind them, and they turned to that instead. "One set of footsteps, but two voices," said Elladan, lowering the bow.

Elrohir stretched. "That would be Legolas and Gimli." The twins turned to meet the pair that came to meet them.

Legolas leapt up to the hilltop first, soundless and fluid. "Well met, sons of Elrond. Any luck shooting Nazgûl?"

"No. We have not matched your shot in the dark, Legolas," said Elrohir. "Our eyes are not as sharp as yours."

"You both have eyes sharper than mine," said Gimli, gruff and kindly. "It is for Legolas to look about when we watch, and I shall listen."

“Gimli has the ears of a fox!” said Legolas, and the Elf and Dwarf both laughed at a private joke.

Legolas grew serious as he stood beside Elladan. “We were told there were two points to guard from here; the sky, where the black beasts fly, and the road coming from Mordor. Is that the track below, going through the darkness?”

“Yes. You can see its light,” said Elladan. There was a dim, sickly glow to the corrupted flagstones stretching into the night.

“A fell road to watch,” Legolas murmured, “The road to Mandos in the past for my kinsmen. My grandfather Oropher perished near here, fighting Sauron’s forces....”

Elladan bowed his head respectfully. “I know the tale of Oropher.”

Legolas smiled. “They still tell it in Rivendell? Excellent.” He missed Elladan’s surprised expression, and spoke on. “It is good to know that others speak of how my grandsire rode against the Dark Lord in the Last Alliance, leading the van, and falling first and bravest.”

Elladan and Elrohir exchanged a look. “Ah. Yes. Great and tragic,” said Elladan.

“My father, Thranduil, has been grieved for his loss as long as I can remember. It was a great part of why I joined the Company of the Ring; the chance to avenge my forefather by helping to topple Sauron,” said Legolas.

Elladan turned to the Dwarf. “What of you, Master Gimli? Do you ride to avenge any of your kin?”

Gimli said but one name. “Thráin.” He stumped his axe handle on the ground, and glared at the pale road below them. “Thráin father of Thorin. He was my father’s liege. Sauron put him to torment in his dungeons.” It was likely that he had heard from Legolas how the twin sons of Elrond rode ever to avenge their mother’s own torment. With Dwarvish discretion, he said nothing, but he gave them a deep look, nodding slowly, solid with approval.

The twins bowed together to him. Elladan said, “We will all ride on to our revenge tomorrow. This night, we go to take what rest we can.” With that, Elladan and Elrohir left.

Their own ears were sharp enough to hear what Gimli said next to his friend. “Almost Dwarvish, those two. As we were saying before, you will help me braid up my hair one last time tomorrow? Good. If I fall for vengeance, I would make a handsome corpse, at least.”

Elladan glanced back as they walked down the hill, beyond their hearing. Their path went between some crabbed oak trees, their winter-dead leaves clinging to them like grey rags. “Handsome corpses.” Elrohir said, quietly. “We shall be lucky if we are, after we fall at the doors of Mordor.” Both twins had been at the counsel where Aragorn and Gandalf had admitted that their challenge against Mordor, while drawing the Eye of Sauron from wherever the Ringbearer roamed, was likely their doom. They

had agreed with their father's message, that the challenge was their path, and they had said they would not turn back.

Elladan stopped walking. "Interesting, is it not, how desperation makes us all the more mindful of the legends of the past."

"I was glad you did not tell Legolas what they say about Oropher in Rivendell," said Elrohir. "He would not care to hear what we were taught, that Oropher's rashness and defiance of Gil-Galad's command undermined the Elves at the Last Alliance."

"Who are we to say which version of an old tale is aright?" replied Elladan. "Our grandfather Eärendil – his errand sounded desperate unto madness, to sail over Sea and beseech the Valar. Our grandmother Elwing did strange deeds for love. She is praised, and we hear she had a good fate, but she abandoned our father as a babe, to keep the Silmaril from the Sons of Fëanor and go to Eärendil. So, do we say that Eärendil was a craven or a hero? Was Elwing cruel or wise?"

"Both, maybe. It was the saving of Middle-Earth," said Elrohir. "Your words make me think of our own tale. It might be said that you and I are ill-starred sinners." He put his hands on his brother's shoulders. "But I do not feel that way. You turned all the old tales into questions. It makes me ask what our tale shall be, in the end."

Elladan sighed. "Sometimes, I wish our tale was different. Not," he leaned in to whisper, "that we were never lovers; no, not that. I would change the sorrow of us being kin for that of meeting you late in life, a stranger, and mourning the lost time we might have had."

"That would not be our story, and we would not be ourselves," said Elrohir. Guarding their affection, he peered about. "Listen, if we are going to speak of this, let us get off this path. These sad oaks make a copse to our left." The pair slipped in between the trees and stones.

Elladan looked about at the grey-hung branches. They seemed long dead. "I have looked to the old tales all my days. Such tales were the only times I ever heard of desires like ours, kin for kin. Yet even in the tales of mortals, such couplings were always a time long ago and far away, shielding the listeners with that distance."

Elrohir said, with vehemence, "I don't give a toss for the old stories. None of them end well. Nor do I care what happened to anyone else. I'll tell you what I would change about our tale; I would give us some peace. Ever since we came together, death has haunted us. It haunts us now. This is the only honourable road, to fight against Sauron. But we know none of us will survive this mad feat." He drew back his hood, for he wore no helm.

Elladan saw that his brother's face was drawn, grime traced along his hard jawline, his hair pressed down and his braid hanging lank. Grief and love smote him. "You are wise, Elrohir. I do not think so, either," said Elladan, setting the bow and quiver he carried to one side. Then he remained looking down, abashed. "I have not been a good lover to you. I never gave you much peace."

"You give me the truth," said Elrohir, reaching out to clasp Elladan's hand. "It is not easier, but it is better, for who we are. And you let me have what I desired from you." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I always do the same thing. I am doing it again."

Elladan blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I ease up to you with touches, you let me, and we fall into lust without saying a word. As if it was not our idea, but some accident." Elrohir pulled his hand back. "See? I was doing it now. I know why, too; if I do not ask you in words, you will not refuse me with words. You called me a fool for my courage on the Pellenor, but that was nothing, nothing to what it took for me to ask you, that first time."

Elladan was quiet for a moment, unravelling this. "You are right that...the way you come to me...makes it easier. But I was ever holding back on speaking yes to you, not no."

"If I asked you now, would you say yes?" asked Elrohir. Before his brother could reply, he rattled on. "You probably think me base for asking. Yet we may never have the chance again. I know, we have not even a shield to shelter us, and six thousand men sleeping near..."

It was far more awkward to break the habit of years, to be asked; to be confronted with the choice. The open door for refusal gave a little honour to acceptance. It was enough for Elladan to say, with a relieved heart, "Yes. It is risky; and I will risk it with you." It was he who stepped up to his brother, lifted his arms and drew his lover close.

They had kissed briefly to reconcile, hidden in a tent on the Pellenor, but this was different. Here, they would dare all, and their mouths were desperate, thirsty, swallowing each other's groans of hunger. As they embraced, vambraces and sheaths clanked together, and shaken mail-rings tinkled. The sounds made Elrohir draw back with a curse, looking up. The watchers on the hill-top were distant; the camp was a ways away; but he was still wary. "Our gear makes too much noise. The quietest thing I can do is what I most want to do, anyway." Elrohir went to his knees and slid his hand beneath the split skirt of Elladan's chain-mail, up along his lover's thighs. "I want you inside me, I want to taste you, one last time." Kneeling close, he pressed his face against the hauberk, warmed by the body beneath it.

Elladan arched back, roused and shaken at the hand stroking between his legs. "I want the same from you. See here!" Elladan shifted the brooch of his cloak. Elrohir expected him to cast the garment to the ground. Instead, Elladan drew up the hood around his face, then pulled the generous cloak shut around his legs and his kneeling brother. As Elladan stood, Elrohir was shielded inside the bell of fabric.

"Marvellous," said Elrohir, laughing muffled. "If anyone comes on us, they will think us but a pair of catamites -"

"-- which is troublesome enough. At least you shall go unnamed," said Elladan.

Elrohir embraced him around his waist. The shielding cloak made it close and dark. It did not matter, for he knew the fastenings of Elladan's clothes as well as his own, even how to loose the curved steel plate shielding Elladan's crotch beneath the mail. Soon, he used one forearm to hold the mail-skirt up while he devoted himself to kissing and licking at Elladan's cock.

Elladan, with delicate caution, leaned forwards and braced himself against one of the stunted trees with one arm, arcing so that the cloak still fell to hide Elrohir. He had been armour-bound so long that it was a shock to feel hot breath against his loins, a firm, warm mouth taking in his shaft. Elrohir's tongue had not forgotten what his lover liked, sliding along his underside, flicking over one sensitive spot. He felt his cock harden. Knowing that he would not have to ignore the tight pleasure of it, that he would have the release he craved with the one he desired, seemed a gift beyond hope. His brother's name was on his lips, but he forced himself silent.

Elrohir paused and slid back to speak. "A moment. This alone rouses me, and my own codpiece..." Elladan heard buckles undone, then his brother's relieved sigh.

"No fear, I shall do this for you, soon, very soon," Elladan whispered. In response, Elrohir devoured him. Elladan's only thought after that was to urge himself towards coming, for the briefer their pleasure, the less their chance of being discovered. When he felt Elrohir's hand clasp in a tight ring around his cock's base, he came, bucking down and then leaning against the tree again, knees weak beneath their armour.

Elladan sank down beside his twin, knees crunching on the stony ground, and leaned forwards to kiss him. Elrohir rested his cheek against Elladan's. "Would that we had time for everything. But this will do," said Elrohir, standing.

There was one vulnerable moment, Elladan kneeling before his brother, before the cloak closed around him. Elladan felt that he needed no other refuge than that, even amidst the Morannon. He did as Elrohir had done, parting and lifting his brother's split mail-skirt with one arm to access the vulnerable flesh beneath it; this left his other hand free for caresses. When Elladan tongued the folded rose of Elrohir's foreskin, he felt a hand clasp the back of his head. He lingered on the cock-head before him for a long moment, saving the taste and feel in memory, aided by the dark. Then he took Elrohir's shaft down his throat and milked it with all the art he had.

