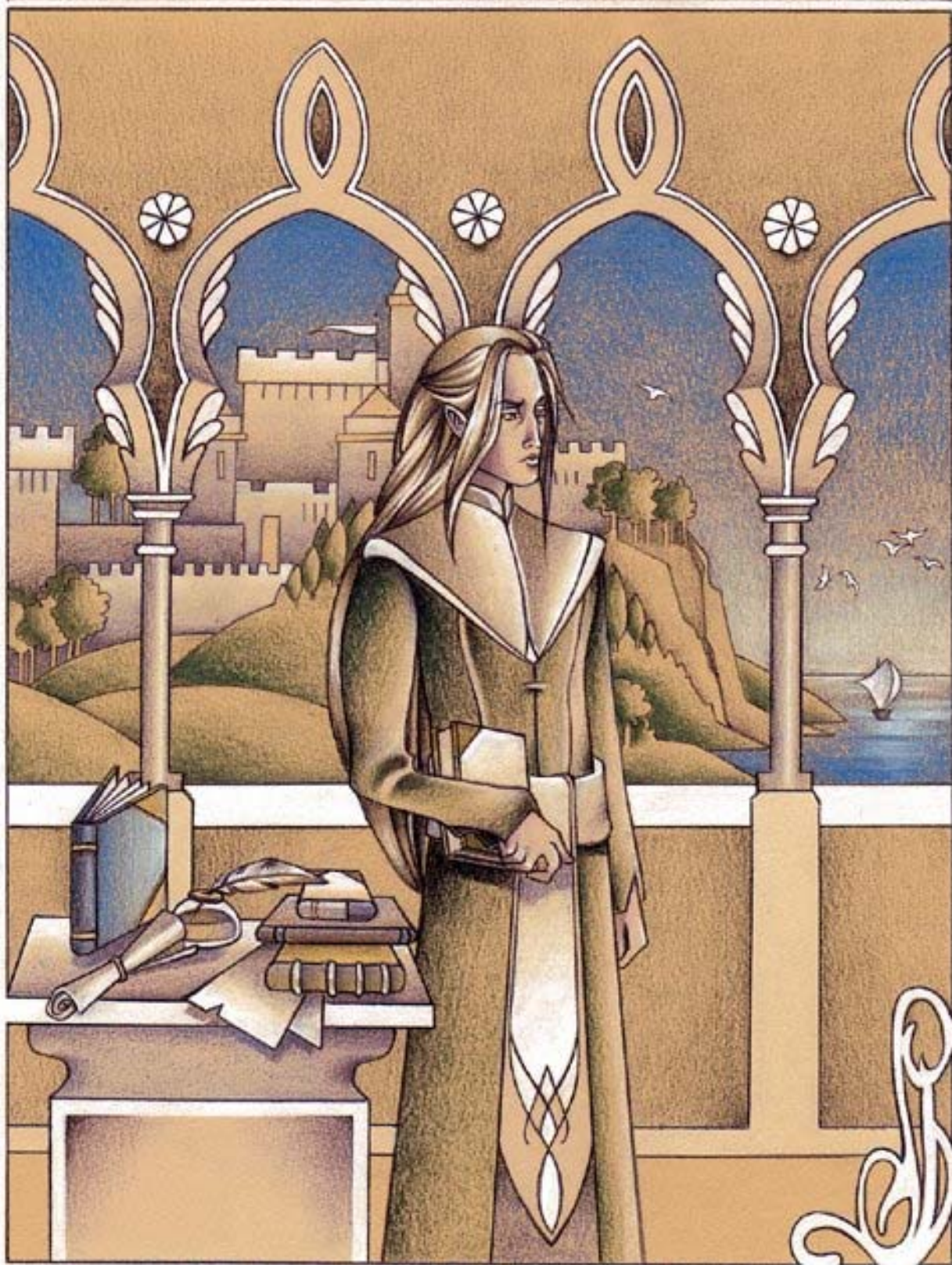


Maegweth Pengolodh: The Question of Pengolod



✿ : Tolkien Fanfiction by Tyellag : ✿

MAGWETH PENGOLODH



THE QUESTION OF PENGOLOD

A Fanfiction Novel for Silmarillion & "History of Middle-Earth" Fans

By Tyellas

Pausing in Númenor en route to Elvenhome, the elvish loremaster Pengolod decides to tarry for a time. In the company of both humble Goodman and scions of the Line of Elros, he recalls his past in Middle-Earth, and seeks to answer a question regarding Arda Marred.

Contents

Prologue.....	2
At the Sign of the Open Book	3
Romenna Days	17
The Ship-Feast.....	32
The Erulaitalë	49
Armenelos	60
Unien's Race	73
The Hall of the Venturers	87
The Fat Man's Tale	97
The Tomb of Elros.....	112
The Traveller's Wind	122
The Sea-Bells	136
The Charivari.....	150
Epilogue.....	157
Story Notes.....	159
Author's Afterword: Discarded Plots and Eucatastrophes	160

Cover art courtesy of Silke; her web site is at <http://silke.gwyaoi.org/fanart.html>

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

Prologue

Pengolod had dwelt long in Tol Eressëa, the ever-tranquil isle of Elvenhome. The Elves who dwelled there spun out their long lives amidst deep peace. Yet the messenger who had burst into the scriptorium had news so urgent that he spilled it out before he could breathe fully after his run.

When the messenger had finished gasping, Pengolod put down his pen to clarify. "You mean to tell me that a mortal, alone in a boat, made it past the Ban of the Valar and to this shore? Even to the quay of Avallónë?"

The messenger nodded, rasping as he added, "And nobody can understand a word he's saying. So we're bringing him to you. You're a loremaster. You deal with languages. Everyone knows you learned the tongues of mortal men, even of Dwarves!"

"Yes, I did, in Middle-Earth. But in Ages past - "

"You studied with Rúmil of Tirion. And you lived for a time in Númenor! If anybody can make sense of him, you can, master. The lords are sending him along shortly." Seeing the loremaster's lean form rigid with shock, the messenger said, "They wouldn't send you anybody dangerous, I'm sure of it, master. I'll...I'll tell them you're waiting?" he ended.

Pengolod blotted his pen carefully. His face had been gentle and slightly sad when he had been found in the scriptorium; when he looked up, his eyes were flashing with memory. "Do not say that I am waiting. I have been waiting for this for far longer than you or the lords knew. Tell them that I am ready."

The messenger was speechless. He bowed (as he had not upon his entrance) and left. After he scrambled away, Pengolod withdrew from the great scriptorium into a study at one side. It was his study, a place fitting for an elvish loremaster, with both a tall desk and a flat work-table. As he waited, he toyed with some items on his work-table and tried to master the flood of remembrance that filled him. He dipped his fingers in a bowl of coins, and took one out. The copper disk had on it the image of a King long dead, and the name of a proud realm sunk under the sea. Turning the coin, he recalled that King and his mortal subjects; some his own friends, some his own foemen, and one of them, the last mortal he had ever spoken to, who had given him that handful of coins.

It turned out that the messenger had been far swifter to come to Pengolod than the incomprehensible mortal, so Pengolod had plenty of time to remember the mortals he had known. His mind lingered on the one summer he had dwelt in a mortal city, the town of Rómenna, ages past, and the question he had carried away.

At the Sign of the Open Book

When Pengolod left Middle-Earth and its wars for good and all, the elven-ships of the day did not sail without stopping. For there was a fair place for them to pause, a month's sailing beyond the Grey Havens, when even those aboard of an elven boat were eager for a rest from the rolling sea: the great haven of Númenor, Rómenna.

The boat that carried Pengolod had slid down the Firth of Rómenna on a bright morning. Everyone had come up on the grey deck to admire the cliffs, sea-carved yellow stone draped in trees, and the great barques also sailing in the Firth. Several of the barques dwarfed the elves' boat. Pengolod identified their flags for his fellow venturers. "That ship there? One of Númenor's navy, for the Lord of Hyarrostar. The greater one following? Another of Númenor's navy, sailing under the banner of its prince, Ciryatan the Shipbuilder, and the one that follows is under the flag of the King, Tar-Minastir himself." The Elves in the crew raised their arms in silent salute as each ship passed, remaining dignified even though the mortals' boats showed a scramble of curious watchers on deck. The sea-warded hulls of the elf-ships were scarcely rocked by the massive waves of the mortals' boats' passage.

Pengolod remembered when the boats of Númenor had been few. Indeed, it had taken six hundred years for the Númenoreans to learn enough boatcraft to sail to Middle-Earth. Now, eleven hundred and four years later, their ships were innumerable, the greatest ones carrying enough sailors to populate a village. The tall ships showed that, despite the recent war against Sauron, the mortals of the Land of Gift continued to flourish. The mortals of Númenor were on a par with the Elves now with their ships and learning, and exceeded the elves with their power. Nor would Elves argue that, thought Pengolod, bitter with sorrow.

In the past five years, the blink of an eye, Middle-Earth had changed massively. Sauron had smashed the old order. The Elves' realm of Eregion had been destroyed. Gil-Galad, the king of many elves, had sent his realm's second lord to try and help, in vain. Instead Elrond's forces and a handful of refugees had been held under siege for several years, isolated in the wilderness of Eriador, even as Gil-Galad came under attack, the people of Lindon pressed hard. It had been the great navy of the Númenoreans that had aided the Elves against Sauron's forces.

Now that the war was over, many of those Elves were taking ship, leaving behind the sorrows of Middle-Earth for Elvenhome across the sea. There were a hundred reasons for an Elf to depart. The isle of Tol Eressëa, it was said, was far more consonant with the Elves' enduring spirits than Middle-Earth. The land went through spring, summer, and autumn, with only the briefest cool winter. The Maiar, and even the Valar, it was rumored, visited there out of love for the Elves. Few who went to Tol Eressëa returned, showing that it was the home it was said to be. But for the Elves who had known only Middle-Earth as their home, the fair tales did not make it any easier to depart. Pengolod had stood in the stern of the ship and looked at Middle-Earth as they sailed away, until even his keen eyes, keen enough for him to have been an archer in the war, could not discern mortal lands.

Pengolod stood at the prow of the ship now, eagerly spying out each new glimpse of Númenor. Middle-Earth had absorbed him so much that he had never

ventured here, but something about the place was overlain with splendour. He had seen the huge navy-boats come into the Grey Havens, where they seemed large, even garish in their ornament, but they fit perfectly here. Compared to Lindon's misty beauty, the firth of Rómenna was larger, grander, the trees on its cliffs greener, the water in its deeps a more brilliant blue. Even the myriad gulls skirling about the sky were large and sleek, and the sun seemed to shine with more brightness and warmth than it did on Eriador's shores. Pengolod recalled that maps showed Númenor as being somewhat southwards of the Elves' regions, and that Númenoreans always commented on the cold in Lindon.

When the boats grew even more numerous in the water, and Pengolod started to glimpse citadels and huts along the cliffs, the Elves' captain joined him at the prow. Pengolod asked, "How long do we stay here?"

The captain replied, "It is morn, now, and the haven is hard ahead. We sail again with the tide at sunset." The firth narrowed, even as its cliffs lowered, descending into gentler, tree-tumbled uplifts. Pengolod did not pay much attention, for the firth's one island, Tol Uinen, was ahead, with its light-tower. This island marked where the harbor of Rómenna began, in the wide cleft where the cliffs joined. Soon the white elf-ship was slipping along, dignified as a swan, gliding into harbor and to a berth beside an open pavilion, reserved for the elf-ships.

Most of the Elves disembarked. To Pengolod's surprise, they were greeted by Númenorean officials and servants, some of whom hailed the captain and began to read messages he had brought. A few market hawkers were on the edge of the pavilion, offering fruit and flowers for Elvish silver. With all this to hand, only a small group left the pavilion to wander the market of Rómenna, for a time. Pengolod went with them, not least to escape the excruciating way the Númenorean officials and hawkers were trying to speak Sindarin.

The main market was immediately behind the quays. The great four-sided open space, opening out upon the docks, rang with a different language, the crisp, consonant-laden mortals' tongue called Adûnaic. Behind the market, looming above its varicoloured tents and stalls, was a massive building with wide stairs and pillars, in yellow-beige sandstone and red granite. Pengolod drew back his light cloak's hood and shook his long, black hair down his back, telling the other Elves, "Yonder is the palace of the King and his family. By the pennants, it is the prince who is in residence there now."

The rest of the Elves took this in with moderate interest, at best. Four elves peeled away to search the market-stalls for other fresh fruit and greens. Another pair looked about the bustling scene as if it was a remote dream, and detached themselves to drift back to the elf-boat's berth. The last of the excursion stood beside Pengolod. He stared frozen at the sight of a pair of old men sitting beside one of the booths. "Alas! I cannot bear it, Pengolod," he said. "It all speaks of the long parting, to me; of the doom and curse of the Elves, compared to mortals' freedom from the circles of the world, their spirits freed through their mortal deaths. I am going back, as well." He slipped back without another word, drawing his own hood fast around his face.

Pengolod scrutinized the pair that had sent the last elf into a spin of grief.

They seemed to be enjoying their trade, and by the way they watched matrons and maids sway by, the other delights of midday. Deciding to remain for a time, even though he was alone, he strolled the bustling market, taking zest in the fresh sounds of Adûnaic. He had learned the language from Númenorean mariners, of course, but it was always better to learn about a speech amongst its lands and people. By the time he reached the market's center, he had decided to write a short essay about informal Adûnaic and its vivid use of metaphor during the second part of the elf-ship's journey.

The center of the square had a massive statue, twice the height of a man, carved with great art of greenish-black granite. It was, according to the inscription about its base, the Maia Uinen, lady of all sailors and fisherfolk and of Rómenna, city and port united. Pengolod raised his eyebrows to observe how Uinen was depicted here. In elvish manuscripts, he had included her in illuminations once or twice as a lissome maid sliding elegantly among the waves, long flowing hair to her toes, for she was supposed to be beautiful. This Uinen also had long cubits of hair, but instead of toes, below the waist, she had the lower body of a graceful fish. Pengolod's eyes traced upwards. Apparently, mortals' ideas of goddess-worthy beauty were inventive below the waist, and generous above it. Embarrassingly so, he thought. The statue's arms were spread wide, as if she embraced all the harbor lovingly, and her face had a joyous smile, for all its inscrutable, blank granite eyes. He gave the statue a bow for honour and walked on.

The mortals in the marketplace walked briskly, for the most part, as working-people do with little time to spare. Pengolod drifted, eavesdropping, examining. Stopping to buy a small punnet of berries from a market-woman, he caused three stalls' worth of chaos. The woman had to scramble to give him something approaching due change for the gold coin he offered. He paused to overhear the argot of a group of squabbling children, filing their colourful curses away to analyze later. The old men had made one elf sad, but these children and their innocent filth were what made Pengolod sigh with remembered grief. There was little difference between mortals and elves in childhood. He noticed several people looking in his direction, and turned to see what was so interesting behind him. Not seeing anything of note, he continued to meander.

The edge of the marketplace gave him another pang. He had not gone towards the palace, but to the southern side of the marketplace, which had small streets and alleys leading away, tempting the curious to explore. Pengolod found these streets lined with narrow houses, built wall to wall and three stories high, with shops at their lowest levels. It was not the building he had expected, and it reminded him deeply of a lost elvish city where he had once dwelled. That city's houses had been close-packed to cram a realm into a hilltop, the city remembered as Gondolin.

For an elf grown weary of Middle-Earth and the long years, a brush of memory was a powerful thing. Pengolod stood still, plunged into remembrance, for a full quarter of an hour. The stares of passers-by grew quizzical, but he did not see them in return. As he shook his head to emerge, he caught a whiff of burning charcoal and heard the ringing sound of a blacksmith at work, and was pinned by memories for another five minutes. Finally, with a nostalgic sigh, he recalled

himself and headed down one of the streets.