By his fast breathing, and the heat of his skin, Elrohir was as intent on pleasure as Elladan had been. Soon, Elladan had the satisfaction of feeling his brother spend down his throat, deep enough to swallow with only the barest taste of the seed. The deed done, he regretted for a moment that he had been so fastidious; the salt taste had a clean note, worth lingering over.

Elladan felt the hand behind him shift to his shoulder, urging him up. "My turn to ask for a moment," he said, and replaced Elrohir's most

intimate armour. “There. Now orcs will have a hard path to unman you.” He stood, and adjusted his own gear as Elrohir smiled. When he was done, Elrohir held his arms out. There was no need for speech, not with how Elladan came to him, coming close slowly so their armour would not clash.

Still close together, Elladan spoke. “If we die, or are taken for torment, that is the end of us. But what if we survive this dreadful feint?”

Elrohir said, “I thought I was the one who asked questions.” He stood back after a last clench. “You have a good point, though. There has been little planning for a retreat from the Black Gate, or for any who might survive battle there.”

“I think that any who live ought to keep on fighting, even if Sauron regains the Ring. If open war is not possible, we may still harry and trouble Sauron’s agents, as we have these past centuries.” said Elladan. “Valar forfend – even if you fall, I would do so, for the both of us.”

“My shade would be glad of it. If you fall, I do the same.” Even discussing the worst, after what had gone between them, Elrohir’s eyes were less troubled. “If such comes to pass, the survivors should also send messengers to the North. Let us speak with Aragorn about this, in the morn.”

They left the refuge of the half-dead copse. When Elladan knelt to retrieve his bow and arrows, he felt a gnarled branch catch against his cloak and brushed it away roughly. The branch did not snap dry, but sprang back, wick beneath its grey bark, unexpectedly alive. Before he could mention this to Elrohir, his brother spoke. “Look to the West! The fumes are thinned. I can see a star.” They peered up together, and it was so, one star alone and faint amidst the mirk.

“It must be Eärendil’s star,” said Elrohir.

Elladan’s knowing eyes gauged its position in the sky. His loremaster’s mind was less than certain of that; it might be, and it might not. After looking up for a moment, he reached to clasp his lover’s hand. “Yes. It must,” he agreed.

Story Notes:

- **Story is set** during the ride from Minas Tirith to Mordor in the *ROTK* chapter, “The Black Gate Opens.”
- **Oropher** = Legolas’ grandfather. Oropher led a force of Wood-Elves of Mirkwood to the Last Alliance in the Second Age. Unwilling to follow the elvish leaders, he led his troops out to fight before the signal was given, and he and many of his host were killed. “The History of Galadriel and Celeborn,” *Unfinished Tales*.
- **Eärendil and Elwing** = The really short version: the grandparents of Elladan and Elrohir. They were both half-Elven and half-mortal. At the end of the First Age, Eärendil sailed over Sea to ask the Valar for help against evil. Elwing jumped into the Sea, carrying a potent

magical jewel, a Silmaril but abandoning her infant sons Elros and Elrond, to keep the jewel from someone trying to take it from her. Eärendil and Elwing managed to reunite and, after asking the Valar for help, Eärendil was set to sail the sky in a magical boat, carrying the Silmaril as a star. Sourced from *The Silmarillion*. Also referenced in Bilbo's song in the chapter "Many Meetings" of *FOTR*, "Eärendil was a mariner..."

Spring of Peace

The end of the War of the Ring is a mixed blessing for Elladan and Elrohir, but a blessing nonetheless. Also, the worst elf poet ever.

After the celebration to honour the Ring-Bearers ended, and they had the pleasure of bidding good-night not to Strider but to the King Elessar, Elladan and Elrohir went to wander the camp of the Field of Cormallen. There was still much cheer around many fires after the feasting and song of the day, but the two elf-kin went to none of them. Instead, in their own company, they began to put aside the honour and burden of being the sons of Elrond the Half-elven.

Away from the pavilions, Elrohir walked with a bit more swing in his step. "I love them all," he said, speaking in the Elvish language, "but I have had enough of other people for tonight." He clasped his twin lightly around the wrist, for but a moment.

Elladan brushed Elrohir's arm. "If this is any indication, the days to come will be full of pomp and glory, and the great Lay of Frodo of the Nine Fingers will be heard seventy-five more times. I must attend to its words, so that I will be able to sing it when we return to Imladris. Listen, there is a fine voice!"

The two brothers stopped and looked to the left. The small group of the Company of the Ring was separating for the night.

"Legolas, with the halflings," muttered Elrohir.

"To think we doubted them. Yet Frodo and Samwise did what I could not," said Elladan. Elrohir, not knowing what to say, clasped his brother's shoulder firmly. Elladan turned to him with a half-smile, keen to the irony of it all. "Well, I shall pay them homage with my pen, in days to come."

Elladan turned back to watch and listen intently while Legolas walked away from the Company singing, alone for once, tall and graceful. Elrohir burned as if he was in battle again, to see his hidden lover looking so intently at the only elf in the camp of thousands. They both listened to Legolas' song.

"In Eressëa, in Elvenhome that no man can discover,

Where the leaves fall not: land of my people for ever!"

And so singing Legolas went away down the hill.

Elladan winced. "Legolas must be the worst poet I have ever heard. Even the humblest of the halflings has a better grasp of meter!"

"You should add that to your list of complaints about him," said Elrohir, crossing his arms. "What else do you count?"

"Of all the vexing Elves to ride with us! He does not manage his ill-behaved horse; Arod can scarcely be held if he is not nearby. For that matter, he does not carry himself as a lord of his people should. He takes far

too many risks in battle. He should braid up his hair properly, as Gimli does and we do, instead of letting it fly half-free. And now his verses—“

“I knew it. You have had an eye for him ever since our march -- you look to him before you even say a word to me of the secrets we share,” said Elrohir. “Well, go to him. One unwed so long will not refuse you, I think. Let him take his wild wood-elf way with you!”

“Elrohir! Be quieter,” said Elladan, fearful that any might discern the passions the brothers had concealed. Shocked, he whispered, “Why this mood of yours?”

Elrohir muttered, “Exactly as I said.”

Elladan waited to hear what his twin added to this, but he had retreated into truculence. “You spin fancies out of the air. I find Legolas lacking in all the ways that you are surpassing,” said Elladan. “I can see why you might think me drawn to him. He is almost as good at killing orcs as you are. Almost, but not your match. Unless he torments the orcs with his poems as well as his knives.”

Elrohir smiled grudgingly at his twin’s over-smooth words. But he did not protest when Elladan said, “Let us walk in these woods ourselves; in the other direction, of course, just us alone.”

They left the bounds of the camp to stride along the banks of the river Anduin. Elrohir did not talk, but he picked out a path with Elladan over the moist ground. Beeches and oaks spread their boughs out over the water’s edge, hung with the enameled green leaves of early spring, fine as a jeweler’s work. The ferns of Ithilien softened the forest floor. Elladan breathed in the scents of wood and water. After weeks of crowded camps, this shared solitude reminded him of the journeys when they turned to each other in the wilds. Memories stirred him.

They walked until, looking back, all the camp’s bonfires were shrunk to pinpoints along the river-meads. No lamp or campfire disturbed the moonlight in the vernal wood around them. Only the rustle of a sharp-eared vixen darting through the ferns and saplings, and the music of the running river, could be heard.

Elrohir finally broke his soldier’s stance and stretched. “Legolas sang of Eressëa, where trees and grass do not die. Do you know if there are seasons there?” he asked, as if he regretted his earlier outburst.

“I hear that it is ever-spring, without winter or fading. But is it as beautiful as this forest, where all dies, and yet is renewed? Does the thought of taking ship over Sea trouble you?” said Elladan, gently.

“In part. Let us not talk about that. We can go on all night.” Elrohir collected himself. “There are other things. Our oath to our mother’s honour is fulfilled. The wild lands will soon be cleansed of evil. We have victory and revenge beyond our hope.”

Elladan listened.

"It will be hard, getting used to peace, after we fought for more than five hundred years. Everything will be different."

Elladan nodded.

Elrohir fiercely clenched Elladan's arms. "Do you still want me? Are you going to leave me?"

"How can you ask that, after all we have endured? Just because I look twice at a fair singer--"

"Legolas is not why I say it. You pledged yourself to me again when we expected to fall in battle. Now, with the great victory, we are bound together no longer by the oath we swore. You may do as you please; your path is free!"

Elladan said, softly, "If one of the Elves looked in my eyes to judge me as a lover, it would be seen that my heart was given out of my keeping."

"But you still shake with guilt in my arms. I can feel it take you," cried Elrohir.

Elladan bit back dark thoughts, thinking to spare Elrohir by saying only, "Because, I suppose, I still feel guilty."

"You see? It was hard enough for you when everyone said the sons of Elrond ride out on errantry, and thus do not marry. We have lost the shield of war that hid our trysts. Why shouldn't you seek another? Someone you could stand by in company, who you could embrace without shame?" said Elrohir.

"There is no other for me. I care for you, as I hate my mind's dismay that shadows you. And that may drive you from me, in the end." Elladan looked away.

Elrohir released his brother. "Forgive me. I should hearken to you better, to try and heal your spirit, instead of taunting you," he said.

"That is not your part, kind one. I must reach what I can of that peace myself, if it is to be found. And if it is not, I surrender a peaceful mind in ransom for my love." Even as Elladan drew up straighter, he saw Elrohir's unhappiness and forced himself to take a lighter tone.

"You assume that peace means people will pay us heed. We are but a small part of the great tale. Chaos will sweep the Elves in the time to come. Once we return to Imladris, who will mind what we do? Take Legolas for an example. Normally, I would be wary of him, and what he might discern. But he is so stricken by the sea-longing that he would not notice if we grew dwarf-beards, let alone if we kissed."

Elrohir laughed at that, then returned to the simplest thing his brother had said. "You say you won't leave me."

"Shall I swear a new oath to that?" Elladan whispered. He reached for Elrohir. "Thrice beloved! How glad I have been in our triumph that we are brothers and none look askance at me cleaving to your side. I could not have borne to hide all of my heart. Yes, the last time we embraced, for but

stolen minutes, we thought we would die on the evil field of the Morannon. But we live in triumph, in a new year, and I would love.”

“I have not heard you speak so since the last battle,” said Elrohir.

“With this strange victory, do you wonder? But I am sorry. Once we left the camp for the ease of the free paths, I knew I should have no peace until you took me.”

Long loves are based on many things; forgiveness, patience, shared desire. Elrohir’s reply was warm with all three. “That makes two of us, then. Let us find some dry ground.” They walked under the trees until they came to a dell that must have mingled sun and shade in the day, for it was floored with a mix of grass and bracken-fern.

After the fear of bereavement, familiar things about each other stood out as even more beloved. Elrohir smiled as he felt his braid undone so that Elladan might run his face luxuriously through the long, dark hair. Elladan felt a pang at the click of Elrohir undoing his sword-belt. Watching each other, they undressed and put their worn gear aside, until nothing was between them.

In the two tall warriors of mingled blood, the physical elegance of the elves was earthed in human-touched handsomeness. Each found the other’s beauty a spur to desire, and to shame as well. Their mirrored bodies made it undeniable that they were kin. They looked at each other, silvered and darkened in the moonlight and leaf-shadows. It was a sweet and sombre moment, threaded with a sense of ritual; the first time they had stood unclad out of doors since winter came down, the first embrace of the time to come.

They drew together, at first holding each other balanced, and then to kiss until they could barely breathe. The fern and sward were soft enough beneath their feet that they did not bother to spread their cloaks upon the ground when they stretched out, side close by side. They alternated deep, probing kisses with meeting each other’s grey eyes, all while their bodies sought to cleave together on every plane. Elladan moved back a touch. He moved his arm down and cupped his battered sword-hand around both their hardening cocks, pressing them together lightly. Elrohir closed the circle with his own hand, and they both gasped at the unified caress.

“Ah, Elrohir. I can never let go with another lover as I can with you.”

“That I believe. It took so long for you to lay down your all your guards with me, even after we came together,” said Elrohir.

“No other could have coaxed me to it,” said Elladan.

“No-one else can love you like I do. Let me coax you again.”

The two lovers and wanderers were prepared. Elrohir carried a metal flask of oil among the gear on his belt, finer stuff than it needed to be for the care of leather and metal gear. He lingered over applying the cool, heavy liquid to each of them, oiling his own cock, stroking into sensitive niches so that he might take Elladan smoothly. With the ease of practice, they were

soon locked together, Elladan lying on his back, tilted and turned so that Elrohir could take him face to face.

It was too good for Elrohir to be sliding inside his lover again. Life and lust close to mastered him, and he almost came. To give himself pause, Elrohir stopped and said, "Speak to me, Elladan."

Elladan gave him a fevered look. "I shall speak all you like if you start moving again. Give it to me, please!"

"You want it," said Elrohir.

"Yes, I have been wanton for you, feeling my body seethe. Such a strange lust it is, to yearn to be taken, to be undone by one man's hands. And I will deal the same to you later! We shall have every night for love, now that peace is come."

"Sweet thoughts, but you think too much," said Elrohir, and began to move inside him again, faster.

Elladan moaned and shifted, angling his hips higher. "I shall be lost if you keep doing that, fast and fleet. I'll spend all over both of us. Do you want that?"

"Yes, do it, do it now!"

Elladan shook his head from side to side and writhed out his release, then fell still, breathing hard. This was the moment Elrohir loved, watching his twin's face go blank with bliss, feeling his muscles loosen. Elrohir took the disarmed elf-man beneath him harder now, bearing him down, yet not wishing to pain him. Elladan made wordless gasps of assent. Elrohir was called on beyond enduring by the small sounds, and came, feeling his own heat flood back against him inside Elladan. They stayed pinned together and rapt for a long moment.

"Why am I always the one besmirched after we love? Twice this time," Elladan said.

"Because you like it," Elrohir whispered, and they shivered together.

Elrohir withdrew, and they entwined themselves more comfortably. Both had leaves and bracken fronds in their hair and dotted against their skins. Fresh bracken and the river were waiting, if they wished to be clean. They stayed where they were.

Elladan felt the sweat and other fluids cooling on his body. Had it never occurred to Elrohir how closely they were bound by their shared deeds? They had been lovers many lives of men. He felt his passions marred beyond redemption: resigned to their incest, and freed to gladness by that resignation. Who else could compare to Elrohir's fierce tenderness? Who else could he trust so deeply? With Elrohir, he shared secrets and forgiveness beyond imagining, both for the acts and denials of lust, and for hearing the call of the deepest evil. He turned his face against his twin's shoulder.

Elrohir felt his brother relaxed in his arms, sharing his body's warmth and sated passion. Innocent of irony, he thanked the Valar for the blessing

that Elladan seemed freer from his mind's shadow for one night, speaking such loving words to him. Did they have to take turns lamenting the strange chance of their fate? Or might this be Elladan's love in a time of peace? It would be a brief time, for their choice awaited, to take ship or take mortality. Elrohir sighed; he had grown more pensive through their ill-starred love, just as Elladan had become earthier. But he knew how to cheer himself up. "Wake up, Elladan," he said.

"I am awake. Not very, but I am."

"To show you there are no hard feelings, I will ask Legolas to give us a poem tomorrow. What do you say?" Elrohir asked.

"Ai, no! Meter aside, what the fellow does to rhyme--"

Elrohir settled back with a smile.

Story Notes:

- *"In Eressëa, in Elvenhome that no man can discover, Where the leaves fall not: land of my people for ever!"* These lines are in the chapter "The Field of Cormallen," *ROTK* as being sung by Legolas in that scene. I consider the poem they come from the worst in the book. Is Legolas' bad poetry why he got sent on the quest? I always wondered.
- **Stricken by the sea-longing** = In *ROTK*, Legolas was struck with a great desire to leave Middle-Earth and go to Eressëa.
- **In a new year** = The Elves' New Year is April 6th, two days before this story takes place, April 8th of 3019

Summer Storm

One of the Wise confronts Elladan and Elrohir about their lawless passion.

At the wedding of Arwen, in some oversight of protocol, the twins Elladan and Elrohir were seated beside each other. Many eyes were drawn to them, for they were almost identical in face and form, and new kin by marriage to the King of Gondor and Arnor. Arwen's handsome brothers looked well suited for such an elevation, dressed in fine garments brought for them from Rivendell. Elrohir wore the deep blue and silver of Elrond's house, and Elladan had donned sage grey-green, embroidered with designs of birch leaves and runes.

The Lord of Dol Amroth, seated across from the brothers, had become fond of them as they all journeyed and fought by Aragorn's side. "Now that your sister is wedded, surely you two fine fellows will be next to be married," he said to them, in a lull between toasts and minstrel-songs.

Elrohir's eyes flicked over his brother, and then he grinned broadly. "That is a good jest, my lord! Our elven-ladies are so fair that I cannot decide. Look at all the beauties here and tell me if you could set one above another!" Laughter spread out around them, and more turned to listen.

"And you, Elladan?" asked Dol Amroth.

"To wed is no light thing. What, truly, is marriage? I would choose well when my choice is made," said Elladan, with an inward smile. "Give me your counsel, lord; what makes the best of marriages?"

Dol Amroth had not spoken for more than a minute before he was interrupted by another, who loudly proclaimed his thought on the best of marriages. The debate span up and down the table, and had no sign of ending soon. In ten minutes, only one person at the high table besides Elladan and Elrohir remembered the question that began the heated converse. And that one looked sadly at the pair.

Arwen and her twin brothers were considered the youngest lords and lady of the High Elves, though they had both human and elvish blood. They were all children of Galadriel's own daughter, Celebrían. Galadriel was the eldest noble of the High Elves who remained. She was done with counsel for Arwen's choice to wed a mortal man, a choice that she could approve despite its rarity among the Elves. Elrohir and Elladan were another matter.

Galadriel noted that the twins often fell into the same expression when listening, or made similar gestures, even speaking together sometimes. She remembered when this had not been so. They had been so unlike one another that it had been thought that, like Elrond and Elros before them, one would choose the life of the Elves while the other would choose mortality. Neither had ever spoken of their choice, and it was clear that they would choose together, now. Galadriel hoped that it was she alone who knew the reason. Her Mirror had shown her many things,

bidden and unbidden. It had been a heavy day when it was revealed to her that Elladan and Elrohir were lovers.

The two together were united in a near-impenetrable leaguer, using all their warrior wiles in the constant battle to practice desire in secrecy. Now, the hour was come for her to take up her deferred duty as the eldest of their kin, to speak to the twins. And she would need to break that leaguer and talk to each alone, that she might learn their true thought and hearts. She watched them laughing and bantering at the table of celebration. Not tonight. But soon.



Three evenings after the wedding brought the first darkened weather Gondor had seen for a week: clouds of rain out of the West. The guests visiting for the nuptials drew close together that night, away from the balconies where the downpour blew along in sheets. Many guests were missing, and the evening declined into informality after Aragorn and Arwen retired early.

Elrohir was laughing with a few of the elves of Lórien when the elves left off their mirth and became dutiful. He looked behind him and saw the Lady Galadriel there, patient as any humble maiden.

“Greetings to you, our Lady,” said one of the other elves.

“Greetings, grandmother,” Elrohir smiled.

“Greetings to all. Your pardon, but I would speak with my daughter’s son. Elrohir?”

Elrohir went with her, his unease at her coolness growing as they approached a courtyard, the Court of the Fountain. In the rain, the fountain’s playing was beaten down, and a white sapling swayed beneath the wind and weather. A cloistered walkway encircled the courtyard, arched and roofed with stone. As Galadriel drew him to a benched niche at one corner of the covered path, Elrohir felt that this conversation would bring him as little joy as the fountain felt, hammered by the rain.