Returned to the present, Pengolod looked up and admired the way each shop identified itself. There was a jug hanging from a hook for a wine-shop, a hank of rope with a small anchor, very likely to indicate a chandler, a trio of baskets hung one above another cunningly. The fourth shop on this varied avenue gave him a start. Its symbol-sign was a carved, wooden representation of a book, opened to inscribed pages. A glance at the shop's window showed a few volumes propped open over a wide map.

Pengolod was sucked in instantly, for through all Middle-Earth's changes, his trade had been ever that of scribe, loremaster, and linguist. He admired the clean lines used to draw columns in log books, and the simple red capital letter adorning a page of text. Going forwards, he read a painted board propped up on the wall before the shop. With the words rendered in an elvish alphabet, the Tengwar, the board promised:

SHIP'S LOGS

MAPS

FAIR COPIES

CORRESPONDENCE RENDERED FIT FOR ARMENLOS

TRANSLATION INTO ELVISH

Below this was added, in different coloured paint:

Yes I paint signs

Strangely, a small rope and anchor dangled on the wall above the sign. Pengolod did not look at it twice. The words "Translation into Elvish" had a sting, especially after the bad Sindarin he had heard at the quay's pavilion. The sign-painter had not even distinguished between the two chief Elvish tongues, Sindarin and Quenya. His own high, fair languages, that he lived and loved best, massacred by a half-lettered mapmaker. The idea of it shook him out of his wistful reverie. He made sure his hair was tucked behind his pointed ears, and shook out the folds of his cloak, its sage-green colour the sign among elves of the most elevated of loremasters, those fit to join the guild of the Lambengolmor, the Masters of Tongues. Then, standing very straight, he opened the shop's door to see this would-be elvish translator.

The smell of the shop, ink, vellum, glue, and paint, almost sent him into another trance of memory. There were a few more pieces of writing pinned upon the wall, and laid out along a wide counter. Pengolod scanned the work-space behind. There were several desks, and signs of some work in progress. The shop's sole inhabitant, a spotty lad of some thirteen summers with short-cropped hair, stopped dusting to gape at Pengolod open-mouthed.

"Are you an elf?" the lad croaked.

Not knowing if the boy spoke Sindarin, and suddenly uncertain of his Adûnaic accent, Pengolod responded with a silent nod.

The lad stared Pengolod up and down again, from Pengolod's long hair to where his trailing silken robe brushed the ground. The boy's round, red face began to sweat as he stammered, "My lord - uh - my lady - uh - you're very - uh - What

should I call you? Sir? Ma'am?"

Pengolod stood stunned for an instant. Then, for the first time since he had left Middle-Earth, he smiled. Playfully, he said, "Guess."

The boy turned beet-red and gaped. "Uh...uh..." Then he scrambled away to stick his head out the shop's back door, bawling in his breaking voice, "Master! Masterrrrrr! There's a, a, a noble elf in the shop! Hurry!" After one more hideously embarrassed glance at Pengolod, he held the back door open, cringing behind it. Pengolod had a glimpse of a large courtyard with a well in the center.

"I'm coming, lad, you know I can't go so fast - ah! My lord!" The shop's owner smiled warmly. "My lad has been amusing you, I take it?" he asked. For Pengolod had leaned against the counter, and was doubled over with mirth.

Pengolod wiped tears of laughter from his eyes to see him. Dressed in blue and yellow, he could not have been more than thirty mortal years. His smile showed teeth as good as any elf's behind a closely trimmed, tawny beard, matching his short tawny curls. With his free hand, he gave his mustache a nervous stroke. Although he seemed in his prime, there was a crutch tucked under his right arm, and he entered the shop with a heavy limp.

Pengolod replied, "Yes, he has been. I have not been so amused in many years, in fact. Your prentice is most witty indeed."

"Truly?" the fellow said, raising his eyebrows. "That's a first."

Behind the door, the boy groaned with fear. Pengolod took pity. "Indeed. He mistook me for a noble of my people, but I am not so. I am no lord; only a loremaster and maker of books, like yourself."

Pengolod was eyed up and down a second time. "An honest mistake on the lad's part, I ween. But surely you are a master of your craft, even one of the Lambengolmor!"

"How do you know of the Lambengolmor?" Pengolod asked. Privately, he noted that not only did this fellow pronounce the word correctly, but with a certain breathless admiration.

The shopkeeper replied in Sindarin, "All the high mortal scholars of your tongue, the Elendili, know about your league of loremasters that included your kings. I am not a scholar, sir, but I have read the books. I hope I'm not bespeaking the Sindarin poorly?" he ended, seeing Pengolod's raised eyebrows.

"On the contrary, you've the best accent I've heard from a mortal since we arrived in Rómenna," said Pengolod, wryly, in the same tongue. "The King should hire you to greet the elf-ships. If you are not a scholar by trade - for I think you are, like me, one by inclination - how did you come by your Sindarin?"

"My father Eädwine was a -" For the first time, the shopkeeper paused. "A pedlar who sailed a boat. We've a word for it in Adûnaic. His father had the tongue from Middle-Earth. Not all of us in Númenor are the kin of Elros, but my father's father was of the Lindon fisher-folk. My father did some trade with the Elves in the west of the Isle. I was born with a, with this marred foot (again we've a word for it in Adûnaic) so I was not for the trade, but I remember my father selling the Elves rushlights and lantern-oil at night, with the starlight on the water, and the soft music of their voices." By now he had come forwards against the counter. "I

learned it hearing it spoken about me as a child. Nor would I sleep when my father traded with the Elves. However late the hour, I would contrive to see it. So I am named Aelfwine."

The mortal's name had the meaning of "elf-friend"; like names, the language it used was more antique than that of normal speech. Pengolod was attuned to the meaning, and remembered it by that. "And I am Pengolod." He reached out his hand across the counter.

Aelfwine slipped back into Adûnaic to say, "I'd shake your hand gladly, except I'm all over ink - ah." He stopped when he saw that the hand Pengolod held out to him, with its long, graceful fingers, was also ink-stained.

"After a thousand years, it never does come off," Pengolod said.

"That's not a problem for me!" Aelfwine laughed, and shook his hand heartily. Then he corrected himself. "Very not diligent of me, to speak in one language, then the other, when Elvish is so much fairer."

"On the contrary, I like Adûnaic very much," said Pengolod, changing back to Adûnaic himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the lad had crept back into the shop. "I'm sailing to Eldamar tonight and my boat stopped here for the day. I've been walking about specifically to hear more of it."

Aelfwine leaned against the counter. "You must think it's terribly harsh, between the consonants and the filth they talk in the markets."

"Harsh, but in a good way, like a strong wine. And the consonant use is remarkably similar both to Quenya and even to Valarin, the language of the Valar themselves."

"Valarin? Can you tell me more?" asked Aelfwine, hungrily.

Fully an hour passed as the two chatted amiably about obscure linguistics. The shop-lad, who had the splendid name of Areleinion and was Aelfwine's apprentice, listened bewildered. Pengolod understood that Aelfwine was someone like himself; not well born, but given a quick mind and the will to make much of it, and open to the wonders of Arda. He suddenly felt his heart twist, with a different pang than that of memory. Pengolod had seen an Age and more of the world, and had endured much. One thing that experience had taught him was that friendship was a treasure. Here he was, talking to one who might be a friend if he could spend a night over wine and more good talk, and yet their fellowship was doomed before it began.

Standing there in the little shop, as the light changed from noon to afternoon, being on the cusp of losing this friend scarcely made concentrated all the ache he was feeling at leaving Middle-Earth. He forced himself to stay light in manner as Aelfwine proceeded to show him around the shop, letting him behind the counter. There was no use, he thought, in inflicting his immortal pain on someone who could not do anything about it. The ship would sail, and he would try to be consoled by memory. It was said of him in particular that he never forgot anything. Pengolod wondered if this meant he felt his memories more sharply than other Elves as well, then turned his attention back to his host.

"Most of the business is ship's materials, which are dull, but at least they're books and maps and writings. I put the note about Elvish on the sign and I do a

few dribs and drabs of it each week, mostly names or verses for fellows a-courting. This week I've had more queries about the anchor-rope," Aelfwine said.

"The anchor-rope?" Pengolod remembered it instantly, hanging above Aelfwine's sign. "And what does it mean?"

Aelfwine shrugged. "That I've a room to let for a sailor, or someone who wants lodging for a time. It brought in steady coin when everyone was coming and going for the war in Middle-Earth, but that's tapered off. I run a quiet shop, and the prentice is here in my charge, so I won't have anyone of bad character. You get a better run of lodgers in the autumn, when the great boats come off the water. I've turned away four bad hats this week."

Pengolod was silent for a moment. He looked around at the little shop, the astonished lad, the friendly man. Five minutes ago, his immortality had wrenched him. Now he felt its advantages. If he chose to linger, he had the time to do it, and naught to lose by it. Thus he said, lightly, "I had been thinking of doing some writing on the Adûnaic tongue; thinking also that I was leaving for Eressëa perhaps over-soon. How much is the let of your sailor's room? That is, if I'm of good character."

Aelfwine had been resting a hand against a table to stand. In his surprise, he swayed, then grasped the table's edge with both hands. The lad said, his voice breaking with eagerness, "We were charging Captal Nuzra five marks the week."

"Soup, hush," said Aelfwine, with an air of long habit. Pengolod gathered that this was the apprentice's nickname, and hid a smile. When the master answered, his words were more thoughtful. "I will barter the let if you'll write out Elves' tales and knowledge for me, and show me some of the Lambengolmor's ways in my trade. Books of elf-lore are costly. Some checking of my maps of Middle-Earth would be good as well." Aelfwine tugged on one side of his mustache. "Mind, I must ask some coin if you'd have your board as well as your bed. Tales and language please me, but the baker only takes cash. How long do you think you might stay?"

"I cannot say. Perhaps until the next elf-ship going to Eressëa comes through, perhaps longer," Pengolod said.

Aelfwine replied, "Surely there's no such thing as one of the Fair Folk staying too long. But perhaps you'd better look at the room, first. Soup, mind the shop. And keep your head if more Elves walk in." Pengolod went up a narrow stair, and peered into a slightly stuffy room that looked out over the main street. It might have been shabby if it had not been immaculately clean, furnished with hooks, a narrow table holding a basin and jug, and something that might have been a couch or might have been a bed, covered in faded red carpet. Pengolod recalled nights spent on hard roots or bracken-tangles and declared that it suited him excellently. He gave a small sum over as advance on the board, and the pair shook hands once more. Then Pengolod returned to the elf-ship to retrieve his belongings.

This turned out to be more difficult than befriending Aelfwine had been. The elf-ship's captain, restless for the sunset tide, only released Pengolod's trunk after declaring, "You'd be better off staying on the west side, at the haven of Andunie, if you care to remain. The land is fairer and they are used there to our people

lingering."

"It isn't the land I'm staying for, it's the people," Pengolod replied.

The captain raised his silver brows. "You are certain? On the western shore, you will have more chance of catching another ship when you grow weary of this place."

"You speak as if you're convinced I will tire of it tomorrow. I know my own business," said Pengolod, sharply. It occurred to him later that the elf-captain himself might have spent some time in Rómenna, at one point; but only later. He was too busy arranging to disembark to consider it further. One of Lindon's former librarians was also sailing, and Pengolod entrusted most of his crates of books to her care. He left the ship with a large canvas pack and one armful of the books, his other arm free to wave farewell, though he did not look back long. A lingering official helped him hire a cart to haul the trunk. He strode behind it through the emptying tents of the marketplace, his long shanks eating up the flagstones, eager and happy to have found another project and to have deferred the long parting, for a time.

Aelfwine's shop closed when the sun slanted behind the ranges backing the vale of Rómenna. Pengolod got a good look at the buildings. It turned out that all the shops packed together on each block, with their two stories of housing above, shared a great courtyard. It was built with skill, and arranged around a well and two oak trees, but not entirely neat; weeds sprouted up between the flagstones. Each shop seemed to have a little space behind it allotted for its own, before the great space in the center, and by the well, a trough with a cooking-fire was set. Soup had been sent to the fire with a grilling basket and a great fish.

Aelfwine and Pengolod were sitting on a bench behind the shop, watching the lad. His lanky limbs seemed to be stretching every minute, despite his round face. Aelfwine had called him a hobbedeyhoy, a word with all the jerky awkwardness of his in-between state, between man and boy. "I set him to a good deal of work, what with me being lame, and I know it, too," said Aelfwine, resigned. "His folk tried him at the great academy in Armenelos. He was clever enough, but he couldn't sit still for fifteen minutes at a go. He was dismissed - a disgrace to him. I said I'd give him a try. His restlessness means that he bears my errands well."

Pengolod dared a look at Aelfwine's misshapen foot. "It must have been a dreadful accident; that or luck in battle, that you escaped," he said.

"No, worse luck, I was born like this. I said there was a word for it in Adûnaic. It's 'clubfoot,'" said Aelfwine. "Remember I said my father was a boat-pedlar? I tried going for a mariner when I was younger. The foot didn't keep me from climbing the rigging. But the older I got, the more it pained me. The ship's purser thought well enough of me that when the captain's mapmaker was seeking a prentice, he put my name forwards."

Soup was staggering back with the steaming fish-griller when Aelfwine asked, "How was it when you became a prentice? Will you tell us while we eat, mayhap?"

Pengolod agreed, and this was the tale he told.



I remember very well the hour my boyhood ended, though I was not grown to an elf-man. It was an Age and more of the world ago, two thousand and two hundred years gone by, and more besides. This was in a land called Nevrast, where Turgon, later to become the elves' High King, was then lord. Nevrast is now sunk beneath the sea, but it was then a land of pine-woods and ferns and gentle shores.

One of Turgon's commands had been that all the young folk of the land must learn to read and write. This was important, for Turgon ruled a mingled folk. Many of Turgon's people had come from Aman and were Noldor. But many more were Sindarin, the Grey-Elves of Middle-Earth. Turgon was a newcomer to their lands, but he gained their fealty through ruling with a lighter hand than their King, Thingol. From this alliance, the two elf-peoples were mingled. My own mother was Noldo, and my father Sinda. But the Sindar, as a people, did not read. They used a few runes of a system called the Cirth to write charms or names with, and that was all. Thus Turgon, to keep matters equal, issued his command.

Not only had this command given me an art I did well at, it brought me some friends. They were older lads, Voronwë and Elemmakil; I had been set to learn with them, even though I was younger than they by a few years. I thought them great daring lads, and they took me up as jester, audience, and younger brother. The three of us were merry together, for a time.

The day when everything changed was a day in summer. We were in the storage loft of Voronwë's household, for it was raining hard, and the wind tore green leaves from the trees. As lads will, we span out the time munching green apples and talking nonsense. They were teasing me about my older sister Thingódhel, who was due to be married at harvest-time. Voronwë said, "She's a beauty all right. Why can't she wait a few years and marry one of us? Now I'll have to wait, and marry one of her daughters."

"It'll be that long before you're done training with your father," teased Elemmakil, throwing an apple core at Voronwë. "At least being one of Turgon's smiths will sound good when you're courting."

Voronwë threw it right back at him. "It's my mother who's keen on that, not I. She wants a smith to send to her Uncle Círdan, so that his folk don't have to buy steel off the Naugrim. You'll be tied up just as long, training to be a King's Guard, if they'll have you."

Elemmakil turned to me. "Pengolod will put in a good word for me, won't you? She'll think me as good as a prince if you teach her to!"

"That's not fair. You should put in good words for us both," Voronwë said.

With my mouth full of apple, I shook my head, smothering a laugh. "I should let one of you louts marry my niece?" I pretended to think. "Maybe if you bribe me well enough..."

This time I was Elemmakil's target as he chortled, "You sound like one of the Naugrim yourself!"

Voronwë, as ever, was distracted. "If Rúmil the loremaster was still serving Turgon, we could ask him for a charm so that your sister would have twins. One for each of us."

"I'd still get first choice," boasted Elemmakil. Before I could ask who this Rúmil was, Voronwë's retort led to further target practice. In a trice, he and Voronwë were wrestling, on the floor of the loft, each trying to pummel the other in friendly rivalry. Just as Elemmakil had Voronwë's arm pinned to the floor, somebody below roared for Voronwë.