“Why do you wish to speak to me so? Might we not have spoken in the hall?” Elrohir looked at her cautiously.

“I have always admired your directness, Elrohir. You are truly my daughter’s son, as fearless and daring as she,” said Galadriel.

“Is it about my mother?” he asked.

“In a way. It is because of her that I speak to you now. Will you go to the West, as I do, to where Celebrian waits?”

Elrohir settled back into the bench with relief. “Elladan and I are still discussing this. It is not an easy choice.”

“Do you not hear the sea-call?” Galadriel’s voice was soft; Elrohir had to lean closer to hear. “Or do you hesitate because you and Elladan are lovers as well as brothers?”

Elrohir's warm expression was swept away in an instant by a soldier's grimness when faced by his foe. "How came you by this knowledge? How do you know it is true, and not a lie of malice?"

"My scrying is my own," she said, eyes glinting at the change in him. "And it is as true as the fact that you sit by me now, with fear in your heart."

Elrohir was aghast. Elladan had set wards of elvish lore around the two of them, to guard their secrecy against chance and misfortune, and the wards had served, it seemed. But if any might pierce such wards, it was Galadriel. At least he was alone, and might speak as seemed best to him. "It was naught of Elladan's will. Let your wrath fall upon me, for I went to him first, and persuaded him to this."

"I cannot believe that Elrond would not have shared with you the laws of our people," said Galadriel.

"He did. I knew that such a thing was against them," Elrohir said, very matter-of-fact.

Galadriel took a deep breath, and spoke very slowly to still her rising anger at such willfulness. "If you knew such deeds were ill, then why did you seek to do them? What in Arda was your thought? Did you work your will with force?"

"No!" Elrohir cried, and Galadriel saw his hard expression fall away. "I would never hurt him! I told him – only how I ..." He paused and collected himself. "I knew it was not right to turn to him. Yet it felt like I would have been turning from love itself had I not spoken to him. I have known enough of others to know that I cannot love them. I might have gone on so, living a false life. My thought was that if I asked and he refused, then my heart would crack. But I would know his answer at least, and I would be more free."

Galadriel was silent, so Elrohir continued. "We have done what we have done; there is no denying it. Still, as things are, we hurt no-one but ourselves. And now our honour is in your hands." He saw that she listened, yet looked away; he turned and saw Elladan stiffly approaching along the cloister.

"Well met, grandmother. A star shines on the hour of our meeting," Elladan said when he drew up to them, bowing formally. He looked at Galadriel, perplexed. In the hall, Elladan had felt a pang of tearing fear, and sought swiftly for his brother. Yet there seemed to be nothing there to cause such distress.

Galadriel stood, dismayed. "Well met, Elladan son of Elrond."

"She *knows*," Elrohir said. Elladan took a step back, and the stone carvings of the cloister had more expression than he did at that moment.

"Yes," said Galadriel. "And I would speak to Elladan now, and alone."

"I do not wish to leave a counsel that concerns me so closely," said Elrohir, standing beside his brother.

Galadriel spoke sternly. "I will trust the truth of what you said before, Elrohir, if you let me have this wish. If Elladan cannot speak freely to me, what does that say about you?"

"Then I shall go. No-one shall ever say that I lie." Elrohir bowed in turn, and walked away, looking back at Elladan until he left the courtyard.

When Elrohir was out of sight, Elladan spoke, and his voice was tight and cold. "What have you said to Elrohir? Can you not let us be? Why is this any of your concern, lady?"

"This matter concerns me for the sake of your mother, and myself. Do you wish to say anything to me?"

"This was no fault of Elrohir's. I am certain I drew him to me. He was too pure to come to wish such an...alliance... alone."

Galadriel raised an eyebrow. "This is not what Elrohir says. He claims he came to you: I believe 'persuaded' was his word for his approach."

"Lady, that is also true. Yet twins such as we are not free spirits. Perhaps it was my own long thinking about this that put it into his heart. It is not a darkness on any other of our house, but a shadow of our own. There have been no others like us."

"And why do you speak so certainly?" she asked, interested to see that his thoughts ran alongside her own.

"Either such a thing was thought so forbidden that none of the Eldar recorded it, if it came to pass. Or, as the sin of Maeglin was credited, the way our hearts are turned is a late stroke of the Curse of Mandos. The Disposessed we shall be forever!" Elladan seemed strangely alight as he met the challenge he had awaited for so long. "You may query me all night. If there is any dark lore about the Eldar, I know it, having sought at first to vindicate our love, and then to try and escape further shadow. Why do you think we did not go with the Company of the Ring?"

"I felt the draw of Sauron's ruling Ring when it came to Rivendell, borne by the halfling. And well did the tool of Sauron know what to promise me; order among Elves and Men, new laws, redemption... Elrohir and I took counsel and I shared what I had learned of this thing. It was best not to be tempted further. I said it was not my place to go, and Elrohir that he would not venture without me. While the Ring remained in Rivendell, we rode our long errand to bring tidings to you in Lórien. And we went to the war only when the Ring was beyond our reach."

Galadriel remained quiet, and her thought could not be read from her face. Elladan slumped down on one of the stone benches, bewildered by her silence. "Now you know all ill of me, incest and call to evil, and how low I have been brought. Go on and scorn me! I will not deny your words."

She reached out and touched both of his shoulders with the fingertips of her white hands. With the worst said, he did not turn aside from her

spirit-deep look, finding there not wrath nor disgust, but sadness and kinship undiminished.

"Bring your brother," she said, softly. "I would speak to both of you." Elladan reeled up from the stone seat. "Please bring him," she repeated, and Elladan left, walking like one reprieved from being slain.

Galadriel sank down, exactly where he had sat, and leaned back to the wall behind the bench. The Mirror had shown her the twins' passion, but not the peril of which Elladan had spoken. As Elrohir had sought to make Elladan blameless of their desire, so too did she perceive that Elladan tried to distance Elrohir from the lust of the Ring. The Ring gave power according to the bearers' stature. How mighty would the sons of Elrond have been, had they taken it up? If they had not loved, would they have not been tempted, or would they have not taken their saving counsel?

When at last the brothers returned, Galadriel was standing again. None of them spoke for a time. The twins saw her slender and stern, her expression fuelled with unknowable emotions. For all the twins' grimness, Galadriel saw in them still the children who had been her delight, and the warriors who had brought her pride. Looking on them, hardened by whatever counsel they had taken in their brief absence, she was reminded of many Elves she had seen in the past bound to a fate or an oath, beyond any advising. *And these*, she sighed to herself, *I must counsel in turn*.

"Children of my daughter," spoke Galadriel. "I have had both joy and grief of you, and yet the grief has been the greater. Long have I sorrowed on your behalf. I would not go from you in anger, kinsmen who I meet seldom. I have only one counsel for you."

They waited, straight-backed and clear-eyed for all their dread.

"Take ship and go over Sea. Go to the West! Do not bereave your mother three times, of all of her children. Seek the judgement of the Valar, which you cannot elude, by short road or long. For they do the will of Eru, the One."

"But there are none like us among the Elves," said Elrohir.

"And of the kin of Men?" Galadriel replied. "Legend says that the souls of Túrin and Nienor, siblings wed unknowing of their kinship, were forgiven by the Valar. For a dark fate was brought on them by a curse; and they loved each other. All your family's fates are strange. It would seem to be the world's way of saying that there should be no more half-elven."

The twins each took a step back at these troubling words. "Will you speak to others of this?" asked Elladan.

"Not if there is no need," said Galadriel.

Elrohir and Elladan looked at each other, not able to discern if this was promise or threat, waiting for the other to speak. At last, Elladan said, "We will bide and choose as seems well to us."

"Yes," Elrohir said, with a defiant glance at Galadriel. "Shall we go?"

"Is there aught else you would say to us, grandmother?" asked Elladan.

She smiled at that, and shook her head. "Namárië."

Galadriel watched them go, then walked out into the open courtyard. She stood long, uncaring of the rain, beside the White Tree of Gondor, the sapling of Nimloth; symbol of a noble line unfailing, of love and high things enduring beyond hope. Its leaves were sleeked down and its flowers shaken by the curtains of rain, but better that the tree should quiver in the storm that nourished it, than that it perish in drought undisturbed.



Once they left the courtyard, the brothers went directly back to the house of Dol Amroth, where they abode as guests. They had no cloaks against the rain, and their fine garments were soaked to their skin. When they arrived at their suite of chambers, without speaking one locked the door, and the other tested that the small mullioned windows were closed and shuttered. A fire had been lit against the chill of the summer rain. They lay their sodden clothes out before it, placing their light shoes on the hearth. Near to naked, they sat on the bench in front of the fire, but at opposite ends, the wet clothes between them.

"A drink?" asked Elladan. Elrohir nodded, and his brother poured out two cups of wine, unmixed with water. Both downed the wine in swift draughts, and Elladan refilled for them.

Elrohir began to drink again, then lowered his cup. He said, "We used to be better than this. There was no need for us to be besotted when we first turned to each other." Elladan put his cup down, and listened as Elrohir spoke further. "With all that has come to pass, and our kinswoman's words, I do not regret that I let you know how I loved you. Desired you. But I have tried to keep you bound to me, never speaking of the wrong we do, and soothing you when you doubted. And this I now rue."

Elladan looked wondering at his brother. "Elrohir. To hear you speak so, almost I feel as if you stand beside me for the first time. My own first thought on hearing such words from you was -- to reassure, as you did for me many a time." He stood and rearranged the garments drying between them, so that he might sit by Elrohir. In the space that remained between them, the air was alive with the yearning to touch, but they held back.

"What do you think of her advising us? I know you are more inclined to mortality," Elladan said.

"All these fine Men pass from us, and so too will our dear sister, and our friend for long years, Aragorn," said Elrohir. "It would be an honor and a mystery revealed to join them. Yet our mother..."

"Yes," said Elladan. "I had thought that there was no hope for us in the West, although I yearned to see it. Would Galadriel bid us to go hence to our destruction? I think not. She is our kinswoman."

Elrohir's face was grim. "She is Galadriel. This I marvel at: that she did not tell us to cease what is between us."

"She is very wise not to waste breath with what I would not heed. I did not cleave to you all these years to abandon you at the last," said Elladan, clenching a fist.

Elrohir covered his twin's knotted hand with his own. "My heart says the same. You are mine. No, you are the other half of me."

"And you, the riven part of me." Elladan said, then shook his head. "We sound like madmen."

Elrohir looked at him anxiously. "Do not mad ones think and feel that their madness is right? It chills me. For so feels my love for you, in spite of everything."

"What everything? It was you yourself who said to me once that our love mattered little, affecting us alone if we stayed secret," asked Elladan.

Elrohir spoke slowly. "I thought of this while you spoke with our grandmother. I have loved others less through my passion for you. You have been all to me. My friendships have diminished, and I speak less to our father and sister. Now I am reminded of our mother, whom I would grieve to be spared from judgment. And that seems deeply false, after we have fought to avenge her for so long."

"You speak true." Elladan looked into the fire, thinking. "We cannot undo what we have done in the past. But we might make amends with others in the time to come, our family and our folk, Elves and Dunedain. If we do as well as we might in all other things, we can say to the highest ones that though we might be outlawed and dishonoured, our deeds are our own, sprung from our own strangeness, and that we sought to do naught else ill."

"I would stand beside you as you said that," said Elrohir.

As they spoke, they had moved closer, so that they were now joined down one side and clasping one hand. Together, they leaned in to embrace, hesitantly at first, then with a passionate fury, restrained only in its quiet. The breathless silence they kept was broken briefly when they pushed the bench well out of their way, to have plenty of room on the floor before the fire.



Next day, the concourse of guests came together again. Elladan and Elrohir arrived very late. Galadriel marked that their leaguer seemed closer than ever; their very stride was in rhythm. After their matched bow of courtesy to the company, they did not greet her, nor any others.

Instead, they walked to join Elrond where he sat, near a window full of the brightness of the day. Galadriel could hear what one of them said to him. "Father, we would speak to you about venturing over Sea. Would there be a way that we may dwell for a time in Middle-Earth after you take the great journey, and yet still follow after? So that we might spend more

years with our sister?” It was Elrohir who spoke, she noted. And Elrohir, she had seen last night, did not lie.

Story Notes:

- **The sin of Maeglin** – In *The Silmarillion*, an elf named Maeglin is drawn into treachery by his incestuous desire for his cousin. This whole sorry state of affairs is blamed on the Curse of Mandos that was placed on the High Elves. Maeglin happens to be Elladan and Elrohir’s great-great uncle.
- **Túrin and Nienor** – Yet more *Silmarillion* incest, a human brother and sister who married each other without knowing they were brother and sister. Túrin and Nienor also happen to be Elladan and Elrohir’s great-great uncle and aunt. The judgment upon their souls is mentioned in footnote #17 in “The Problem of Ros” in *The Peoples of Middle-Earth*. “The (Valar) had mercy on their unhappy fate.” Really, really obscure, sorry.
- **And yet still follow after** – In *ROTK*, Appendix A, “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen,” it is stated that the children of Elrond live with the life of the Eldar while Elrond remains in Middle-Earth, and that when he departs, they have the choice to go with him or become mortal.

Through Words

In the peace of Minas Tirith, embassies are given, princedoms are denied, and Elladan and Elrohir go to the Tower of Ecthelion with a message for a third party.

The Citadel of Minas Tirith was centered around corridors of white and dark stone, great hall arching into great hall. But beside the proud chambers were smaller, warmer rooms, lined in wood and woven hangings, for common duties and the work of clerks. Aragorn had stolen some time to meet in one of those smaller rooms with two visitors from outside the city. He perched on a clerk's stool, his rich red cloak trailing on the floor, to speak fondly with his guests. Both guests were clad in nondescript cloaks to give them a little peace as they walked around the city. Their handsome elvish faces drew a great deal of attention, for they were the twin brothers of Gondor's new Queen.

"Of all the buildings you were shown today, I believe the third one will be the best to use as an embassy for the Elves. What do you think?" said Aragorn. Aragorn's foster-brothers, Elladan and Elrohir, nodded.

"I don't see why you even offered the other two, to be honest. The last we saw is the only one with decent stables," said Elrohir. Elladan gave him a disapproving glance, but Aragorn only smiled.

"I will miss you two when you return north," said Aragorn. "Scarcely anyone dares to correct me in these days, save Mithrandir."

Elladan quipped, "We will be sure to tell Arwen that before we leave – she will fill that gap for you." The three laughed together, and Elladan spoke on. "But Legolas came with us, and his opinion should weigh more than ours in this. He will likely be sending more of his folk to this embassy than we of Rivendell."

"Yes, I will speak of this with him as well. But I wished to talk to you two alone, after this morning's councils," said Aragorn.

The twins both braced themselves. The morning had seen the White Council sit and speak for the last time. Elrohir had joined his brother at the council. With the wizards and many Elves leaving Middle-Earth, such a counsel would never be held again. Many matters that concerned all Middle-Earth had been decided. They had said little. It was Aragorn's beginning, and their father's last hour to wield great lordship. But Galadriel's presence had silenced them the most; she alone knew that the twin brothers were lovers. Ever since she had told them that she knew, they had been waiting for someone else to confront them.

Aragorn's words made them abashed at their fears. "I wished to thank you. You were ever there for me, even when I told you I loved your sister."

The brothers answered at the same moment. "Aragorn! How could we do otherwise?" said one, and "We told you then it made no difference to us," said the other.

"Perhaps, but it means something to have these things said. All eyes turn to Elrond's grief, but I know what Arwen is to you," Aragorn said.

Elladan half-bowed as he sat. "We love Arwen dearly, and she is all our honour. And she could not have found a better one to love than you, in all the long years of our lives." Elrohir nodded, and their grey eyes were warm.

Aragorn relaxed under that warm regard. "I also wished to say that you will have every honour in my courts, even though you are not made princes of Arnor."

Elrohir waved the possibility away. "Brother-in-law, there will be plenty of lords for the North without us. You have all the folk of the Dúnedain to ennoble."

"That will bring enough problems. Galadriel was right when she said today it was not fitting that elf-lords be counted lords of mortals." Elladan noted this with his wry smile. He admired the argument Galadriel had raised, well aware that this noble-sounding statement would bar the incestuous brothers from a role in Aragorn's realm. She had not bid the twins separate, but her actions showed what she felt about their being lovers.

"So you will join your fate to the elves - you have chosen," said Aragorn.

"We know what our choice will be. All that remains is to speak it; that is how the choice is sealed, through words," said Elladan.

Elrohir said, "Our father said he spoke to Eonwë, the herald of the Valar. Of course, Eonwë's not here right now! But now that we know, should we do it tonight, Elladan, do you think? It feels right to me." Elladan nodded. As guarded as they remained with Aragorn, they spoke more freely before him than any other in Minas Tirith.

"I am sure that Mithrandir would hearken to your choice," Aragorn noted.

The twins shook their heads together. Elladan spoke again. "It is different for each of us who must choose their doom. Arwen's fate was sealed when she spoke her wedding vows to you. We have our own way in mind."

Elrohir asked, "Is there anywhere blessed to the Valar in this city, any hallow we might go to this night?"

"The tombs of Rath Dinen were sacred, but they are much damaged. Nor is a place of mortal death the best for your task. The Court of the Fountain, where the White Tree grows, is very blessed."

Neither of the twins seemed enthused at this, remembering Galadriel's words with them in that cloister. "Perhaps somewhere more private?" asked Elladan.

Aragorn smiled at them. "More Elvish, you mean. Those are the chief hallows within the city walls...no, there is one more. The Tower of Ethelion. There is a chamber at its pinnacle. It is held sacred because those with the keenest eyes can see a glimpse of the western sea from there."

Elladan frowned. "I heard that the perished Steward strove mind to mind with Sauron there. And little good it did him."

"Yes, and he slew himself in the hallow of Rath Dínen," said Aragorn. "And you yourself saw the Court of the Fountain before the White Tree was replanted. Hallows fade and are renewed, here, for this is a mortal city." Elladan looked thoughtful at this.

"Well, I think it will do," said Elrohir.

They were all silent for a moment. Aragorn bowed his head in an elvish gesture of acceptance and regret. "It seems that you have made your choice to balance Arwen's, sparing Elrond the loss of all his children. I regret that your free choice was taken from you by our wedding."

The twins stood up with one mind. "Arwen's choice had less to do with our decision than you might think," Elladan said.

Elrohir added, "You of all folk should never regret whom you love."

"That is good to hear, my kinsmen." The three embraced.

Elrohir turned his head and looked at how the light fell. "Well, we could tell you all into the next day how great and good you are, and how fair Minas Tirith is, and all our wishes for you. But the sun will be down soon, and I fain would watch the stars rise from this tower. Tomorrow is our last night here, so if we go to the Tower, tonight is best." They made their farewells and parted.

When they reached the outdoors path to the Tower, Elrohir slumped with relief. "Never does the lie of not telling others about us burn me as much as when we talk to Aragorn. I wish I knew why. What are you looking at?"

"You can see the city beneath us from here." Elrohir turned and saw his brother transfixed by the streetscape. "I never felt much like a mortal until we came to the White City. It is like an old tale come to life and made fair, full of streets to explore, everywhere something new from mortals' minds. I could live here all my days, even were they short."

Elrohir said, "If you could be pried out of their archives and bookbinders once in a while, I would be glad to spend those days with you. But we have our duty in the North, to care for Rivendell while it lasts. I did not wish to make Aragorn feel any worse by telling him that he was right, in part, about why we choose as we do." He put his hand on Elladan's shoulder. They drank in the warmth and hope of the city, watching the streets being lighted, basking for a time in what they were about to lose.

When the sun glimmered nearly-set over the plains below, they went to the height where the Tower waited.