The two lads let go of each other instantly. Voronwë went stiff and anxious. "My father."

Elemmakil was scrambling to pick up the crushed apples. Voronwë whispered, "I'll go; you two stay quiet and clear out when we're gone. See you soon, if I'm not in for it." Then he swung down out of the loft. His father immediately told him the news that had sent him to seek his son.

So it was that we two friends of his overheard the dreadful news that Voronwë's mother, a sailor-maid of the Falathrim, had drowned, and all aboard her ship. Elemmakil and I stared at each other in horror as it was explained that she had softened and taken one too many Noldor sailors on her crew, inciting the wrath of the sea. For at that time, the Sea hated the Noldor for their attack against the Sea-elves, the Teleri.

We crept down after they had gone, stunned to the core. It brought up the most childish of fears, losing one's mother. But when we left, we each reacted as men, going home swiftly to see that our own families were all right.

This tragedy broke up our daily fellowship. Voronwë's bereaved father now kept Voronwë fast to him with duty, teaching him his trade. Voronwë, numb with grief, acquiesced. Elemmakil was accepted to train up and join the King's warriors. This left me on my own. I often thought of our last merry talk. My friends had known what trades they should learn, but I did not.

For a few weeks, I was left mostly to my own devices. I had completed the lessons mandated by Turgon ahead of my years, and my father thought me somewhat young to be his apprentice. In fact, my sister's affianced, eager to please, was proving a great help to my father. I had never yearned to be a roper, but this had a sting nonetheless, so I busied myself roaming about, earning a little by carrying messages. The news of that time that was going to give me my trade did not come to me that way. It was important enough to merit an announcement from the King himself.

The announcement had been sent out to lighten the people's hearts after the Dagor Aglareb, the Third Battle. Turgon's forces had fought there for the High King Fingolfin. While the battle against the orcs had been won, some of our own elf-folk had fallen or been lost. Not only had one of these folk returned, but it was someone of rank, the loremaster Rúmil of Tirion. He had, the official words declared, been taken captive and made a thrall in Morgoth's realm, but learned of an escape from those riven halls through his patience and cleverness in languages, and his counsels were aiding the King once more.

This was followed by a fiery sweep of less-official rumor. Rúmil had staggered back on stumps, having lost both feet; Rúmil had learned of the origins of orcs in Thangorodrim's deeps; Rúmil had been transformed into an orc himself, and went about clad in cape and hood to hide his grotesqueness; Rúmil was

blessed by the Valar for their merit of his art; Rúmil was being interrogated by the King on charges of treachery. At that time, Rúmil was but a name and a vague face amongst the parade of rich-dressed nobles, and my lively family enjoyed all the rumor greatly.

A week after the news was cried, my father said that he would give me an important errand. He admitted later that he sensed that I was very much on the sidelines as Thingódhel's wedding drew closer. He sent me to the great lord's hall of Vinyamar, to seek out the Lord Turgon's steward and give him a letter inquiring about rope orders for the Turgon's ships. My errand-running had not sent me so high before, nor on such business of import to my father's trade.

The steward was short with me when I was granted an audience. After reading my father's letter, he said, "We'll need ropes, coming up; but not for ships. I'll seek him out when we know more." He handed my father's letter, so carefully composed, back.

This fellow's offhand dismissal baffled and offended me. Forgetting my age and place, I said, "If that is what you mean to say, you should write it down, with your sigil. My father took the trouble to write to you, and you should do the same with -- with him!" At the very end, I had begun to realize what I was saying, and sudden fear gave my voice a tremor.

The next instant, I had turned scarlet with embarrassment, for behind me, someone was laughing richly. "The lad's got you cold, steward. Knows your business as well as you do already. Pen a line or two at the base of his father's note, at least, then return. I think I want to talk to him." The steward gasped and collected himself, and I saw why when I turned. This person had to be Rúmil. As rumor had said, he wore cloak and hood, but the day was so warm he had thrown the hood back and gathered the cloak behind his shoulders.

I had never seen any elf so ugly in my entire life. To your eyes, he would seem a battle-scarred old man, with a creased, gaunt face and straggling silver hair, though still straight and tall. We Elves knew nothing of mortal age, at that time. So to my young eyes, he seemed what rumor had promised, transformed into a very orc by the torments and power of Morgoth's dungeons. The worst disfigurement about him was that one side of his face had been riven by a great wound, and on that side the eye, though still in its socket, was cloudy and dead. His other eye, set amidst creases, sparkled with enough wit for two. I could not stop looking at him.

"Who are you, lad? I've never seen you before," he asked.

Recovering, I gave my name and my father's. I was so fearful of doing something wrong, or having done something ill to gain his attention, that Rúmil had no trouble learning from me my age, that I was fond of books and tales, and my family's state. After a few moments talking to him, I had recovered from the discrepancy between his ravaged visage and his low, musical voice. When pressed, I noted that my family had no ties to nobility, being, as the Sindar would say, "common as leaves."

"I don't know if you're common or uncommon, but if your mother gave you the name of Pengolod - Noldo, was she?" When I concurred, Rúmil looked thoughtful. "Elf-mothers' foresight will tell even what a mother never wished to

know," he murmured. It was an aphorism amongst our people. More clearly, he said, "Do you know both tongues, Sindarin and Quenya, from both parents?" I said that I did.

Rúmil's one eye glittered. "If you could ask me anything, what would it be?"

"How did you escape, really? And are you an orc now?"

Rúmil chuckled in his throat, without smiling. "Doubtless they tried to make me so, but I am no orc. You'll learn what orcs really are if you go to war."

Eagerly, I said, "I'll go to war next time. I've got a friend in the guard and another friend makes swords. I'd go too."

"Then you'll learn. As for how I escaped...let's sit a moment, shall we?" We went to a bench at the edge of the hall. I saw that Rúmil was lame. More lame than you, Aelfwine; the staff was his third leg. All the rumours were untangling themselves in my head, and I understood that this was what had brought about the rumour that he had no feet. "I was smote hard in the Dagor Agarleb. The orcs hauled me out of a pile of corpses. I'd thought I was going to be as dead as they, soon, with my face split half open. Instead, they revived me with a foul liquor, made me strip off my gear, and forced me on a march. I thought the march was torment - until we arrived at Thangorodrim. We were taken to Him. To Morgoth." In the sunlit summer hall, Rúmil bowed his head a moment. A shudder freed him from the memory, and he said, "Those of us who were judged not important were shunted off to be thralls."

Perplexed, I said, "But you were Turgon's loremaster. You were important."

"Yes, and I was glad that I managed to keep my mouth locked shut. Though I lost a good deal by it." At that time, Rúmil said nothing of the torment Morgoth's orcs used to cow and maim thralls into obedience. He only said, "I was set to digging, mining metal to make weapons that would kill my kin. The other Elves in the mine were worse than houseless spirits - they were bodies without spirits, empty shells. I knew that if I stayed long, I would be too." He paused and said something odd. "I'm very fond of animals. In Aman I learned all the tongues of birds. They were my favourites ever. No birds in the mines, of course, but I could look at the rats and beetles, and hearken to their squeaking and clicking, and think that they at least were free to come and go."

"Then one day, in a trance of hunger and weariness and pain, I watched the beetles trace along. I could have sworn that in their stupid hum, and their skittering paths, they were telling me a way out. Perhaps I was mad. I was certainly starved, starved enough to slip my chains. I staggered into the dark, after the beetles, hearing their chittering as a tune sweeter than any bird. They did not lead me false, those beetles. They came and went through a fissure in the mountain-side. I was so thin that I, like the beetles, slipped out and escaped. Even with my withered leg, I wended my way back here." His tale done, Rúmil looked at me keenly. "Do you think I'm mad?"

I took my eyes off him at last to observe my feet as I muttered, "My father talks to birds, sometimes, and my mother to hounds. I guess the beetles don't talk out here?"

"Oh, they do. Clever way of not answering the question, Pengolod. That way,

you don't insult me if I am mad, nor do you insult me if I'm sane and truly aiding Turgon. You ask a good question as well. I'm sure it's what everyone who keeps from staring at me wonders."

The steward had reappeared and looked mightily inconvenienced to have to stand and wait while I spoke with Rúmil. Rúmil called him over. As if I were worth doing business with, he asked, "Does the note meet with your approval?" I read the few lines and said it did.

"Then give it to me: I have something I want to add." From a pocket, Rúmil took out a stick of sharpened charcoal and unrolled the letter on the bench. He added several flowing lines below my father's painstaking writing and the steward's crabbed reply. "And what do you think of my annotation there? Does that, too, have your approval? Charcoal rubs out if it doesn't."

Rúmil's note, in the most formal and gracious language, asked my father if he would consent to allowing his son Pengolod to become the apprentice of Rúmil of Tirion, in the service of Lord Turgon at the court of Vinyamar. The paper crinkled as I clamped it, reading the specifics of how I would serve (low errands described as "making himself useful," the usual lot of prentices), what I would learn - languages and songs, history and counsels wise, the making of books and scrolls and fair writings - and what he meant me to become; aide, teacher, and loremaster.

This was a richness I had not imagined. To do what I loved best, be around books and learned elf-men all day, and to be one myself. Yet this would come to me through this intimidating stranger, Rúmil, terrifying alike in his ugliness and the uncanny brightness of his mind, which saw through every subterfuge. I looked up at him more quickly than he expected, to find him grave and sad. He started and arrayed his ugliness into wry indifference again. Finding my tongue, I said, "I hope to bring my father's approval back this very night."

Rúmil smiled. Scarred and balding, he was an elf after all, when he did. "Tomorrow morning will do."

The mediocre news from the steward was overshadowed by this offer, which set many things aright in my house. Now Thingódhel's fiancée could be my father's full apprentice. Thingódhel herself took fine cloth out of her trousseau to outfit me. Amidst all the fuss, the reality of what I had agreed to did not strike until I stood with my hemp satchel of belongings in Rúmil's workrooms.

"Ready to begin?" Rúmil did not wait for my reply. "Here is your first task as my apprentice. Work's the same wherever you go, and you're an old hand at running messages." Rúmil lit a taper and, with its wax, sealed a note that had been waiting on the table. Handing it to me, he asked, "Do you know of the Lord of Harps?"

I nodded mutely, awed that Rúmil was noble enough, through his learning, to be sending the head of one of Turgon's clans of knights a message.

"Deliver this note, and wait for his reply. He will be sore vexed once he reads. I am declining his offer to take on his son, Salgant, as an apprentice. If he asks you who is taken on in his son's stead, tell him that it is yourself. Can you do that?" Rúmil asked.

Still mute, this time with shock, I nodded again.

"It is hard. And it is politics." Rúmil sighed. "That is my work as much as my lore. I am glad that you seem capable of dealing with it. Thought you would be."

"But, sir, why did you take me on when you could have had a Lord's son?" I asked. "To spite him?"

Rúmil laughed once. "I won't deny that had something to do with it. Having had the wrong lad offered to me, I was looking for someone else to take on, someone who suited, in a hurry, that I might say 'No, found this fellow instead.' Plenty of lads didn't suit before I ran across you defending your father's word. There's worse ways to make someone's acquaintance. You placed the written word first, before the steward. There was light in your eyes when you read about what you could be. You know what work is. And you can look at me without flinching. The other boy can't." Rúmil waved his hand. "Get along and you'll be back before dusk."

I went. I did the errand. I survived the displeasure of the Lord of Harps, well enough that my bearing was proud when I left his timbered abode with his own note of reply. Rúmil nodded when he read the note, though I never found out what the Lord of Harps said. I could guess, though; I had been thinking a great deal as I went to the Harp-house and back.

Rúmil tore the note into three pieces and put it to the fire immediately. "Now we both have an enemy. Welcome to Vinyamar," he said, as the note curled in the flames.

Thus I began my apprenticeship.



By the time Pengolod finished his tale, the late summer dusk was on the brink of night. In the long summer days, this meant the hour was late. The three of them retired, with words wishing fair rest. Alone, he lay down on the bed-couch and inhaled with relief. He had been here before, in a way, finding his way among strange folk, drinking in a new language and the life that gave it meaning. Pengolod wondered if each of them saw themselves in the tale. It was all true. Very likely, he mused, it was the echo of the past that had made him appreciate Aelfwine and this curious lodging.

Before he succumbed to the memory-dream of elvish sleep, his last directed thought was troubled. Staying in Númenor for a time in Aelfwine's company had felt as right to him as becoming Rúmil's apprentice had been. But the elf-captain of the boat he had left had, surely, not given a warning for nothing.

Romenna Days

The next day, Aelfwine arose with the summer sun. Pengolod, awake as well, heard his irregular steps going down the narrow stairs. Unsure of the protocol of this house, Pengolod waited until someone knocked at his door. It was young Soup, who croaked, "Water to wash with, sir." By the time Pengolod opened the door, a ceramic flagon of water and a linen towel were waiting, but shy Soup had bolted, clattering downstairs. Pengolod freshened himself conscientiously, for his day was planned out. He meant to break his fast, then depart to explore the Rómenna for a time, and to do some writing for Aelfwine that night. With this firm in his mind, he went down as well.

Things changed as soon as he arrived downstairs. Aelfwine was already at work. He had donned a linen apron over his yellow tunic and rolled up his blue sleeves, and he sat precisely ruling lines upon a stack of pages. After determining that Pengolod had slept well and been pleased with his room, Aelfwine explained. "We've got a huge job on here. A great ship is being built and needs maps and ships' logs. Usually it would fall to a greater scribes' house, but the biggest one had summer-fever in their workshop, and sickness clings to vellum and cloth, it's said. It's the last thing they wanted on the new boat. The job came in late, as all good jobs do; it is due in a week. I should have worked more yesterday, but, well, meeting an Elf!"

Pengolod was drawn in by the sight of pen on parchment. He asked about the logs, and the maps, and how much Aelfwine was likely to be paid, before he recalled breakfast. Aelfwine said of that, "Working days, we have a proper dinner, but since I'm not married we make do with a workingman's fast-break and nuncheon. There's pedlars who come around. In the morning it's the muffin-woman, and in the afternoon it's the pastie cart and the fruit sellers. If you don't eat that sort of thing, we can arrange for what Elves eat?" said Aelfwine, ending on a worried note.

"Fruit is very Elvish, and as for the other things - I had Elvish food for a month unbroken on the boat. Waybread, waybread, fish, and more waybread. Something different would be most welcome." Pengolod turned as a small bell was rung in the street outside, then the shop door creaked.

The ringing bell entered with the person. "Muffin, muffin. Won't you want to keep that door open, ink-man, and get some fresh air in your shop? Goodness!" The new entrant stopped in the doorway. She was a small old woman, wrinkled, but hale and rosy, with a blue kerchief and an enormous round basket slung about her neck by a leathern strap.

Aelfwine, in his workshop area, did not seem lame at all. He sprang up from the table and took the three steps needed to stand behind the store's dividing counter to say, "This is the Widow Ezellen. Widow, the new lodger, Pengolod of Lindon, one of the Fair Folk."

"Valar be kind! Are you really an elf?" cried Ezellen, stepping back.

Pengolod reached up and felt the side of his head, then his chin. "No beard,

pointed ears, too tall to be one of the Khazad - I must be."

Ezellen chuckled at this foolery. "First time I've ever seen an elf standing still, is all. They're always in a boat or walking 'round, a-going somewhere more beautiful than here. Don't suppose you'd buy a muffin?" Pengolod agreed, not quite certain what he was buying.

Muffins, it turned out, were a domed round bun of comforting heft, speckled with spices and fruit. The ones Ezellen drew out of her basket were still warm from their time in an oven. Nothing would do but that Ezellen wait until he had taken a bite and pronounced them as good as elf-bread. Ezellen beamed. "Didn't even bake them myself this morning. Same oven as for five years, but I've sold the pedlar's run, basket, muffin-receipt, and all. The new pedlar, Widow Rothinzil, baked these up."

"Is she still starting tomorrow?" Aelfwine asked.