The Tower of Ecthelion was a marvel, fifty fathoms high in the whitest granite, casting its dusk-shadow dark and long over the pathway behind it. The brethren walked along its path, then up the six steps to the tower's double doors. With measured ceremony, each pressed on one half of the door, that they might open it together.

The door did not budge.

They looked at each other; then Elladan pressed harder on his side, while Elrohir rattled the handle on his. "Locked," he said.

"Well, this is a fine pass. Why in Arda do they lock it?" Elladan groused.

"So unhappy folk don't throw themselves from the tower's windows." The twins turned about. "Had a few toss themselves over during the siege." They were being addressed by a man with a creased round face, going silvery-bald, clad in the livery of the White Tree. They had gone by him a minute past on the tower's path. "What d'you fellows want?"

Elladan cast back the hood of his cloak, as did Elrohir. The man's expression changed, eyes widening with wonder. All the City knew of the handsome twin brothers of their Queen, like she of mingled elvish and mortal blood. "You're lucky to catch me here, my lords. Just lit a lantern at the top, I did. Command of the King himself," he added, proudly.

"Then you have the key, and can let us in," said Elrohir. "We would climb the tower for a time."

"If my lords want. I will wait here until you come down." The twins both began to say it was not needful, but the man said, "Not supposed to be left unlocked, it's not – they'd have my tabard if someone took a fancy to chuck themselves off the top tonight." He straightened as he placed a hand on the White Tree brodered across his tabard.

"Who'd want to slay themselves in these times, when all goes well?" asked Elrohir.

The man quickly glanced west, then said, "Don't ask such questions, m'lord; it's bad luck to find the answer to that."

Elladan and Elrohir looked at each other. Elrohir's eyes flicked between the man and Elladan, and Elladan nodded, almost imperceptibly. Elladan turned to the lugubrious guard and said, "We shall praise your conscientiousness to the King Elessar himself! We will not remain in Gondor long, and one thing only we ask..."

After three minutes of persuasion, Elladan held a great silver key, and the guard was saying, "Wouldn't hand this off to you if I didn't have a spare, m'lords. Mind you lock it after you go in, so's nobody slips in behind you. All very irregular – I'd be happy to stay and attend you, m'lords." Elladan repeated, soothingly, that they would bring the key back to him at

the guard's barracks as soon as they might. The guard nodded, and said, "If I am not at the barracks, I'm at the tavern next door to't."

Elrohir beamed. "You will not lose your tabard on our account." Before the man could detain them further, they bowed to him and nipped through the doors. Elladan locked them from the inside while Elrohir stood in the centre of the tower. A stair wound up about the walls, through an opening in the adorned ceiling above. "Fifty fathoms," Elrohir muttered. Had they come there on a lighter errand, he would have made merry over the canny guard, who would show all his drinking-mates that he had truly met the brothers of the Queen. As it was, he waited for Elladan to join him, and they made the long, meditative, thigh-aching climb together.

By the time they reached the top, the sun had set entirely. Each of the tall tower-chambers had shrunk in size, and the room at the pinnacle could be spanned in six strides. Those who stood within could hear the banners hung from the pinnacle flowing and snapping in the winds. It was a plain chamber with an elaborate glass-shielded lantern hanging at its centre, burning much oil from several wicks, making the room as bright as noon. Any other furniture that had been there in the past had been removed, save for a modest cupboard. Curious, Elrohir opened it, and both saw that it held spare lantern-panes, wicks, and oil. Elladan had gone to lean out of the most westward window, an arch opening into the high airs.

"We have not had so far a view since we stood atop Amon Sûl. Here, even as high as this, the stars are slightly dimmed from all the city's lights," Elladan said. "No matter. Let us look west and speak as we have planned."

"I would be quiet first," said Elrohir, coming to join him.

Elladan said nothing, but slipped one arm around his brother's waist. Elrohir never found out what Elladan had thought as they stood there before pledging their choice of fate, nor did he ever tell his brother all of what ran through him. Sadness, the coming loss of many he had loved and a divine mystery he would never know; resentment of their kinswoman Galadriel; yearning for those who waited on ahead; and, though his form was as fair as ever, and his nature as ready to mirth, weariness after their revenge, the quest that had been longer than many wars. When he felt ready, he turned and gave Elladan a chaste warrior's kiss on the cheek, and said, "Well. Now?" In a last gesture of defiance, he ringed his own arm around Elladan's waist, glad to see his brother did not move away. Let the Valar see them as they were, he thought.

Elladan invoked the Valar and Illúvatar himself to hearken to them, with formal words that made his brother shiver. Following this, he said, "We, the sons of Elrond Peredhil, have a choice laid on us; to bide by the doom of Elves, bound undying to the life of Arda, or the doom of Men, whose souls are freed beyond the circles of the world."

Elrohir spoke next. "And we two together make our choice. We join the Elves, the Eldar, the Quendi."

“Yes, we join the Elves. The burden of the Eldar we take onto us: the loss and endless memory,” said Elladan. “We will take the long road to you over the sea, forsaking the lands of our lives. And we, brothers and lovers, will come forth to your circle of judgement, and hear your judgement of us. Thus the doom that we take is twice heavy.”

“Whatever your words are – we will not be parted. So we have sworn.” Elrohir was silent a moment, then he whispered, “Is there anything else?”

“Do you want to say anything else to the Valar? Or to the One?” asked Elladan.

A hundred yearnings churned inside him, too many to sort. Elrohir shook his head. “Nor do I,” whispered Elladan. He ended the short rite, thanking the high ones and the creator who had hearkened.

Elrohir bowed his head when the last words were said. Speaking the choice made it no easier to bear. His brother’s arm was firm about his waist, so he was not startled when Elladan turned him about for a hard embrace. The salty streaks of tears on Elladan’s face did surprise him. Elladan’s voice had betrayed no tremor. They stayed before the window, wrapped around each other, for several minutes.

Elrohir felt Elladan’s lips rest against the base of his neck, and grasped his brother tighter. He realized that, without thinking about it, he was stroking below the small of Elladan’s back. Elladan, still leaning against Elrohir’s shoulder, said, “At least that does not feel different.” He turned his face up to add, “Let us see about the rest...”

Elrohir, loath to draw his hands away, eager to drive the sorrow from Elladan’s eyes, felt more modest than usual. “This is a high hallow - should we make love here?” He glanced skywards, as if anxious of the tale the stars would bring their mistress.

Elladan caressed his sibling. “My brother, we should not make love anywhere. Still, I should like to, in this hour and place. It is private. And if we are doomed to eternal memory, it would be a fair thing to remember: that we stole a little of our own blessedness in this hallow, that I lay with you above the White City and near the stars.”

Elrohir smiled. “The things you say; I shall try and gild my speech to match yours, tonight.”

For a brief moment, two lovers locked in a kiss were silhouetted in the Tower of Ecthelion. Then they sank to their knees, below the high windows. Though the night came down outside, the chamber was without shadow, bright and warm as mid-day from the great lamp.

Elladan drew his mouth away from Elrohir’s enough to ask, “Did you fear that I would cease to want this, now that we know the judgement we will face?”

“I had wondered,” Elrohir muttered.

"I could feel it. You have been looking at me sidelong all evening." Elladan's touch was forgiving. "But I do not think I will change, any more than other folk tire of eating bread," he said.

Elrohir pressed himself even closer to Elladan. "That is good. Some of the Elves I know say lust grows dull over the ages – and I do not think I am the most inventive in such things," he said.

"Ask anything of me, ever, if I am wearisome to you." Elladan drank another long kiss from Elrohir, and his next words made him flush in the warm room. "For now, would it be well if you took me again? Far from inventive. But so much changes around us – I would be glad if one thing stayed the same."

"Forget the changes, for now, and tell me how you want it," said Elrohir.

Elladan clenched his brother's upper arms and said, "Take these clothes off, every strip."

Elrohir leaned back with his hands on his hips, smiling broadly at the imperative. "Lordly, aren't you?"

"When else do we dare a lighted room at night? I would see you." Elrohir's thin tunic and leggings were easy to set aside, but the ties of a loincloth worn for summer modesty took a moment. Elladan seemed happy to watch, saying, "I am glad I am of the same face and form as you, even though I am not so fair in bearing. To be your shadow is enough."

Elrohir drew his linen away at last. "No, you are more comely than me, I am sure. Someday we will settle this with a mirror. For now, your own clothes are in the way."

It took even less time for Elladan to strip. "Is that better?"

Elrohir leaned back, pleasantly startled. "That is all you wore? To think you were wearing nothing beneath, all the day –"

"It is summer!" Elladan protested.

"-- through the court, and all throughout the streets. For our words to the Valar, even, with such a serious mein all the time! A good thing you did not let me know."

Elladan tried to look stern as he said, "Next time, I might."

"That settles it. Me, I would tire of bread before I tired of you. Come here?" asked Elrohir.

"One moment." Elladan went to open the lamplighter's cupboard. He tilted a metal oil-can and sniffed approvingly. "Imagine what the lamplighter would think, if he saw what we are about to do with his spare oil. What?"

"Just that it is good to see you smile," said Elrohir. And it was. It had been good to have his brother come to him at Cair Andros, but it was even better to have Elladan turn to him when there was no quarrel to resolve. He dared to ask, "Show me something else. Ready yourself for me."

Elladan said nothing, but poured several spoonfuls of the pale oil into his left hand. Briskly, he circled his palms together, spreading the oil. Then, as he knelt, he shifted one knee up and to the side, a pose both virile and vulnerable. A mix of pride and enough shame for spice played over his features as he gripped his hardening cock, then placed his oiled left hand where he could slide fingers into himself. "Like so?" He slid two shining fingers inside.

Elrohir had been folding their cloaks together to pad the wooden floor beneath them. He rocked back on his heels to see all, and felt his own skin flush hot. "You ever know what I want," he said, hoarsely. Elrohir watched until Elladan slowly removed his fingers, slipping his oiled hand back over his own groin, lingering. "Ai, the way you work yourself – put those clever hands on me."

With warrior's grace, he was there, kneeling parallel to his lover on the folded cloaks. Elladan's right hand was still bright with oil, and he palmed Elrohir's own hardness. "Is this cold?"