"Indeedy yes. She'll be walking around in the order I done went about in, until she settles what suits her. Me, I look forwards to putting my feet up a few years, 'till I put them down good and proper in my grave. I'm giving the taverns the list of any fellows who don't pay me their tallies," she added, wagging a strict finger at Aelfwine.

"Tell them I paid you extra," Aelfwine said, handing her some copper coins.

"They'll be thinking you're my sweetheart then, and calling me - hem! Hem! Saving your presence, Master Elf! I must get along, I must. You let me know if Rothinzil doesn't suit." As Ezellen left by the front door, Soup came in through the back, carrying another flagon and pouring out some kind of tea. It was bitter and strong, but its astringency went well with the rich bread.

Pengolod lingered over the brew, asking questions about Aelfwine's materials. Seeing the scribe-table laid out to work, and the tempting sight of the waiting sheets of fine parchment, made his fingers itch. Learning that Aelfwine's ink was ground from the oak-galls of Forostar and that the vellum came from the shepherd's region of Emerië made the itch worse. Pengolod gave in and said, "Perhaps I could help you today, to make up for the time lost yesterday?" Aelfwine demurred enough to be polite, then set Pengolod to the lines and headers for a ledger. This was a master's work. To the side, Soup kept them equipped with ink, quills, and sand for finished pages, and took the completed pages away to dry. In his spare moments, Pengolod smiled privately to see Soup set to writing out practice calligraphy on scraps. Some things about being a loremaster's apprentice never changed.

The bright shop was peaceful and productive for the first half of the morning. After a time, Pengolod looked up and saw the muffin-woman peeking in the mullioned front windows. He gave her a nod; she waved brightly, then bobbed along. "She's done with her rounds, by the looks of it," Pengolod observed. They all found out soon that her tongue had been busy about her pedlar's path. Immediately after she had left, the door began to swing open, and the shop admitted a steady stream of people.

A woman, hauling three children, was the first to enter. Aelfwine took this calmly. Pengolod knit his brows. Of course she would bring her babe in arms in.

But surely a working woman could have set the eldest child, who looked to have eight years, to mind the four-year-old outside a shop that had valuable texts inside? The children seemed on the brink of being too lively. Just as Pengolod was thinking that they looked like mischief, the woman said, in broad Adûnaic, "See, there is so an Elf in the shop, so you be better than good or he'll tell the Valar you're naughty!" Then she turned to Aelfwine. "Good day, master. You're still doing Fair Naming?"

"I am indeed. For the little one?" said Aelfwine, with a nod at the baby.

The older child squirmed as if like to burst, then cried out, "I want one too! You promised us too!"

The mother nodded. "For the lot." In a harried aside, she said, to the children again, "And once you get your Elvish names you'll have to behave finely to match them. You hear that, now?" Pengolod put the pen along by his inkwell and tried to catch Aelfwine's eye.

Aelfwine noticed. Seeing Pengolod's expression, he said in Sindarin, "It is the custom of the people here to give their child a name in Adûnaic or the like, but to also give them a Sindarin name. It is thought to be a noble thing. But nowadays, most of the people here do not speak Sindarin. So they ask those who know the tongue to name them. I thought folk would stop coming for it if I charged a few pennies, but it only brought more of them." As he spoke, he took a battered book from beneath the counter. Returning to Adûnaic, he said heartily, "Now, who's this fine infant?"

The mother proudly plunked the large, lively baby on the counter. "At home we're calling her Zudo." The baby immediately removed one bootee, then another, from her chubby feet, and waved her footgear in the air, laughing. "Zudo, no! Clothes stay on!" chided the mother.

"What do you think of Lorindal as a name for her?" proposed Aelfwine. "It means golden-foot."

The mother nodded right away. "I like that. Hopefully she'll walk on them into a rich marriage. Now, the other two. Stand up straight and don't wipe your nose on your sleeve and talk to the wise man!" Upon talking to the two others, Aelfwine dubbed the quiet young one *Manrumin* (blessed whisperer) and the noisy one *Sulpallan* (wide-roaming wind).

Aelfwine wrote the names out in his book, adding the dates of the children's birth, saying as an aside to Pengolod that he received complaints if he used the same name twice over. Writing the names on pieces of paper, he told the woman the fee for three names. She seemed about to bargain, but cast another glance at Pengolod and said, "All right." Her two other children were glued to the counter, staring shamelessly at Pengolod. He had the impression that it was worth it to her to see the children quiet and still for more than a moment.

Aelfwine watched them go with relief, then looked at the counter and shook his head to see a damp spot where the infant's bottom had been resting. "Soup, wipe up the counter, double-quick. And scrub with the hard soap."

"Does this happen all the time?" Pengolod managed to say.

"Once or twice a week. Usually they'll bring a babe in arms, if they are proud

enough to spend the money. What you saw there happens less often." Aelfwine jingled the coins in his hand, then stowed them into a pouch at his belt.

Fairly soon, they figured out that the muffin-woman had told all and sundry that Aelfwine was hosting an elf in his shop. Several people came in and bought small blank books, or some of the few maps kept in stock. A rich merchant, his clothes clashingly bright, entered pompously. He was vexed at Aelfwine refusing him "one of those big fine books you're working on there." The fast-thinking mother who had come first likely had a fast tongue for gossip as well. For that afternoon, it seemed like every parent who had a child in the cradle felt the urge to give their progeny an Elvish moniker.

Pengolod watched and listened with delight. There was no need for him to leave to explore Rómenna. All of Rómenna was coming to them. There were laboring folk and folk in leisurely rags, families of fisherfolk with skin browned and hair bleached by the sun, vintners from the hills in town to trade, mariners and soldiers of all ranks. The latter men brought no children with them, but they had the names written down for the children they had begotten but never seen. Those who could not read repeated the names aloud until they were stuck in their memory, and took the papers anyway as talismans. Pengolod and Aelfwine's Sindarin asides to each other were an equal delight to the customers. The two scribes were hard pressed to stay grave when a pair of women hauled their toddlers away, one saying to the other, "Not only did we get the names, we heard all that Elvish being talked for free. That's a bargain, all right."

Pengolod's elvish hearing was sharper than that of mortal Aelfwine. So it was that he alone heard what the other woman said, out in the street, to follow this. "Fancy one of the Fair Folk in the house of a clubfoot cripple-born. I always did hear tell they hated ugly things."

He liked the other woman well for her retort. "Fine talk from you - he can't help how he's born. Besides, when's the last time you had the Fair Folk to your house, eh? Since The War, the best-looking man who comes around for you is..." The ugly exchange faded out. Aelfwine had turned his attention to a sailor who claimed he had twins at home, and had heard none of it.

In the few quiet moments, they managed to limn enough of the log-pages to equal a day of Aelfwine's work between them. When the harbor bells rang for the dinner-hour, Aelfwine barred the door and curtained the windows. Leaning against the door wearily, he shook his head. "Usually, things are quieter," he said, apologetic again.

Pengolod lifted his hands. "I am sorry! I had no idea that...well..."

Aelfwine levered himself up and crossed the shop. Pengolod's impression of the morning, that Aelfwine hardly showed halt at all in his shop's space, had proved true through the day. It came out over a longer distance. Pengolod had watched once as Aelfwine had gone on an excursion to the courtyard. He had used his crutch, then. Memory had haunted Pengolod again to watch it, for his adapted stride had been much like that of Rúmil's an age past. He was not much like Rúmil otherwise, to look upon. After seeing the folk of Rómenna stream on through all the day, Pengolod decided that, save for the foot, Aelfwine was quietly well-favored.

"Your look is deep. What are you thinking?" Aelfwine asked.

"I was thinking perhaps I took to you right away because you reminded me of the master I had, long ago. Except that you are better-favored, of course."

Aelfwine sighed. "Yes, but your old master Rúmil had courage. The only chance I'd have to show courage is if Sauron came to Númenor's shores. Four years past, when the heralds called the muster for The War, I went. Soup wasn't my apprentice then; the one I'd been training at the time went down with me. He was a good lad and got signed up. Ciryatan's sergeants turned me down, of course. With the veterans and their tales about, the words 'I would have gone' mean little."

Pengolod weighed his next question in his mouth before speaking it aloud. He felt no shiver of foreboding, so he asked, "Did you ever learn what happened to your earlier apprentice, in The War?"

Aelfwine cheered slightly and stroked his mustache. "He went to the trouble to send me a letter, when they only had the parchment they brought and husbanded. After the battle for the King Gil-Galad, he was garrisoned in Lindon's defense, and was of good rank due to his Sindarin. I never heard from his family, so that means he lived out the war." Aelfwine raised his voice. "Here, Soup! You've worked hard today and we've plenty of coin. What do you say to roast pork from the tavern's spit?" Soup accepted the errand eagerly and went to fetch food.

When he had dashed off, Aelfwine limped to a seat and said, "The War turned everything upside-down for us."

"I note that you all say 'The War.' Has it no other name?" queried Pengolod. "We Elves had named the various battles of it, the Battle of Lindon, the Rout of Eriador, the Siege-break of Imladris. But I left it to the other historians to put a name on it."

Aelfwine leaned back in one of the cushioned work-chairs, drumming his fingers on the wood for a moment. "I never thought of that. No. It is only The War. And perhaps, perhaps..." He thought and spoke on. "It has been our only war."

This was true; so true that it had not occurred to most of the Númenoreans that Pengolod had met, and he esteemed Aelfwine the more for it. "Your people did splendidly well. We would have perished if not for your doughty soldiers," said Pengolod. He had not known, until he said the words, how much the guilt of it had weighed him.

"Worth it, then? I am glad. I saw what it did to us here, at home. Rómenna had the brunt of it, you see. Tar-Minastir's navy and troops were mustered there. More Rómennans, we say, went to fight or sail than had people of other areas of the island. We traders profited - I limned many a letter and many a will. But for many, their sons died, or came back strange-tempered, or are at duty yet."

Thinking of women he had known, Pengolod asked, "What of their daughters?"

Aelfwine smiled appreciatively. "There you show that you are a wise man! Women's tempers changed Rómenna even more. The traders' daughters grew stern and efficient-"

"Women do, in wartime," Pengolod said.

"Or they were resentful of the other women who came to Rómenna, awaiting

the return of their own men. There are more widows than there ever have been, even among mariner's wives."

Pengolod, in a listener's pose, nodded. Now he understood why time itself had been split in the memories of the Rómennans by this event; they spoke of things that happened Before The War and After The War. "Surely many fates have been changed by this..." he mused.

Aelfwine said something unexpected. "I had my grandsire's tales. He remembered when the word went all around Lindon that Sauron was come again. His own father had been of Rómenna, although," Aelfwine coughed, "He had not married my great-grandmother. My grandsire was able to talk his way onto a great-ship and come here by virtue of it, though he did not have a long life-span, by Númenor's measure. He said it was better to be poor and low in peace than a rich man in war, when you could lose every treasure."

"Perhaps you gained your own wisdom from him," Pengolod said.

"Wisdom? What wisdom? I'll show you how wise I am; we'll have a toast to all the wise men." Aelfwine unlocked a cupboard and took out a bottle of metheglin and two fine ceramic cups. They said the toast, laughing, and each downed their shot of honey-liquor.

Pengolod shook his head and began, "Fine stuff indeed! It reminds me of..." Before he could say more, Soup came in through the courtyard door, still carrying the dish, now laden and richly fragrant, and with the addition of a flat loaf of bread under one arm. The shop had been too busy for them to mind the pastie-seller that noontide, so they fell to eagerly.

Pengolod retired to his room when Aelfwine and Soup turned in, but he did not sleep. He was still fresh after last night's elvish repose. It was all to the good, he thought, if all the days were to be as busy as today. He could use the night hours to write out the elvish lore he had promised Aelfwine.

More silent than a mortal could ever be, Pengolod went downstairs. The slight moonlight from the shop's back windows was enough for his sharp eyes to find ink, pens, and the stack of second-best reed-paper. He would sort out who was paying for the paper tomorrow. An elf could do many things by twilight. Writing in detail was not one of them. Pengolod lit a taper, conscientiously placing it inside a taper-glass. After thinking, he began to write something that he thought would interest Aelfwine, an essay on the naming of the different elf-kindreds. It had been one of the set pieces for the advanced students of the Lambengolmor, with the title "Quendi and Eldar."

Pengolod had just set aside the first completed page when he heard the stairs creaking, in an even, yet awkward rhythm. In a few moments, Soup's outsized feet appeared, then his narrow shanks and knobby knees below his night-robe. Soup looked half-asleep, with his arms clenched across his chest. He woke up when he saw Pengolod working. "Evening, m'ster."

"I hope I did not wake you?" he inquired.

"No, just, just going to the privy out in the courtyard." Soup stayed still, as if this errand was not particularly urgent. "And - and, thank you, for not getting me in trouble with my master yesterday."

"Trouble? Whatever for?" Pengolod asked.

"When I didn't know if you were, were you or, or not you. When you first came in. My lord. Um. Sir." After a hand-twisting pause, Soup added, "You've no beard, and your hair and dress - I mean, robe - were so long, and, well, you're so fair it's a wonder."

Pengolod smothered another laugh. "I assure you, among the Elves, I am considered absolutely unremarkable as a specimen of an elf-man."

"But you're here with us humans now," Soup said.

Pengolod paused at the new Adûnaic word, human. It differed from the Elvish names for mortals: apart from the distinguishing *Fírimar*, itself meaning "mortal", there were also "Second-born," "Sickly," "Self-Cursed." Human. The lad meant it as plainly as if he was saying "people." The names that Pengolod was writing out for his own kind made the same assumption, that he referred to people. The Elves were the Speakers, the Star-People, the Light-People, the Deep-knowing-People. What else did mortals call themselves? What weight did the names the Elves had given them carry? And what did they call the Elves, when none were about?

Pengolod judged that these matters were not for the tired lad before him, who was trying to do a good deed by giving thanks. "The lords of my people are fairer far."

"You said your old master wasn't handsome," said Soup.

"That is true. But I saw many fair lords and ladies when I was apprenticed to him."

Soup seemed to wake up further. "Could you tell us sometime more about when you were a 'prentice? Did your master beat you?"

Pengolod put down his pen, deeply alarmed. "Never! Does your master beat you?"

"No, he doesn't." Soup sounded disappointed. "Says 't isn't respectable. Prentice Gimrap down at the basket-weaver's says that his master's got the hardest hand in all Kingstown, and that he's the toughest lad on the block on account of it."

"Kingstown?"

"That's this neighborhood. The King had it built for the working folk fifty years past."

Pengolod set this aside in his memory. "Well, I say that Aelfwine has the right of it. I will tell you somewhat about my apprenticeship, and the noble people I saw in those years. You will learn why I do not name myself fair." Soup sat on the counter and swung his shanks as he listened.



An elvish apprenticeship traditionally lasts a hundred and forty-four years. We call this span of time a long-year; it is how we reckon our great dates. If this seems long, it is because we Elves take a long time, by your measure, to come of age. I went prentice to Rúmil when I was six-and-twenty, but to look at me then, I was as mature as you are at thirteen years. My years of training were done by the time I was eighty. This is how it came about.

Rúmil, my master, had regained his rank within Turgon's court. He was not exactly a lord as the Númenoreans would have it, as in a noble with ships or land and people at his call. He had no title other than Rúmil of Tirion, and he needed none. He was deeply esteemed. He had been born at Cuivenen, the mere of the Elves' awakening by Illuvatar, and gone on the Great Journey to Aman. Once there, of all the Elves, he had been the one who invented writing. Having done so in Tirion the Fair, in the Years of the Trees, he had demonstrated the art to Finwe, an Elvish king. When he had convinced the King of writing's worth, he taught the art to Finwe, and to Finwe's sons and daughters, and their children as well. In a good mood, he would tell me about these princes and princesses, each one better-favored than the last.

His favorite of them all had been Fëanor, a tempestuous noble, Finwe's eldest son. Of Fëanor, Rúmil said, "He was a lord in full when he came to me, a smith of fiery temper. Within two days, he knew my letters. On the third day, I had nothing more to teach him - so he sat down and bettered my work a hundredfold. How I was wroth with him! My letters had been the work of a long-year, and with his gift of creating, he had made them what I had meant them to be, clear, simple, and true to speech. We quarreled a day and a night over it, and in the end, my pride went down before his bettering of my work. I forgave him soon after. He wished me to take a seat of honor in a guild of loremasters, the Lambengolmor. His smile was as mighty as his hammer-arm, and there was no denying either. We were friends; for a time. I disagreed with him long before his end, and moved my alliances to gentler souls." So it had been that he had gone with the Noldor into their exile in Middle-Earth, for the sake of those alliances, and to see again the stars under which he was born.

Rúmil soon established the rhythm of my apprenticeship to him. In the morning, I joined his other pupils of lore and heard his lectures and sayings, with the difference that I brought him anything he needed during this work. He set me to help the scribes in the afternoon, learning their trade from the very beginning. On scraps of paper, I wrote line upon line until Rúmil was satisfied that my hand was good. "Absolutely essential for a loremaster, lad," he said. "Your writing will go far and be your voice, nay, your self for elves who will never meet you. Some may judge it as much for its beauty as for the wisdom of what you say. I am a ruined thing, if I look at myself in the glass, but I bless all the Valar that I still write as fair a hand as ever." This made a deep impression on me.

In the evenings, I was sometimes free. But often I waited on Rúmil in his chambers, as any other page of the court would for a noble. Of this evening duty, Rúmil said, "You won't have anything to be ashamed of in it - not unless you think you're too good to fill a cup for the Lord and Lady of Nevrast." It turned out that he regularly gave counsel to Turgon and Turgon's sister, Aredhel. Rúmil explained my presence by gesturing to me and saying, "He has no family at the court, nor are his kin allied to any of the knights' houses. So he has no reason to not keep your secrets as well as I do." Turgon was content with this, and I was edified further as to why Rúmil had chosen me as his apprentice.

Turgon was widowed, with one daughter, the lady Idril. Though Aredhel was the lady of Vinyamar in name, she spent most of her time in hunting and other

sport. In the day to day life of Vinyamar, Idril did many of the deeds that fell to the chief lady's part. Idril came to Turgon's closed councils with Rúmil more often than her aunt. I thought Idril the fairest woman I had ever seen. Her eyes were cornflower-blue, very vivid against her fair skin, white and rosy. It seemed impossible that her slender neck could hold up the weight of her heavy golden braids.

In later years, I would see Idril grieved and troubled; shadowed by visions; thrown up against more than one terrible fate. My first opinion of her remains unstained, proven all the truer by her later deeds.

Anyhow, back to these counsels. They had a higher purpose than allowing me to admire the high and fair. For Turgon was under a geas, a call of fate, which he was compelled to fulfil with as much secrecy as possible. It had come to our Lord in a vision that Vinyamar was not a safe haven for the long years. He had gone out venturing alone, and been gone two months. The venture had succeeded. I saw him, on a map of Middle-Earth as it was then, mark the spot where he said a new realm ought to be. After the Dagor Agarleb, he had begun to lead craftsmen there. Encamped in a lonely valley, well hid among the mountains, they had begun to build a city. In time, Turgon declared, all the dwellers in Vinyamar must remove there, with enough stealth as to remain secret. Even other elf-folk should not know of this Hidden City. His explanation done, Turgon said, "What do you think of my plan, Rúmil? Some say that you must have gone mad in the deeps of Angband. If you think my plan is mad, then does that make it sane?"

Rúmil looked at the map before him and tapped his lip in thought. Then he said, "I have seen the might of Angband. I have felt how much Morgoth wants to destroy our people. So. A hidden city, to protect us under Ulmo's aegis? Unless we can get in boats and go back to Tirion, I think it saner than anything else, my old student. And what does that make this plan in the end?" They both laughed. "What shall this new city be called, my lord?" said Rúmil.

"I would call it the Song of the Rock, Ondolindë."

"It is a fair name," said Rúmil, with a bow of honor.

After Turgon had gone, but before I left, Rúmil grumbled to me, "Turgon is wise in many ways save one. He is no master of tongues. That city name is never going to take."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Say it aloud. Ond-o-lindë. It falls off the tongue as halt as I am, with that short syllable breaking it up. Ah, well. I am not going to correct him, not after his courage on the Grinding Ice. His deeds there were why I chose to follow him, after all. If the name is to be changed, the people who use it will change it. You'll see." Rúmil proved to be right. A new argot was developing in the valley amongst the builders. They rendered Turgon's Quenya name for the city in the Sindarin tongue, as Gondolin.

Soon, this name worked its way into the letters they sent. By the time it was the only name people were using aloud, Turgon accepted it. He might have been forceful about making people stick to his old name, but when Rúmil mentioned it to him at last, I remember his reply as one of the more lordly counsels I ever heard.

"They have taken the spirit and meaning of the name. I do not mind. Why? The way they act, it is as if "Turgon" and "Lord" meant the same thing for them. They are obeying me, leaving the halls they have builded here and the free trade of the coast, all for my word. Whatever name they put on it, my rightness is unquestioned, in the end."

If you would hear of fair lords, then I must speak of more than Turgon's private councils. I hear mortals say that an elf is accounted of age at fifty years. In sooth, this can fall any time between forty-eight and sixty years. Elf-maidens are reckoned to come of age in the earlier years of that count, but they are wiser by nature, we say. I had been in existence for sixty years when Rúmil asked me to accompany him to a great feast.

Turgon's people had not been the only ones a-building, at that time, when the Elves were young and strong beneath the new-risen Sun. The people of another lord, Finrod, had delved a realm that hollowed a great mountain. Finrod gained the name Felagund, Lord of Caves, by this, and his realm was Narogthron. Finrod held a feast to celebrate the completing of Narogthron. Turgon and his kin were invited. Turgon took his sister, leaving his daughter as chatelaine and one of his lords, one Glorfindel, as regent, and journeyed hence with the most close-mouthed of his attendants and counselors. Rúmil, included in the party, took me with him as his aide.

In later years, I would be very sorry that I had not seen more of the splendor of Beleriand, and the elf-realms at their height. The feast of Narogthron was a taste of that. The High King, Fingolfin, was not there, having stayed in his fastness with his troops. Most of the other Noldorin nobles were. There was splendid Aegnor, a warrior with hair like bronze flame, and his sister Galadriel, tall and fair as a golden tree. She was newly espoused to a lord of the Sindar, the handsome Celeborn. Very proud of her new alliance, she was dressed in Sindarin silk and pearls, causing a sensation among the women in our party. At one end of the highest table glowered several of the Sons of Fëanor, each handsome in their own fashion, dark Caranthir and fair Curufin, and the twins Amrod and Amras. Their brother Maglor opened the revel with his song.

Rúmil had been honored with a seat at the high table. Most who sat there were nobles in sooth, and it was the custom then for one of their pages to attend them during the meal, one servant to each lord. I was a prentice still, and bounden to serve, so I was to take my place in the line of pages. I had just drawn out Rúmil's chair and taken his walking staff when he was addressed. A clear voice called, "Rúmil of Tirion! The tales are true, then. I am not the only one to survive Angband. I will sit by you."

Rúmil sat up and hissed to me, "Maedhros! The eldest of the Dispossessed."

I turned eagerly. Every elf of the Noldor then knew Maedhros' legend, that he had survived Morgoth's torment and been rescued by his dearest friend Fingon. The rescue had been desperate. Fingon had found Maedhros hanging upon a cruel cliff, and had to sever his friend's hand at the wrist to free him. This was the only marring about Maedhros, for he was splendid in his beauty. Tall as a tower, his elegant body clad in close-fitting sable and silver-grey, he was distinguished further by a pure, strong visage and a remarkable fall of fox-auburn hair, worn

unbound for the feast. Yes, he was splendid, and the light in his eyes was terrible; the light of Aman grown too pure - but no, you never saw such light. It was like the flash of light along pure sharp steel. Knowing Rúmil as I did, Maedhros was a wonder twice over, that he had emerged from the torment of Thangorodrim with his beauty - it was beyond handsomeness. Overwhelmed, I half-bowed and stood back to my waiting place. Maedhros never looked twice at me.

However, once this high lord was seated, Maedhros' esquire came and stood by me with a friendly wink. As seemed fitting then for one serving such a lord, he was well-favoured, perhaps a distant kinsman to Maedhros with his auburn hair, though less tall than myself. His name, he told me, was Rodendil. Seeing my youth, he asked if it was my first time, and said that he would show me the way of things that night. Which he did, quite splendidly. I was grateful then for his example. More, as we served at the feast, we were in a prime place to listen as these two remarkable survivors discussed their travails.

"I hear that you did far better than I in Thangorodrim, escaping on your own," said Maedhros.

"Curious. I do not have that impression at all. You see, I did not have to endure more than a moment of him," Rúmil replied. He did not explain who "him" was, it being ill luck to darken a feast with an evil name. "Me, that moment pushed me nigh to breaking. And, unlike you when you were cliff-imprisoned, we thralls were fed. Not much, mind," he said, helping himself to more bread, then proffering the bread-salver to Maedhros. "Just thinking about it gives me a wolf's appetite. I'm surprised you don't eat more."

"I never had the habit of it," Maedhros said, coldly. But he had been one of Rúmil's students, and took the offered bread. "Besides, your place was to work. Mine was to suffer."

"We thralls there talked about you, you know," Rúmil went on. "As did our keepers."

Maedhros brightened with a pained hunger. "What do they say?"

"Those who were not broken said that your surviving, your escaping, showed that it could be done, even after His attentions. Our keepers cursed your name for the hope you inspired. They said it took that much longer to train us." Rúmil's grin was wry.

Maedhros leaned close. His face was inches from Rúmil's seared visage. "Did my escape mean that others suffered more?" he whispered. The lord at Maedhros' right was listening keenly.

Rúmil took a draught of wine. Sharply, he said, "More than what? More than you did? More than the castes of orc-slaves? He was cruel to our people long before you were ever born. What was done to us later thralls was a return to the old ways, I would say...what was done to those taken from Cuiviénen." More gently, he said, "Suffering is relative. I would have let myself lie down and die if I lost my right hand, as you did, for that would ruin my scribe's art. I am not what I once was, but I am thankful for what remains."

The strange light in Maedhros' eyes brightened. He sat up straighter. "I hear you well. I did not lose by His torment. I gained. Now that I know how much we

are hated, how much the world is hated, I will bide by my oath; that He must be destroyed, and our treasures regained. What you tell me shows me how right that is. I hope that someday, I will see those other thralls freed." Such was the power of his presence that I thrilled to hear these words, the great oath of Fëanor's kin renewed before me. I told myself it was a moment to remember, history in the making. Most unfortunately, I was correct.

The lord to Maedhros' right spoke up, saying, "You are wise, Rúmil. We will not forget your sayings. But perhaps we are shadowing your feast."

"Not at all, Fingon. So many folk have been so boringly polite today, it's a relief to have someone speak frankly."

The two of them laughed, though Maedhros did not. "I would speak more frankly with you, if I might. Though I am corrected about doing so at this table," he said, inclining his head to his friend. They spoke of the past, after that, Rúmil recounting the tale of Fëanor that I told you before. Maedhros drank it in, for Fëanor had been his father. The three of them left the table early, so that Maedhros could question Rúmil more in private. We aides were released from service. Rodendil invited me along with him. That night, I learned well that the men of the Sons of Fëanor reveled as fiercely as they defended their leaders' oaths. It was the earliest morning when I returned to our guest-chamber.

Rúmil did not chide me when I reeled in at dawn. He was looking out the guest-chamber's narrow window. "Ah, there you are. Just got in myself. I hope you feasted as I would have, if I had the face that was mine a long-year past, and feet fit to dance." I flushed from embarrassment and asked him if he wanted anything. He said, "No. Or rather, not that you can give me."

He sighed. "My old student was right. He is more himself now, but a certain self. Of all Fëanor's seven sons, he is the one with his father's charm. He and I, we both went through Morgoth's madness, and through to something else, with great loss. I lost what fairness I had. My hröa is a ruin," Rúmil said, with bitter acceptance. "Maedhros has lost his laughter. I feel that this will cripple him all the more. But I cannot say why." Returning to himself, he looked at me and said, "Drink some water, get some rest. I have more thinking to do." When I awoke to day's brightness, he was still silhouetted against the window in his meditations, but not minded to speak of his thoughts further.

Twelve years passed swiftly after that. I became less Rúmil's student and more his aide. There was much to do. It was then that I learned the greater part of my clerking, a trade that stood me in good stead for long years. Gondolin was being completed, and to bring this about took many practical records and missives. Our people were surveyed and sent out to their new dwelling slowly, so that their passing would not be marked upon by evil's spies. We disposed of our goods, bartering things we would not need for things that could be brought with us.

Rúmil was one of the last to leave, being both frail and a good face to put forwards to negotiate with other ambassadors while keeping Turgon's secrets. I remained with him. How well I remember those quiet nights in Vinyamar. He told me many tales; we played at word-lore games; at times, we quarreled, but purely from the strength of our ideas, not from hateful hearts. It was on one of those nights, in the fading winter, that he said to me, "A great task is set for us in

Gondolin. Lord Turgon has asked that the city have the best library in Middle-Earth. Young though you be, I think you will be equal to it as any of the Lambengolmor. This journey will be your proving. If you succeed in the task you are set, managing the most precious texts and scrolls, and clerking the chaos of this great caravan and its supply, then none in the new city will quarrel when I name you a loremaster in full."

Rúmil cut off my effusive thanks. "I don't see why you bless me, lad, I've set you a task that makes rock-breaking for Morgoth look desirable. Fill our cups again from that wine. It's not coming with us; it's our duty to drink the casks dry!"

Even after drinking several cups dry that night, it occurred to me that Rúmil had done this as much to inspire me for the hard work ahead as to praise any diligence or talent I possessed. Rúmil had brought a strong measure of cunning with him, out of Angband, and he was not above using his position to aid those he liked. (He had told me to encourage my family, my parents and sister, to be amongst the first to settle Gondolin, saying this would increase their standing in the city, and they had gone.) I weighed the worth of this, and accepted it with the fourth cup of wine. It still seemed good the next morning, so with a powerfully aching head, I set to work.

Three months later, it was the heart of spring, and the last caravan was due to depart. I felt like I had not ceased working for that entire time. Turgon had returned, and everything had to be done to the best of our abilities, and done to completion. Though some of my boyhood friends were still remaining, I had seen little of them, until the final afternoon. Voronwë came to me, with Elemmakil in tow. I had spoken at times with Elemmakil, for he served the King's most trusted guards in the hall of Vinyamar. Voronwë had been more elusive. His father had been one of the first to leave to build Gondolin. Voronwë, still in Nevrast, had slid from forging ship's chandlery into being a mariner. He had been much away at sea, yet he greeted me as if we had parted but yesterday. "Pengolod, well met. Will you help me with something before I go?" he asked.

Being busy to near madness, I was not of a mind to help until I heard what Voronwë was about. What followed was typical Voronwë, impracticality turned to noble poesy. He had been indecisive about what to do with a small boat his family had owned, a two-sailed ketch, out of reluctance to let it go. It was still moored in a tree-edged cove, and there it seemed likely to stay. It was now too late to barter it down the coast and return, and its deep keel meant it was not a good boat for the shallow river Sirion. More, it had troubled Voronwë lately to be leaving the shores where his mother had died. He wanted to ease her spirit before he left. To do this, he would drape the boat she had once sailed with flowers, and let it go freely out to sea. Would I be willing to help with this?

Who would not help an elf-man succor his mother? I agreed, though it meant that I would labor long and late that night. Voronwë swore by his honor that the few hours from then until sundown would suffice.

I can see by your expression that you think that picking flowers is not a manly pursuit. We honored an elf-woman, remember. What is more, picking enough flowers to fill an entire boat's deck turned into such a destructive venture that I left a libation for Yavanna later that night. As we worked, the three of us

found something of our boyish fellowship again. Elemmakil became as competitive as always as he tried to bring the most flowers. As we brought them in armloads, Voronwë became distracted in arranging the floral bounty pleasingly on the boat. For me, going about the dells of my childhood and the gardens of Vinyamar to find flowers, the task became my own farewell to the life of Nevrast.