"From your hands, never." Elrohir grasped the top of Elladan's thighs, feeling where the oil had run, spreading it back up with his fingers.

Elladan groaned, "You feel nigh ready. I know I am."

"Then I shall give you what you want. How do you –" Before Elrohir could finish asking, Elladan turned and presented his back, still kneeling up, twisting his neck to look at Elrohir. When Elrohir slid in behind him, they stayed back to belly for a moment, arms wrapped forwards and back, indulging in the embrace. Elladan still led on. He leaned forwards so that Elrohir could enter him, then bade Elrohir to be still while he eased himself back, sheathing Elrohir's cock fully inside him.

"All right?" asked Elrohir, burning to thrust into the tight channel sealed around him. "What you wanted?"

"Yes," moaned the one who was everything to him. "Let me have it from you, Elrohir."

Their words slid into a chaotic exchange. Commands blended into confession, then into pleading; one brother declared, the second affirmed, wrongs and lust and shared need. Elladan arced back, and Elrohir folded forwards, so that they were almost embracing again.

Elrohir had one of those intrusive moments when thought breaks into lovemaking. He recalled why they had come to the tower's height, and was chilled for an instant at the thought of judgement. To forget, he shifted his right arm around Elladan's chest, enjoying how Elladan was sweating. Feeling the hardness of the muscles, he spread his hand wide and flat, and almost cried out, for he could feel Elladan's heart hammering. Elladan leaned into the touch. Breath rasping, Elrohir dropped his hand, finding his brother's taut cock also hot with blood. "Elladan," he gasped, "I'm going to spend. Inside you --" Elladan's response was rigid silence, broken by a groan as his orgasm flooded Elrohir's hand. Soon after, Elrohir kept his word, gripping Elladan tightly.

Afterwards, they leaned against each other, Elrohir leaving his hand where he could feel his lover's pulse. "What are you thinking?" said Elladan.

"Blasphemy," said Elrohir. "That to be with you like that is worth what we shall face."

It was rare that Elladan was silenced. Elrohir let the silence be. The way Elladan remained pressed against him, placing his hand over Elrohir's, was eloquent enough.

A wind came over the plain of the Pellenor and sent its breeze through the tower's windows, snapping the banners and shivering the lantern, though its light did not falter. Elladan spoke again. "It grows late, by the chill. You do not have to do that. I am content." His brother was mouthing fondly at his neck, behind where his single plait fell. "I am content," he repeated.

Elrohir let his mouth rest still. Then he grumbled, "We should have said we'd give that guard back his key in the morning. If we do not go to him soon, he may think we have flung ourselves from the height."

"No, we have done the opposite...and it is just as terrible, in the end," said Elladan.

Elrohir admitted, "I am more relieved than I expected. But you have consoled me well this night."

The twin silhouettes were framed against the tower window in their embrace again. They were both wordless; everything had been said and settled, now. If the pair had looked out the tower's windows, they would have been able to view the glimmer of the Sea. But they did not turn away from each other.

When they went down, the steps were less wearisome than before. It came to them that this was the first of the changes they had expected. They drew as close for comfort as they dared when they walked the city's streets. Although their senses felt sharper, their eyes keener to detail, they felt the city's life no more. The mortal walls were remote around them, as if the city and the battle-torn plain about was a vision that would pass, a block between them and the green world beyond.

Most painful of all was coming to the tavern by the guard's barracks. They had to find the guard in the mortal crowds. Although they had lived far longer than any mortal, they had still felt connected to such folk, able to read and measure them. That sense of like kind was gone, now. Whatever their choice had shifted inside them had made it melt away. As they sought, they scarce dared to meet any man's eye, grieving already the parting of the ways writ clear in every lively, ageing face.

Story Notes:

- Set on July 17, 3019 Third Age (two days before the Elves leave Minas Tirith with the escort of Théoden.)

- **Fifty fathoms** = 300 feet.
- **The Tower of Ecthelion** = In Minas Tirith, the Tower of Ecthelion was at the very highest point of the city, fifty fathoms tall, capped with a pinnacle of pearl and silver and with banners. Ecthelion was an early Steward of Gondor; there was a second Ecthelion, the father of Denethor in ROTK. Built around 3340 in the Second Age – Minas Tirith is very old.
- **The Valar** = Divine beings and servants of Illuvatar directly linked to Middle-Earth. Varda/Elbereth, the elves' star-goddess, was one of the Valar.
- **Illúvatar/The One** = Also called Eru, the creator/equivalent of Judeo-Christian God in Tolkien's Middle-Earth theology.

Make the Autumn Precious

After the death of Aragorn, between duty and destiny, Elladan and Elrohir find an hour for themselves.

It was in the autumn that the enchantment of old returned to Rivendell. Elrond and the greater part of the Elves had left, and the power of the great ring Vilya no longer warded the valley. Rivendell had subsided into being a land of Middle-Earth, even with elves still dwelling there. Yet briefly in the fall, the hills flared with red oaks and yellow beech and birch, and the air carried the dry, spicy smell of fallen leaves. It was easy to forget that all the brilliant beauty was doomed to fade.

Drifts of gold and russet leaves curled along the floors of the Hall of Fire, blown in through the tall windows open between the pillars. The hall was bright in the afternoon sun. Elrohir walked through the leaves briskly, his arms full of wood from a fallen tree, going up to stoke the fire that was never supposed to go out. There were so few elves left in the final days of Rivendell that he had taken to stopping by three or four times a day to tend it.

Soon, Elladan entered, carrying some scrolls cradled against his chest, and greeted Elrohir. The two had agreed to meet there at that hour to discuss the works of the day. As Elrohir tended the embers, Elladan walked the Hall of Fire slowly, looking at the walls and carved pillars. They were almost covered with war-banners, shields, swords, and every other weapon known. Elves passing through Rivendell on their way to leave Middle-Earth had placed them there. It was said there was no need for such weapons over Sea, in peaceful Eressëa.

Elladan paused before the weapon-hung walls. Should he leave his sword? He decided not to. They had been through much together, he and his blade, although he had not taken it up as anything more than a proud ornament for fifty years. And, Elladan thought, he and Elrohir did not go over Sea to meet peace unbroken. They brought scrolls with news of sorrow; the last writings of their sister Arwen. One of the scrolls Elladan carried now, wrapped in white silk with black wax-seals, was for their father, Elrond. The other, heavier scroll was for their mother.

Would Arwen's final words sadden their mother more than the pass her sons had come to, breaking the laws of the Elves as each other's lovers? Had their kinswoman Galadriel kept her silence? She had been cool and neutral when last they saw her. In the West, they expected to face the judgement of the Valar, the gods who were but a name to them and yet had been beheld by the eldest High Elves. There was no way of knowing what their will would be in the matter of the twin-born lovers.

Elladan was calm as he thought on these things. He had attempted no scrying or foreseeing in this matter. He and Elrohir had long agreed that they might endure any consequence of their willing incest, except to be

parted. And there had been other things to think about. In the years since they had become the Lords of Rivendell they had been busy with much. They it was who ordered the Last Homely House, at need aiding dealings between the increasingly strange and distant Elves and mortal Men. Of late, they had taken to doing daily tasks, because not many hands were left to do them.

“Kindled at last,” said Elrohir, brushing his hands clean and looking with satisfaction at the fire.

“Once we pack these scrolls, what tasks remain for you? My works are finished,” said Elladan.

“Naught except helping tend the horses at sunset, and putting on brave faces at evensong,” Elrohir said. “Which will go all night, I think. Nobody will want to sleep, when we all ride out at dawn tomorrow, to go over Sea.”

“You mean we have some time free?” said Elladan. “What shall we do, then? It is sad to be at the very end. I have taken all my last walks, said goodbye to all our home.”

“Yes, I feel foolish to do it all again,” said Elrohir. “Last afternoon I went about and looked at all our works here; the bridge we had widened, the new road to Mirkwood, the dwellings of Men along our western border. Did I tell you that I saw the mortal Brandir? We traded words of eternal memory and fellowship yesterday, and then I ran across him this morning, too. My, we were clumsy, saying farewell again.” Elrohir looked around at the door, then out the open arched windows, where more leaves were blowing in from the sheltering trees. Nobody was nigh.

Striding through the leaves on the tiled floor, he gestured to Elladan to join him before the most westward window. Very swiftly, they kissed once, standing in the spot where the elves of Rivendell had by tradition stood to plight their troth.

“We have time...” said Elladan.

Elrohir understood immediately what he meant. “Your room? Or mine?”

Elladan was grave. “I would not go to my chamber again. It is too sad for me to look at my work-table, after the delight of having you upon it last night. Your room, if we might.” He handed one of the scrolls to Elrohir, and they left not by the doors, but by one of the windows, low to the ground. They only saw one or two other Elves on the path that had once been busy, going to the building where Elrohir still had his bed-chamber.

Neither of them had felt comfortable taking over Elrond’s austere rooms when he had left. They had flattered Celeborn when he came to join them in Rivendell by offering him the suite. However, Elrohir had quietly had a large mirror that hung there taken to his own west-facing room. The brothers entered to find the mirror reflecting the slanting sun and the creamy linens of Elrohir’s bed.

Elrohir packed the scrolls into their travel-bags, carefully, among the delicate items. One last time, they read the simple message that Arwen had sent to them, beseeching them to take these messages to their parents in the West, declaring her love and sorrow. She had had the least to say to them, at the end. But they had seen her happiness through the long years, through visits to her and in biding with her and Aragorn at Lake Evendim in the North.

When the last message was folded away, they sat upon the bed. The straw mattress had been crushed hard from bearing their shared weight many nights. Elladan looked up. He could see them both clearly in the mirror from the bed. "So here we are, at the very last," he sighed.

"And we will seize what we can!" said Elrohir. "This hour is a gift. I had not thought that we would be free to touch one another again."

Elladan said, "Of course, the question is; what can we do after last night? We left nothing undone!" They both began to laugh.