By sunset, the deck of the silver-grey boat was overflowing with blossoms, scented flags and lilac, whole branches of cherry and apple-blossom, twined to the mast and garlanding the prow. When this was done, Voronwë went onto the boat, stepping between the blooms, and set the sails as if to catch a full wind. The boat rocked a little after Voronwë left it, then drifted out evenly into the water, as far as its rope would let it, though the sails hung nearly slack. It was eerie, as if the spirit of a seafarer truly was at the tiller. None of us broke the silence as Voronwë undid the boat's rope and let it slide out of his hand, into the water.

The three of us silently watched the flower-laden boat drift away. I watched it with a pang for both my friend's grief and my own sudden misgivings. In that hour, I doubted that the city amongst the stone would be a fraction so fair as Nevrast, the only home I had known. The ebbing tide, made golden in the sunset, took the boat on a clean Westwards path. Voronwë's voice it was that broke our silence, ringing out in one of the strange songs of word-strings that came to him unbidden. His last note faded as the sun fell below the horizon.

Elemmakil patted his arm, and said, "That was fair done, my friend. Surely we should be going? We leave at dawn tomorrow." Voronwë left with us, though slowly, and casting many glances behind us.

I let Elemmakil stride on ahead and said to Voronwë, "You have kin yet, down the coast. Círdan's folk would not turn you away; you are a mariner born. So I must ask, why are you going to land-locked Gondolin?" Away from the sunset-gilded sea, the flowered ship gone, I felt my work pulling at me again, and it seemed well once more that the path of that pull drew me to Gondolin. But, even after all the tales of Gondolin's promise, I did not think that sea-loving Voronwë would be very happy there.

Voronwë had picked up a long gull's feather on the shore-path, and twirled it between his fingers as he ambled. Watching the feather spin, he murmured, "I don't know. I just feel that I must."

At the time, I thought he was feeling twinges of filial responsibility, or perhaps following someone for whom he nurtured a secret fondness. We would not know for many long years what drew Voronwë away from that which he loved; but that is another story. Give a loremaster leave to speak, we say, and you may wish he had never begun! I see your eyes grow heavy with sleep. Do what you were going to do, then return to bed. Aelfwine will need your aid tomorrow.



The next morning, Pengolod received the washing-water and a less embarrassed "Good morning, master," from Soup. Washed, he dug in his trunk. He meant to do today what he had intended to do yesterday. His day's delay had been to his profit, for he had a better idea of what he ought to do to go about Rómenna unnoticed.

Hanging up his green-grey loremaster's robes, Pengolod donned the garb he used to wear out riding, a close-fitting tunic over trim leggings, with boots over the knee. With his green cloak over it, this was somewhat closer to the garb of Númenor. Yesterday, he had gotten used to the vivid colours worn by the people of Rómenna. They vied with each other to have the brightest clothing. And why should they not? There was no need for camouflage in the peaceful city. The greatest danger in Rómenna was falling off a boat. In that instance, bright clothing could save someone's life, showing where they were amidst the waters. Pengolod's Elvish clothing was subdued in comparison. Nonetheless, when he came downstairs, Aelfwine limped in from the courtyard and approved. "That should allow you to see, instead of being seen. If you pull up the hood of your cloak, you'd pass for a visitor from Armenelos."

"Why Armenelos?"

"The men of the court shave their faces clean each day. I hear that they didn't used to do it when the Old Queen ruled." Aelfwine meant Tar-Telperien. "The King started the custom. It made humans look more Elvish, and what the King does..." Aelfwine did not need to finish this sentence to get a nod of understanding from Pengolod. "If you go abroad now, you should miss the crowds of folk going to work."

"I'll break my fast with you, if that's all right. The muffin-pedlar comes each day?"

"Except for Starday, when workers rest. The new one is due any moment. I'll miss Widow Ezellen. 'Tis a little thing, a pleasant pedlar, but it is good to start the day with some news and cheer. I hope the new woman isn't sour or pinching." No sooner had Aelfwine said this than there was the sound of a small bell ringing in the street. Still with his crutch, Aelfwine went behind the counter, grown rather formal, as he had been with strange customers the day before.

The great round basket and the blue kerchief came in the door, the same as yesterday, heralded by the little bell. The person carrying it swayed into the shop. "Muffin, muffin - oh, I can't be bothered with that. You heard the bell. I'm the new muffin-seller."

Pengolod, behind Aelfwine, could not see his friend's face. Aelfwine took a good moment to clear his throat. "Ah. Yes indeed. Widow Ezellen said you'd be by. We usually - right now we take four muffins, not much, but we were steady." As Aelfwine spoke, Pengolod saw him slide his crutch, which had been beneath one arm, down below the countertop. As if disbelieving his own words, Aelfwine said, "She said your name was...Widow Rothinzil?"

The young woman's smoky blue eyes did not waver. She brushed back a long black curl that had escaped from the edge of her kerchief and said, "That is me."

Pengolod was surprised himself at her youth. Then he remembered The War. And with that memory fresh, he had no jests this morning for the muffin-woman.

The Ship-Feast

Aelfwine closed the cover of a newly bound ledger. Satisfied, he said, "That is the last of the ship's logs for the Prince's new ship." He buffed his finger-marks off the pure new leather. "Let us bring all the works together. We'll wrap them up, Soup, and take them to the shipyard tomorrow."

Pengolod had been lodging with Aelfwine for a week. He cleared the large worktable and stood back to admire the work he had helped complete. There were two stacks of blank books and a half-bushel of scrolls. "Those there are ledgers for the ship's pursers, cooks, and healers, and the first and second mate. These three here, with the leather, are for the captain's own use. The scrolls," Aelfwine unrolled one, "are cove-maps for the mates and watches to use. The great maps, showing whole realms and even all of Arda, were made up by royal workmen," he admitted. "I don't mind too much, for I was charged with these." Aelfwine needed two hands to lift a large book, wider than it was tall, bound in sleek brown oilskin, its corners finished with pure gold. Two books identical to it remained on the table. Very proudly, he said, "The ship's own logs."

The next day, the master was as restless as his prentice until it was a good time to deliver this momentous job. They left at midmorning, Aelfwine dressed better than Pengolod had seen him, Soup's face redder than usual as he hauled the books in a barrow.

It was the first time that Pengolod had been alone in the row-house that was Aelfwine's shop. The single chamber on the ground floor was split into shop-front and workshop by the counter and supporting beams, with many cupboards inset on one side. More household-minded tenants might have made the small paved patio behind the shop into a kitchen. The floor above was divided with walls and a narrow hall into two chambers. Pengolod had not seen Aelfwine's room, though he knew it was the chamber that looked over the courtyard, quieter than his lodger's room on the street. The highest floor had the prentice's smaller room and storage. Altogether, the place was somewhat too large for one trader. From the houses on each side, Pengolod could hear more people bustling around, and the noise of children and their calling mothers came in from the courtyard. Sitting there in solitude, Pengolod could feel why Aelfwine took on apprentices and even opened the door to lodgers.

In the silence, Pengolod's thoughts expanded. The past week had been so busy that he had not once thought of continuing his journey to Tol Eressëa. He had been too distracted to make a proper start at his "Essay on the Adûnaic." Instead, he had written out a short piece of Elvish lore for Aelfwine each night, to share in his friend's pleasure of discovery as he read it in the morning. Pengolod knew that, though all but one piece had been new to Aelfwine, it had not been new to mortal men. He had told those tales before. They were, in large part, what was safe to pass on, either very simple matters like the tale of the Elves' awakening at Cuiviënen, or matters that would bore anyone but a loremaster.

Solitary in the shop, Pengolod had noticed something else; a certain asceticism. Whatever Aelfwine did with the coin that came his way, he was not

living lavishly. Perhaps genteel need, as well as the echoing space, led him to take in lodgers. If so, what was he losing by feeding his mind's hunger through his bargain with Pengolod?

Pengolod resolved to leave him something that would have substance even for one of Tar-Minastir's counselors. There was a tome in his luggage upstairs, a work he had shown Aelfwine with pride, for both its green leather binding and its unique summary of Elvish history. He would offer to write out a copy of that for Aelfwine, instead of the short pieces.

At noon, Aelfwine and Soup returned, Aelfwine wielding his crutch with a flourish. "The job is well-received! It has paid the King's lease for a year and left coin for the banker's book, too."

"They were hauling up all the sails on the boat for the first time, and setting all the rigging new. The masts just went up yesterday," said Soup, dreamy as a lad in love.

Aelfwine noted this with a tug at his mustache, the little pull that meant whatever was passing struck him in some way. "The boat will be named and hallowed with its first branch of *oiolairë*, and all who worked to make ship and fittings are to come. All my establishment has been invited to the ship's feast. Of course you're coming, after your help." Aelfwine grinned. "We've got two days to get you in some good bright garb."

Pengolod smiled slyly back; his observation that Rómenna's clothes were almost painfully vivid had become a running joke between them. "Do not fear, my friend, I won't put your bookbinding to shame by fading into the walls. I've somewhat besides the grey and green that I wear. Though we still might want to palm me off as a visitor from Armenelos."

Pengolod was true to his word. He had several garments in his luggage to give him a fair start in Tol Eressëa. Apart from the grey and sage-green layers he wore every day, there was a set of white robes, and a set that had been from Gil-Galad. They had not been a personal gift, though they had been bestowed to honour someone who had been in service a long time; rich silk in Gil-Galad's colours, azure blue and light silver-grey. Aelfwine and Soup agreed that this was colourful enough, and Pengolod bowed and said they were exceedingly kind, considering their own garb.

Aelfwine kept to the blue and saffron that was a sober businessman's attire, the shades crisp for his finest garb. All was blue or dark below his waist, to keep attention from his twisted foot, and the body of his doublet was blue as well, so that his dark crutch would stand out less against it. He explained these things only after Pengolod exclaimed over his dramatic saffron sleeves, gartered with blue and orange ribands. Soup's good clothes had been chosen by someone with more pride than taste. An extremely green tunic was edged with purple brocade strips, and he also had belts and shoe-bindings with many nickel buckles. The tunic was short in the sleeve for the gangling hobbledohoy, and it clashed with Soup's rosaceous face, but Soup said he was delighted because he knew now that green was an Elvish colour.

The feast was held in the ship-yard where the boat had been built. Going

there was the first time that Pengolod had been for an extended walk with Aelfwine. He was very conscious of keeping his long-legged stride slow. Most of Kingstown, he had learned, worked in the ship-yards, and by the traffic in the lanes, they had nearly all been bidden to the feast. Aelfwine was hailed many times as they walked, and Soup, incourteous in his youth, had a tendency to lope on ahead, then loop back to Aelfwine, which led to them losing each other in the growing press once or twice. Pengolod drew up his hood, sensitive to the stares directed their way.

So it was that they arrived at the great ship-yard hall at the waterfront that was the feast's centre. They were able to make their path two-thirds of the way through a huge timbered hall, before the crowd's press held them fast. The vast ship-hall's gates onto the water were open, and they could see the stern of the new boat, taller than many of Kingstown's houses even at its mooring. A great crowd was already ahead of them, packed solid from the quay beside the boat to where they stood. More and more people packed in behind them, a huge varicoloured mob scented with oil of cinnamon and cloves to cover summer sweat. This clashed with the resinous freshness of the hall's garlands, made of many evergreens and sheaves of long-tasseled reeds in bloom. Soup stood on a bench, and others too young to be dignified followed his lead.

Pengolod learned several things he had been shy of asking in the long wait that followed. Unlike when he walked, Aelfwine showed little sign of pain as he stood, despite his turned foot. A respectable family of burghers who specialized in illustrated books were well pleased to talk to Aelfwine. Some stevedores who lurched against them in the press were far less well-spoken than his host, with coarse accents, compared to the burghers in their lisping refinement. In the latter's mincing speech, Pengolod heard the origins of the bad accent that had overlain the elf-language spoken by Rómenna's officials. This imagined properness took the soft "s" sounds of Sindarin and laid them over the Adûnaic language. And it was strange, Pengolod thought, for any elf who learned Adûnaic took care to enunciate its crisp z-sounds, just the same as if they spoke the other Elvish language, Quenya.

At last the ceremony for the ship began. Those in the hall could hear, but not see, what was passing. From outside, there came a series of long bass notes, the sound of conch-horns being blown. A cheer spread back from the crowd on the quay to those in the hall. Soup said, "The Prince is here! He came up along the water outside, in another boat." He took up the cheer of the crowd, and called the name of the Prince, "Ciryatan! Ciryatan!" until his voice broke.

Quiet spread back through the crowd when the sound of vast drums penetrated. The drums were beaten until their thump of doom, and the sound of the wind in the banners, had conquered all chatter.

Then a voice of hollow greatness, amplified with a speaking-horn, called out, "Númenor! Rómenna! Attend to me. Ulmo, Master of the Sea, and Uinen, Lady of the Waters, hear me now. I am Ciryatan, Fleet-Master of the Land of Gift, son of Tar-Minastir. We are here to hallow the ship before us, which has been a year a-building. There is gold in my hands, gold the gift of the earth. I cast this to your waters, Ulmo, that you take not the wood and lives of Men, also of this earth." A silence followed this. "There is silver and crystal in my hands, beauty like the sea-

spray at its fairest. I cast this to your waters, Lady Uinen, to show how we honour your loveliness and love of us." There was another silence. "Give this ship leave to sail your seas with honour and fortune - especially the latter!" Some laughter followed this, rippling out from Ciryatan himself chortling. "Her name is the Sunbearer."

A smaller voice yelled out, "It is said! The ship of our building is the Sunbearer!"

Again Ciryatan's voice boomed. "The Sunbearer is for its first sailing after the Erulaitalë. But the first bough of *oiolairë* shall be laid here now, upon the Sunbearer's prow, by the Lady Laurinquë." Hardly anybody could see the woman fixing the evergreen branch to the prow; it seemed that the lady did this task in silence. A faint cheer from the mooring followed, which grew to a roar as it spread through all the watchers. The horns bawled out in irregular exuberance, and this bedlam was allowed for a moment before being disciplined again by the great drums.

Even though a few folk were still stamping and whistling, Ciryatan said his last. "Yea, the Sunbearer will be the first ship to make a new contribution to our fleet. Other ships have brought world-knowledge from the venturers, or taken our men to war. The Sunbearer is different. Her hold will be filled with the treasures of Middle-Earth, more gold and more silver than ever we cast away. We Númenoreans have returned to Middle-Earth of late - and there, we triumphed. I saw with my own eyes how we are now the mightiest folk in the world! The Sunbearer will bring us back our due." Much interested murmuring followed this.

"Let the feast begin!" The chaos of happy sound returned, and the crowd flooded back from around the boat into the hall. Soon, even though there were more people in the hall, there was also more space as folk spread out into cliques and comfort. Pengolod tagged along with Aelfwine, who found his place among the small traders who had either some learning or some prosperity. Much of the great mob of carpenters and other labourers shifted to the back of the hall.

As the crowd resettled, Pengolod blinked at some folk passing. He recognized one of them, light on her feet without her great basket, by her blue eyes and skin touched with brown honey. "Aelfwine. I believe that is Rothinzil?" Without her blue kerchief, her long black hair hung fully down her back in fleecy curls.

Aelfwine turned. "So it is." He tugged his mustache. "Looks like she's with some friends." She had not seen her customers, and was giving her attention to a tall, broad fellow beside her, following him to the back of the hall.

The matron of the burghers who had chatted with Aelfwine had attached herself to Pengolod as a crowd-mate. She said, "They lay out the strong drink in the back first. Then once they finish setting up the tables, there will be food." The tables, trestles and more benches were being laid out as she spoke. She sniffed. "So unrefined. These feasts are really for the common folk. But we must put on a good show and support the Prince, of course. That makes it worth coming. And the boat's higher crew will come around, and of course you meet good folk in the

trade. We should be able to get seats in a moment."

Another horn blew, this one firmly inside and painfully out of tune. A voice from the centre of the hall addressed them all, over the rattle of the tables being placed. "Dames and men, lasses and lads, goodwives and good husbands, shrews and cuckolds!"

This last form of address drew a general laugh. The fussy woman sniffed, "More unrefinement," but she turned to watch just the same. "Fools. Zanies. They don't dare draw the attention of Lord Ossë with an offering, you see. He is so capricious, with his storms and his rages, he is as like to be offended as to be pleased by anything formal. So instead, these mummers have their play after the ritual, to distract Ossë and make him laugh instead of rage."

This time, Pengolod was able to see. The first of the fools rolled out into a space at the centre of the tables. It was scarcely a metaphor to say he rolled, for he had a great belly and limbs thick enough that his feet and hands seemed small. His dark beard brushed a shirt of a surprisingly noble colour, entirely purple, and dark locks straggled lank on his brow below an off-kilter tin crown.

His voice rolled like his stride. "Where's the ship, good people? Where's the ship, I say? The Little King has something for the ship! The right prince has doused her prow in gold and silver, and had the virgin's branch set, which takes some doing in these times. But she won't sail aright until I've done with her, oh no." He held up a branch of ginger-root and a long chain of dried peppers. "I'll peel the ginger for going up the ship's arse, just as the traders of Forostar do with their fine horses! With pepper to follow, there won't be a faster ship on the seas, and she'll buck about so hard that only a mariner true can keep to her decks. Which puts most of you louts out of the question, eh?"

Someone in the crowd vented themselves in an insulting reply. The Little King took it in stride. "I put to sea just fine, no barquentine has a deeper belly than I do. It takes a fortune in provision for my hold, and plenty of wind for my sails. With your mouth, good sir - or was it your arse? My hearing is poor - I should have plenty. And where my crew? Where my lads? Where are those darling delinquents, as maddening as any of your own lords who take your tithes, the Little Court?"

The out-of-tune horn sounded and a motley crew spilled from the back of the crowd, some gawky, some lardy, one or two of them half the height of a normal man. The Little King gestured to them. "Here they come, late as ever, it's only the money makes them attend. Thus they show that they are true lords! Come, my courtiers, did you hear our good Prince's words? We sail to win treasure in battle!"

The ragged procession immediately turned around and made as if to slink away. The crowd was beginning to laugh.

The Little King retorted, "Not this very night, you cravens. We're feasting first."

They turned about with exaggerated joy and, tumbling, capering, and staggering, unified their disorder before the Little King. Over their heads, the Little King said to the crowd, "See? That's how a fair court is ruled! But what's this? Where's the fairest of you all? Where's my lady with the golden locks, fair as Uinen, light-footed as Vána, my Little Queen? Is she under your tunic-tails, sir? No? I'm

most surprised. I've learned it's the first place to look! What about you..." The Little King blended into the edge of the crowd, chaffing the labourers. Everyone had an expectant air.

From the back where the ragged Little Court had emerged, a powerful figure shouldered through the crowd. It was a man, who, by his brawny thews, seemed to spend his days working the docks in feats of strength. His face was clean-shaven, and he made the other clowns look dignified. Of white cheesecloth was his draped gown, bound with a woman's girdle; of the brightest straw was the long wig sitting unevenly on his pate, sending rough braids along his painted face, and he clattered with strings of glass beads as he moved.

This spectacular grotesque threw his arms open and shouted, in his gravelly voice, "I'm a beautiful elvish lady!"

The crowd greeted this as the ultimate in mirth.

Encouraged, the Little Queen shouted again, "I'm a beautiful elvish lady! But ay-las! My lover fair, our Little King, has deserted me for the Sea!" An exaggerated pantomime of a woman's weeping followed, and the grieving fool was surrounded by the Little Court in a parody of sycophancy. A second group of mummers came out, also dressed as women and maidens. A good half of them were as ill-suited to women's garb as the central figure, but some of them withstood one glance, even two, as passably fair maidens. These all curtsied and the ugliest of them declaimed, in an exaggerated falsetto, "Let us your Ladies aid you! We will find you a new lover!"

"Yes, yes, a new lover! A fine young one! The fairest man here!" The lady-fools dispersed to the edges of the crowd, as the Little King had done, but they went more to where the respectable folk were clustered.

Pengolod was caught between a scholar's rapture and an elf's appallment at the spectacle before him. Aelfwine coughed. "They'll drag some well-favoured youth out there and he'll have to give a kiss. For the main one, it's because the Elves are thought of as beautiful that -" He said no more, cut off by a falsetto whinny in front of them. Two of the lady-fools had discerned their group, and one of them blew a shrill whistle.

"Here's a clean-faced lordling from Armenelos, with the learned men!" they shrieked. Three hands seized Pengolod's wrists and dragged him from the crowd. Aelfwine shouted, and Soup tried to hold Pengolod back by his blue cloak. The lad's attempt to help stayed Pengolod's hand in fighting free, and made even more mischief. He might have kept up his own role of being from Armenelos if Soup's pull had not yanked back the long hood of the blue robe. Pengolod's long hair fell free, save for the braid that drew locks away to show his ears. He was, in an instant, among the clowns with his elvish visage revealed.

The crowd shrieked with shocked mirth upon seeing a real Elf thrown into the mummers' mocking. The ones who had lain hands on him went fearful behind their makeup and pulled back, but it was too late. The coarse Queen of the mummers, following their whistled signal, advanced on them. "Oh handsome one!" he bellowed. "Give a fair maiden a kiss, a kiss for honour!" Forcing his way up to Pengolod, he leaned forwards and bunched up his painted lips. A good half the

crowd took up the call and chanted for the kiss, the kiss, the kiss, stamping their feet.

Several actions sprang to Pengolod's mind. He chose. Raising a hand, he shouted, "Lovely lady, I am honoured!" Then, he took a step forwards, closed his eyes (very firmly) and brushed his mouth against the clown's (very lightly).

The instant's silence hailing this was followed by even more bedlam.

"What's this, what's this?" someone caroled behind them. The Little King had reappeared. Bellying up, he waved an admonishing finger at the elvish intruder. "Fie on you, elf-man, to steal my lovely Queen from me! Go back to the true King's table. You won't have to work to swive your way through the lot of them. They'll all bend about for the likes of you!" The hand he waved turned dismissive. Passing by and dragging the Little Queen a little ways away, he began to harangue the Little Queen about his quest to bring her a diamond from Middle-Earth. The Little Queen wept with appreciation as the Little King gave him a large chunk of bottle-glass wrapped up with wire, and declared that all was forgiven. By the time the Little King had laid his head on the Queen's spectacularly overstuffed false bosom, Pengolod had been able to slide back into the crowd.

The Little King, clearly in league with the feast's servants, had the out-of-tune horn blown again and declared that everyone had to honour the True Court and the great new ship by feasting until they burst. The tables had been laden by now, and the crowd flooded in to take seats.

Pengolod allowed himself to be swept along with Aelfwine and the other merchants. He wound up next to the fussy lady again. She showed herself kinder than she seemed at first, saying, "It's considered good luck for a young fellow who is handsome to put up with that well. I don't know why we let them go on with that foolishness. I suppose because it's the custom."

"Betides, it seems to work! Ossë has let our ships be for the three hundred years they've been doing the mumming. They are damned funny," said her husband, across the table. "True enough about the luck. You'll be the beau of the evening."

Aelfwine offered sympathy in a more welcome form, proffering a carafe of wine. In yet another of the evening's surprises, the wine was extremely good. Pengolod was grateful for this. It gave him something to talk about apart from the recent spectacle, and the Númenoreans striving for propriety around him were glad to fall into the role of gracious hosts.

They had plenty to be generous with. The food was stunning in its excess. Whole sheep and sucking pigs had been roasted on great spits. Instead of the modest white-fleshed fishes that were the staple food of Rómenna, dishes of whole crustaceans were passed about, the shells to be hammered open at the tables, and tunny-fishes lay on platters, also roasted whole so that their fish-skins were golden. Endless dishes and flasks of condiments were used to season all this flesh, each person choosing to taste from salt seaweed flakes, hot pepper in vinegar, intense preserved vegetables, sweet chutneys, a greeny-gold oil, brewed fish-sauce, and spice-pastes. The wines and ales served in plenty were also spiced. Pengolod sought to soothe his palate with some bread, but even this was not the simple rye

bread that set off everyday fish and meat. The feast-bread was rich, sweet, and yellow, with currants in its dough. Eventually dishes of other sweets followed, by which time Pengolod had a pressing question.

"Who is paying for this feast?" he asked Aelfwine.

"The King's exchequer, I believe. The boat was built under the auspices of Ciryatan."

"Hence, his name, the ship-maker," Pengolod murmured.

The older burgher sitting by them spoke up. "Ciryatan has changed many things in the past thirty years, though he himself is but fifty. Tar-Minastir put his care towards the men of learning, for the most part. The Queen before him, Tar-Telperien, her chief love was riding and the hill-country of Forostar. When Ciryatan is king, I think he will place ships first, both for himself and the realm. His favor has brought much trade to Rómenna already." The burgher lifted his cup, with a nod towards his stolid son and wan daughter. "To Ciryatan! May my children see him made Tar-Ciryatan!" Aelfwine repeated the toast. Pengolod only lifted his cup to honour it, and drank. The mortal toast was not for him.

The feast went on. Musicians and other entertainers spread through the crowd. Many of the feasters went out to see the new ship at anchor, and Aelfwine's party was among them. The burghers exclaimed over the width and depth of the new ship's hold. Aelfwine interpreted the intricate runes carved all about the prow. Pengolod nodded at something else on the prow, the *oiolairë* in the moonlight. He said, "I saw your green bough many a time as the ships of Númenor drew into Lindon haven."

His story-teller's instinct was quenched when only Aelfwine had any curiosity for the memories behind those words. For the music from inside the ship-hall had grown louder, and the women wanted to dance. Surprisingly, the burgher urged his daughter to dance with Aelfwine. The girl started, then smiled encouragingly. Aelfwine managed to say, "Well. Uh. Though I...one measure, then, and it please you."

Pengolod, knowing what that measure would cost Aelfwine in pain, thought to himself: *Prove your courage as you may*. Aloud, he said, "Go along. I'll meet up with you inside presently." He was glad to have the chance of some air and space.

Pengolod walked along the quay-boardwalk embracing the great mooring to see the ship in full. A large party of merrymakers passed him as he went to the end of the quay, leaving him almost alone, able to look back and see the ship in full. Her tall masts, with the sails furled, were dark against the stars, and her gilded rails were gleaming in the light from the hall. Pengolod recalled what he knew of Númenor's navy. This made the fifth great ship for Ciryatan. He frowned. Yes, a fifth great ship, fit to carry a king's ransom in treasure. Sunbearer. What cargo was Ciryatan anticipating? And how would he be obtaining it?

"Good evening, my lord," someone said. He started at being addressed in Sindarin.

Pengolod turned to see who had this melodious woman's voice, speaking an elvish tongue in the Númenorean fashion. "Well met, my lady," he replied, in the same language

A lovely woman was behind him, striking by starlight in a white dress. Pengolod's elvish eyes discerned that her long hair was red-gold, her eyes a pale silvery-grey. Her beauty and simple garb evoked his own people. It was simply a pity about her exaggerated courtly accent, he thought, as she said, "It is a lovely night, is it not? I love to see the moonlight on the water, and the swans about the bay."

"It is very fair," he replied.

Pengolod was about to ask her name when she spoke again. "My father is well-to-do. One of our homes is a houseboat."

Interested, Pengolod said, "Truly now? My host's father goes about in such a boat, as a trader."

"Oh! Our boat is much finer. It's just along here, the next pier over. See?" She came up beside him and indicated the boat with a vague, gentle motion.

Pengolod said, "The one with the red sails?"

"You have keen eyes, to see it at night," she said, nearly whispering. He came a bit closer to hear her better. She looked up at him, then down again, smiling. The hairs on the back of Pengolod's neck prickled. He recognized coquetry when he saw it, and there was more than one reason why he wished to rebuff it, quickly.

She was no fool, either, and knew when it was time to play her hand. Her next words were, "You were so gracious inside, when those mocking mummors drew you out and made you kiss their Little Queen. 'Tis true that you were the fairest man there tonight. Perhaps you'd like a real woman's kiss to make up for what you endured?"

Rigidly, Pengolod said, "My lady is too kind. Your fair words are honour enough."

Denying his refusal, she came closer. "I always heard you Elves were honourable towards women. Now I see it. But surely there is honour in a woman's favours freely offered?" She ran her fingers up and down the silken edge of his outer robe, where it lay open along his chest. Arching herself towards him, looking up under her lashes, she murmured, "Nobody is aboard my family's house-boat. It can be very pleasant there."

Pengolod grasped his garment and took it out of her hands. Then he stepped well back. "Lady. All elf-men are honourable to women of all kinds. Yet we never cross our fate through...untoward intimacy...with those who are not our kind, however fair they be." Fortunately, this was as he had said, true for all elf-men. She would not think him strange in particular. He bowed. "Forgive me, lady."

Her lovely face hardened in anger. "There's not a man in the hall who wouldn't be honoured a thousand-fold - not even the highest - keep what honour is to you, then!" She gathered up her skirt and flounced away.

Pengolod's first wry thought was that she acted like someone who was rarely refused what she wanted. His second, worried, was what might pass if someone had seen that drama. For it had been too much to hope that they had stayed alone. When the merry-makers by the ship's stern were quiet for a moment, he could hear a man's tread on the boards. Not far away, either; a keen-eared or sharp-eyed mortal would be close enough to perceive what had passed. He could not leave

without passing this person, as the refused woman had done.

He ambled nearer the prow of the Sunbearer, as if admiring it. The tread came closer, with a prowling evenness. Pengolod brushed back a lock, idly. He wondered how long he needed to continue in this classic elvish feint of seeming distracted by his surroundings while being braced for battle.

Not long. "A good evening to you, elf-man. Very unusual, it is, that an Elf comes to one of our feasts who is not come through the Court."

It was the second time that evening that Pengolod had heard this voice. After his previous conversation, the repeated use of Sindarin made him wary, even though it was natural, coming from this particular person. Pengolod took a sharp breath and turned, composed. "My lord Ciryatan."

The Númenorean lord before him raised his thick brows. He had the famous height of the Line of Elros, and was both taller and stronger than the elf-man before him, a match for an Elvish king. The hair beneath his golden circlet was, like Aelfwine's, tawny, but it shaded into a reddish brown beard, trimmed neatly square. Obviously, the Prince did not follow the fashions of Armenelos. His brocades incorporated vivid shades, reds and oranges and blues, so skillfully woven and dyed that they gave an impression of tremendous richness, not brilliant clashing. "You remember me?"

"Who could forget you, lord, after your triumphs? I am Pengolod of Lindon. I served Gil-Galad closely in The War. I forget little, least of all the commander of the troops who broke the Siege of Imladris. A star shines on the hour of our meeting."

Ciryatan nodded. "Admirable, is she not?" he said, gesturing at the ship beside them. "I can scarcely wait to sail her. Though I have sailed the world, there is nothing like the ships wrought in Rómenna, and the beauties you see along the docks here. But perhaps you, as an elf, are used to fairer?" There was an arch tone to his last words.

Ciryatan had seen what had passed; Pengolod would wager his pens on it.

The loremaster took a step back. "I know little of ships at their finest, my lord. In my travels, I was on my way to Tol Eressëa, but I learned the truth of what you say, that there is nothing like Rómenna. It is a very fair city, and I thought to stay here a time, and learn of your people. After the siege of Imladris, I confess I was enthused at the idea of a feast. The memory of the hungry siege still bites, at times. The plenty tonight has been very impressive."

Ciryatan chuckled. "Things are changing indeed in Middle-Earth, if an Elf comes to a mortal feast and praises the food. I remember the first time I sat at Gil-Galad's table, thirty years syne. To have sat there, and then to have seen you made a fair course for the players of Ossë tonight...I certainly hope you were not offended." Another chuckle followed this, as if Ciryatan had been subtly satisfied by what had passed.