"That is right. Did I not say it was a good thing we did not ride out the next day, and that I would have a day to recover from your deep use of me?" said Elrohir.

"If we gain some reprieve in the West, I hear that all heals and springs fresh quickly. Something to look forward to," said Elladan, with a sly smile. He cracked the knuckles of one hand.

With the haste of eagerness, they disrobed and embraced in front of the mirror. The twins knew how their bodies had become more different over time. Elrohir was more tanned by the bright sun of the Fourth Age, having spent much time that summer beating the bounds and tending horses. His hair was a shade or two less dark than it had been, with copper-tinged streaks. Elladan's limbs were a touch lighter of muscle, since he had put by the sword for works of lore. Every mark of time and faded scar on their bodies was clear in the light that flooded the room. For all these intimate differences, others still mistook one twin for the other. Elladan looked into the mirror, saving their togetherness in memory, saddened at the sight that was so dear to him. "Is it hard-hearted of me to regret that once we go over Sea, we will lose the freedom we have had more than a hundred years? You know I miss our father. But, still..."

Elrohir finished the thought. "Still, it has been good to be the Lords of Rivendell in our own right, not eternally the sons of Elrond."

"And to ride out without weapon or guard. Middle-Earth is grown very fair. Nonetheless, I am ready to part from it. The fading I have seen..." He lightly touched the sun-worn skin around Elrohir's eyes, and then kissed him.

Elrohir folded his brother to him. "I do not think you cold to miss what we have had these past years. I fear to lose you; but I trust to mercy. You yourself spoke of reprieve moments ago, and how we might enjoy ourselves if it came to us. Let us take a taste of that now!"

They knelt on the hard-tamped mattress and its crumpled linens. Following five hundred years of closeting their passion when they were in the halls of Rivendell, even after their time of greater ease, it still seemed a luxury to be able to lie together in a bed.

“After last night, I owe you your pleasure first,” said Elrohir. Elladan sat up, with Elrohir lying between his legs, and looked into the mirror as Elrohir began to use his mouth to arouse Elladan. He watched and felt as Elrohir first nudged and nibbled at his scrotum, scarcely touching his shaft even as it was teased into blood-filled heat. Elladan leaned back, closing his eyes and bracing himself on his arms. The first touch of Elrohir’s tongue on the tip of his member made him arch his whole body forward. Elrohir did not deny him, and took Elladan’s cock in his mouth without delay.

When they had first done this, so long ago, Elladan had felt like to die from mingled shame and lust. At times, especially after their kinswoman had confronted them, their passion had been a dark revel in their incest. Now their shared determination and labours had drawn them as close as might be. They were never more aware of the brilliance of existence and the fullness of love than when they touched. Elladan breathed deeply, harnessing the energy of desire that pulsed through him.

When he felt his cock was close to bursting, he reached down and stopped Elrohir with a touch. “Wait. Please. I want to feel this way as long as I might. Let me bring you close, as well.” They slid along the linen to exchange places, Elrohir settling where the sheets were still warm from where Elladan’s body had been.

It was no surprise that Elrohir’s cock was already hard. Elladan slowly drew the length of it into his own mouth, savoring the taste, the first luxurious touch of its skin before it became slick from saliva. He heard Elrohir moan above him, and Elrohir’s hand rested lightly on the back of his head. Elladan continued to work slowly, taking the full length of it every time. Elrohir’s cock became even harder, contracting slightly. When Elladan felt Elrohir’s thighs tense like stone, he pulled away and sat up, enjoying the slithering linen bedding along his own hardness.

He smiled at the sight before him; the one he loved most caught at the moment most fair, flushed with arousal, grey eyes flashing, dark braid half-undone. “I wish you had never found the scroll that told you all the arts of delay for the love of the body!” said Elrohir.

Elladan’s smile was all contentment. “I wish I had found it long ago, instead of as we packed the final books of the library. Is it so onerous? I am glad to give some art of love back to you, who have given me so much.”

Elladan knelt up. They took each other’s hands and breathed deeply. Only their palms were touching, and only lightly, yet both closed their eyes to better feel the hot seal of energy that bound them. After a moment, Elladan asked, “Are you with me?”

“Always,” said Elrohir. He knelt up to match Elladan’s posture, and they kissed, pressing their bodies together, sweating slightly from arousal

unfulfilled and from the sun-heated room. With deliberate art, they echoed each other's gestures; the stroke of a hand down a back, a shift of legs and hips to press their shafts side by side, a searching kiss. What one began, the other continued, fluid and unbroken, the lightest of touches burning with life.

When even their breathing was in the same rhythm, Elrohir sat back and reached for Elladan. Elladan slipped his legs over and under his brother's; they sat interlocked, very close and face to face. In a gesture of elvish care, they stroked each other's cheeks. Elrohir looked into the mirror again, and then back at his twin. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Now, yes," said Elladan. Very slowly, supported by leaning on their left arms, each moved his right hand down the other's neck, along the muscles of the chest, along the waist and side. Then each clasped the other's cock and began to stroke. They were so close, and at such an angle, that it almost seemed as if they might be grasping themselves. To each, his brother's touch was as knowing as if it was his own hand self-caressing, with the extra lure of the touch of another.

Elladan realized that he had closed his eyes without meaning to and opened them again to look upon his twin; and their gazes had a searing spirit-meeting. Elrohir leaned to meet him, and Elladan moved forward into his kiss. They shifted so that they were now leaning with their left arms wrapped around each other, still working each other to the peak with their right hands.

One of them gasped, "My brother. With me?"

They could not remember later which one had asked, nor which one had cried out "Yes!" For they came together, in a merging, draining blaze.

The two stayed supporting each other: heads bowed together, embracing with a hard and fierce grasp, their skin still hot. They remained until their pulses had slowed and their over-wrought hardness had faded. Elladan was the first to speak. "Elrohir?"

"Yes, beloved."

"My left leg is going numb. Can we move?" The pair untwined, and Elladan shook his leg out over the edge of the bed until the sickly prickling sensation was gone. Elrohir retrieved a ragged linen towel from the depths of the sheets, and they cleaned themselves with swift swipes.

Elrohir leaned over and rummaged in the nearest bag. "An apple?"

"Thank you." Elladan sat upright to bite into his apple, letting his legs cross over Elrohir, who had lain back down to eat. When Elladan was finished, he looked at Elrohir, still munching. "How can you swallow lying down?" asked Elladan.

"Practice," said Elrohir, "much practice."

Elladan hit his brother lightly across the arm, and the two laughed together for a moment. The silence that fell next as they looked at each other was too profound to break. Elladan lay down again and the two

embraced face to face, feeling each other breathe. The room was warm enough that they were comfortable unclad. Slowly, the westering sunlight drew across the floor, becoming more rich and golden as it drew nearer to setting. Both watched the sun's rays for a time, until they could not deny the passing of time in the change of the light. "We need to rise and go," said Elrohir.

"I know," Elladan said.

Neither of them moved.

"You may get up first," said Elladan, starting to smile again.

"You are worse than when you delay your arising in winter," Elrohir chuckled, sitting up. Their rising brought them naked in front of the mirror again, and they indulged in a final embrace. Then Elladan bent over and tossed Elrohir his tunic. As they dressed, they turned to their duties once again, speaking of horses, and packing, and reassuring the elves of Rivendell before the journey tomorrow.

"If they are sodden with sentiment for Middle-Earth, tell them some tales that will make them glad to turn about and go. The fall of Eregion, the siege of Rivendell, the Long Winter," said Elrohir

"At least I was there for the Long Winter. If Celeborn starts hesitating again, you speak with him. He is fonder of you," said Elladan.

Elrohir shook his head. "I cannot believe he is abandoning his axe in the Hall of Fire."

"It is his fourth one."

Speaking together, in the unending conversation they had found agreeable for hundreds of years, they left the room. The sun touched the tree-girthed horizon and the valley's brilliance began to soften in the falling dusk.

That night, every elf remaining in Rivendell came to the Hall of Fire. They clustered close around the hearth against the empty space of the hall, against the absences spoken by the hanging swords. The elves told tales and sang songs through the night. Elrohir leavened the conversation with some merriment. Elladan reminded them of the dolor and sorrows of Middle-Earth, and brought out alluring lore of the isle over Sea. The two encouraged others to share their stories. The brothers sat by different people for most of the night, speaking to all there; but as the night paled to dawn, they were side by side. In that sad hour, no-one thought anything of it that they sat close enough to touch each other, a hand on an arm.

The End

Story Notes:

- This story takes place on September 21, 1541 (Shire Reckoning) or 118 (Fourth Age), 119 years after Aragorn became king and in the autumn of the year Aragorn died.
- **In white silk with black wax-seals** – In Tolkien's unused epilogue to *ROTK*, scrolls sent by the court of Gondor were wrapped in white silk with black seals.
- **At Lake Evendim** – Again in the unused epilogue, 17 years after the end of *ROTK*, Aragorn went North, to Lake Evendim near the Shire, and lived there for a while. Sam, who told his children that the King was coming, mentioned, "And there will be Elladan and Elrohir, who still live in Rivendell." Sam also mentions that Elves are grown elusive and difficult to talk to. The two versions of this epilogue, which focuses on Sam talking to his children and providing all kinds of useful post-*ROTK* information about the Fellowship, is in the book *The End of the Third Age, History of Middle-Earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien.
- **When Celeborn came** – According to the Tale of Years appendix in *ROTK*, Celeborn tired of Lórien after Galadriel left and went to live in Rivendell.
- **The sun-worn skin** – This description of physical change is still canon. In several character descriptions of Elves (notably Cirdan at the end of *ROTK* and Gwindor in *The Silmarillion*) Tolkien expressed his idea that Elves' physical forms in fact change over time or due to duress. The idea is expressed that the very slow change, or "fading," caused by time increased after the end of the Third Age.
- **Title source** – Poem *The Summons*, J.W. Howe, quoted in part below:

"I expect you in September
With the glory of the year:
You shall make the autumn precious,
And the death of summer dear;
You shall help the days that shorten
With a lengthening of delight...
We, communing with twin counsel,
Each to other all in all."