Pengolod's smile flashed. "On the contrary, I thought it a splendid play. Their reference to a piece of your history, Tar-Aldarion's courtship of his bride Erendis, was very subtle. Though they do exaggerate on the whole, for the humour, of course." He gestured to the ship beside them. "Talking about going to battle to fill your new ship's holds with treasure, that is a good example of such."

Ciryatan's fists curled in his brocade, even as his mouth curled in a grin beneath his mustache. "Myself, the players are not my favourite entertainment. Their ludicrous japes often lead to unfounded rumors being noised about. I would not want a visitor like yourself to get an incorrect impression. You will see better of us, I am sure. For now, I must return to the feast. *Navaer*, Pengolod of Lindon." Pengolod echoed the farewell, with a bow. Ciryatan did not return the gesture.

Pengolod stayed on the quay several moments more, cursing his own recklessness in the face of Ciryatan's strange gloating. Surrendering to the inevitable, he went back inside the ship-hall. Back at the table, where Aelfwine was seated again, everyone had the same question: was their elvish visitor having a good time? Pengolod said yes, thinking privately that he would enjoy this feast better in memory, and as a tale to tell. He wished that someone would take away the broken meats and shells strewn about.

Aelfwine alone seemed a kindred spirit. He leaned in and said, "Soup discovered the beer, and he's going to discover his first hangover tomorrow. I should get him home. You can stay and dance in the dawn, if you like."

Relieved, Pengolod said, "No. I will go with you. This feast is a richness, and I have had enough." This was simpler said than done. It took as long to extract themselves as it had done to arrive. Several other traders took the opportunity to extract their apprentices. There was tolerant banter back and forth about this, showing that this boyish misbehaviour was not an exception at feasts of this kind.

Finally free, the two of them hemming in Aelfwine's swaying apprentice, Aelfwine said, "You were gone a good time. Did you have any problems after the mummers' picking you out?"

"Well, actually," Pengolod began, then he stopped. Lowering his voice, he said, "We are being followed." He did not add *again*. Warily, he turned about.

"Sorry, sirs, sorry! We are just going the same way as you, back to Kingstown." Another woman was there, this one a sturdy wench with a wide mouth and a wary strut. Beside her, demure in comparison, was Rothinzil.

"They're on my route, Pudani." Pengolod heard her whisper to her friend, "They're no trouble."

"Yes, we saw you earlier at the feast. With your fellow?" Aelfwine said.

"Oh, he's not my fellow," said Rothinzil.

Pudani smacked one fist into her other hand. "Yea, he won't be anyone's fellow by the time my mates are through with him tomorrow morning. He'll have to sail round to the west coast to get any -"

"Pudani! They are gentlemen. That fool was not," she said. Pengolod saw her worrying one wrist with her hand. The wrist she rubbed was marked with a dark ring of bruises, as if she had been grasped unwilling. "So I was heading home."

Both speaking at the same time, Aelfwine and Pengolod assured her that she was welcome to walk with them. Pudani snorted, and when Rothinzil made to go with them, said to them, "If my friend is not well at home later, I'll get my man to make your feet all match the ink-man's lame leg." Smiling broadly, she added, "Have a good night!"

Left with the three males, Rothinzil barely said anything for several streets,

evidently embarrassed by what her friend had revealed. Finally, she murmured, "I am honoured that good folk take such trouble."

Again, Aelfwine and Pengolod fell over themselves to protest. "You are good folk as well. Ezellen would not have handed you her business if you were not," Aelfwine said.

"Oh, no. Not me. My people are not even full-blooded Númenorean. My mother's people are from The Mud."

Aelfwine explained immediately, "A, ahem, everyday term for Middle-Earth, it being between earth and water." He added to Rothinzil, "The same is true for me, and my grandsire."

Rothinzil looked alert. "Really? Where are yours from?"

"The Firth of Lindon."

Sadder again, Rothinzil said, "That's almost the same as being from Númenor. Mine are from the isles beyond Harad."

"Islands beyond Harad?" asked Pengolod. "The islands where the Fastitocalon swims?"

"Yes. My mother's mother is from there, and told us all the tales. The great turtle that the mariners here name the Fastitocalon, and enormous nuts full of sweet water growing on trees, and many whales. But I was born here," she said, firmly.

Pengolod said, "I was born in a certain place, but it's curious, I always say that I am from another."

Aelfwine nodded, "That would be your elvish city of Gondolin." Pengolod agreed.

"Is it near Lindon?" asked Rothinzil.

"It was never near Lindon," Pengolod replied.

"Could you tell us of it as we walk, perhaps?" asked Aelfwine. "You have spoken of it many a time, but I know little about the place myself, save that you name it the fairest and grandest of cities. The tale is overdue!"

Pengolod longed to hear Rothinzil tell more about her grandmother's islands. Hoping that his tale would prime her to tell her own, he began.



As I said, it is curious how a person may dwell somewhere for many years, and yet say that the place they are from is another place entirely. For most of this Second Age, I have lived in Lindon. I lived in Gondolin for less than a quarter of my life, and Gondolin is no more. But if you ask me where I am from, I will say to you that I am from Gondolin, before I catch myself. So it is that a time and place of joy and beauty may mark us for all our days. I will tell you about it, if you will be patient.

Gondolin was the greatest city of the Elves that ever has been in Middle-Earth. It was made in the image of another city on a hill, Tirion on Tuná over the sea. Many of us went to dwell in its hidden vale at the command of Turgon, our lord, so that we would be safer than in our old realm. Nevrast, by the sea, was

ringed by mountains. I was in the last caravan progressing from Nevrast to Gondolin. It took two months.

The journey made me nearly mad with anxiety. I had in my charge our most valued books and scrolls, as well as my master, Rúmil. Rúmil, having been lamed at the hands of the orcs, was a terror to travel with. He was supposed to ride slowly, but against this advice he would ride with great swiftness up a rise or hill, in order to see the view and regale us with some anecdote. Soon after, he would pay in pain for being so venturesome, and either take it out on his assistant (that was me) in demanding ill-temper, or far worse, grow silent in his suffering. I never knew which I would have to deal with at our camp. We were meant to be travelling as discreetly as we could. When Rúmil finally balanced who he had been with who he was, he was an easier companion.

This was good, for the journey grew harder. A month out, we were forbidden to set fires unless it was utterly necessary. We rested during the day, when our passage might be seen, and travelled in dusk and at night. Our journey had been timed for the moon's waning. The lands grew steep and broken.

We did not know that the worst part of our journey, through cliffs and crevasses, was the last. Turgon rode at the head of our caravan, and one day we were alarmed to see his steed dash ahead into the mouth of a great cave. In a moment, Turgon emerged, smiling on his restless horse. "Through here!" he called. "Come, and see what has been wrought!" Then we knew we had arrived, and were glad.

In time, seven fair gates would be hung along the path we took; beyond a deep tunnel, gates of stone and wood, bronze and iron, a gate for the sun and a gate for the moon, and last and latest, a great gate of steel. Only the gate of stone was in place at that time.

After the narrow tunnel, we came upon a smooth road, easy for the wains and walkers, and progressed rapidly between tall cliffs. Already, we were hailed at checkpoints by some of our people who had come ahead. It was not long, less than half a day, before we emerged into the full sun, and the green sward, and the place that was to be our dwelling.

I had seen it marked on maps, the Echoriath - that is, the Encircling Mountains - locking in a flat round plain, called the Tumladen. Near to the centre, somewhat south and west of it, a hill had been marked on those maps. The mountains were tall and splendid, with snow upon their sharp peaks even in midsummer. The plain was deep among them. Trees on the mountain-slopes blended into green brush and herbs, then an open plain of grass, at that time. All this was fair and splendid, yet it was like the velvet surrounding a fine jewel in its casket. This landscape was wild no more. It was tamed, focused, and given its splendour by the city on the hill in its midst.

Gondolin! The Song of Stone it was, Gondothlimbar, its white walls clean-cloven above the plain, its fair roofs gleaming slate and gilded. Within its high gates were tall, fair-built houses, the like of which I had never seen before, nor many of the Sindar, being built close, side by side, like the houses here in Rómenna. They were fair and spacious, and glad were we to be dwellers in the stone. My family were laughing yet that they, who had been in lean-tos and

platforms amongst the trees, had such a house. They greeted me with joy, and showed me two new pretty nieces born to my sister Thingódhel. They also offered a room they had held in their dwelling for me, in case I came to Gondolin unwed. The room was so well placed, high over a garden with its own balcony and stair, that I took it as my abode gladly.

That city was further named the Secret Place, being hidden deep and well, that all who dwelled there could be free of care. Yet care was not forgotten. It also was the Tower of Guard, Gwarestrin, for all the plain could be surveyed from its walls. Those with a martial bent joined the King's many guards. They it was who would build the seven gates, in the fullness of time. My friend Elemmakil thrived amongst those guards, and told me much of what they were about. Was there a need for defense, we were ready, we believed.

Most of all, our city was Loth-a-ladwen, the Lily of the Plain, blooming like the most artful flower in a king's garden, ravishing and pure. Our own arts blossomed there as well. We had time, and we had peace. Crafters wrought with stone and wood. My family grew the fibres used for elven-ropes and diverse cords, and wove them long and fair. Even more did the dancers and musicians prosper, and the needle-quick and the limners of images, all together making the city fair.

I tell you of the joy that I recall, yet I must own that Gondolin's early years had their struggles. As we learned how to till the Tumladen, there were irregular harvests. Winter proved the tall stone houses somewhat cold. Others less fortunate than I in their dwellings squabbled about resettling. Some things were to be had in plenty, and others grew rare. We loremasters were not outside it. Even as we made books for the King's library, we were driven to writing mostly on reed-paper, since many others also wanted the hides that could be used to make parchment. The greatest change of all was that the people were far more under Turgon's rule as we worked for the common good, and we depended on the lords to redistribute food and other necessities.

My master Rúmil kept a promise he had made to me. Once I had had the precious texts unpacked and placed in the new great library, I was made a loremaster in full. You ask what I received for this service? Since I was not boarding at the expense of the Palace, I was given a stipend each year of thirty sigils of gold. In addition, each two years I had either a new suit of clothes or forty ells of fine cloth and linen, many supplies for my own works, and later, the privilege to serve at the mines of Anghabar only once every six years, instead of every three, my knowledge being considered essential, and Rúmil saying I was near-indispensable. The books we brought to Gondolin filled but a quarter of its shelves. Rúmil noted with immense satisfaction, "We shall be writing for years, every scrap of lore worth having, to fill these shelves as Turgon would have them."

What? No, I did not only work. In time, the plain of Gondolin was made fruitful, a wheel of fields, orchards, and pastures spoked by roads, with the city as its hub. Those fields fostered sport as well, riding and archery for my part. Folk allied to different lords competed in great games and races. Many loved and many wedded; fair children played in the plazas and streets, while trees grew tall along our avenues. In a high place, Turgon put up two fair sculptures of trees, Belthil the tree of silver and Glingal with boughs of gold. Lanterns lit the streets at night, and

in their light, we made merry drinking yellow wine from the mountain-slopes.

Only one great grief did the city have in its first long-year; the loss of its chief lady, Aredhel. She pressed her brother, Turgon, to let her visit some of her kin out in Beleriand. In the wilds, she slipped her escort, and was lost. The shame-faced riders who returned two months later could not say if she lived or died, or where she might have found refuge.

This was when Turgon's daughter, the lady Idril, first came on her own behalf to us loremasters. A meeting of the Lambengolmor had just concluded when she knocked on Rúmil's door and pulled back the hood of the servant's cloak she had worn to hide herself. Seeing me there, she looked at me, and her lovely brows creased. "Master Rúmil, I must talk to you alone."

"Gently", Rúmil said, "You are new to stealth, my lady, if you say such things before a third party. But this might be well. Mayhap another will serve you better than I can."

"No, it must be you, I am certain of it." They closeted themselves briefly for a time. She left soon after, her face intense with thought. When she was gone, Rúmil said, "It is well enough that you heard. Idril wants me to do a rite of scrying. I want to lie low to prepare myself for it, for three days. Tell folk I am working in my chambers, and that I am not to be disturbed. I will take no food, and think long." He confessed that Idril had asked Rúmil to try and foresee if lost Aredhel might return, hoping to gain strength to assuage her father's grief at losing his sister.

On the evening of the third day, I went to the great Palace at Gondolin's centre and brought Idril to Rúmil's quarters. It was not far; he had apartments off the library. His scrying was as follows.

After three days without food, embalmed in thought, Rúmil's spirit was half-free of his twisted body. One of the few things he had done was to light censers of heavy incense. When I brought Idril in, Rúmil was seated on a figured carpet, leaning back and forth, and muttering. Before him there was a great silver bowl filled with water. He looked up and nodded when Idril entered. Muttering slowly became chanting. He was invoking the Valar, using the harsh language that the Valar spoke among themselves, half-singing with strange sounds in his throat as he chanted. I only understood half of it, enough to recognize when he was ready.

Idril was kneeling before the great bowl, as I had directed her. I was by her side, and I offered her a small silver pitcher, full of black ink. I told her, "The question is yours, my lady. So it is for you to pour this ink into the water."

Biting her rosy lip, Idril lifted the silver vessel and poured in a thin stream. Ink spooled and curled in patterns through the clear water. Rúmil's eyes snapped wide. Frozen still, he gazed into the patterned fluids as if he saw through them to strange lands.

Rúmil did not look long before he shook his head. His expression became his own again. Firmly, he said, "Yes. Aredhel will return to Gondolin, and stand before her brother's throne once more."

The face of the lady blossomed with a smile. "Then I may hope! Thank you, Master."

When she had gone, Rúmil said to me, darkly, "She may hope. I have seen that she has more hope than any other here. But hope will not come to her through Aredhel's return." He would not answer me further, nor break his scryer's fast. Saying that he would do so when he had a mind, he sent me away.

Freed, I went out in the city. I could not help but feel some of Idril's exuberance, even though I knew there was a darkness that Rúmil was leaving untold. I was too used to Rúmil and his discretion, and did not feel it as I should have, that night. Gondolin's white stone was pure and lovely beneath the full moon, and the night sky over the Tumladen was an indigo dome. It was the time of harvest-festival, and warm company was waiting for me in several places, to help me set aside my master's ambiguity.

With one jewel taken from its parure, Gondolin still glittered, and thus it remained for long after that day.



Rothinzil's face had opened into enchantment as she listened to the story. Aelfwine gave her an admiring glance, and then said to Pengolod, "You said that city is no more."

"It is a tale for another time," Pengolod said. Having improved the evening, he had no wish to ruin it again with dark memories.

Rothinzil missed all this to observe, "This is my street. Thank you for the good company, and the tale."

"We'll see you on the Starday, then?" Aelfwine asked.

"Count on it," Rothinzil agreed, and she was gone.

Soup, swaying on his feet, hiccuped. "I don't feel so good."

Aelfwine said, "Let's get you home and empty your gullet."

Pengolod lifted his hand. "No, what is good is to drink as much water as you can hold, and let its pureness clean your insides."

Aelfwine said, "By his looks, it's probably going to be both." His laugh was good-natured as they shepherded the queasy lad to Aelfwine's home.

Soup's head ached all the following day. Fortunately for him, it was the weekly Day of the Valar, Númenor's day of rest. Aelfwine had by now approved Pengolod's proposed project, and Pengolod set himself to write for the day, in his chamber alone. Aelfwine, sated with company, had his own errands. Pengolod faced the first day of the week that came after with curiosity. How would Rothinzil greet them? Aelfwine's mustache-stroking had reached compulsive levels, but Pengolod refrained from chaffing him about it.

The next morning, the first person in the shop's door was not Rothinzil. Pengolod looked him over from top to toe. He had the grey livery he had seen on a few at the ship-feast, worn by servants of the court of Tar-Minastir, come from Armenelos. The visitor looked direct at Pengolod. "You are Pengolod the Sage, lately of Lindon, counselor to Gil-Galad?"

"I was," Pengolod admitted.

"Tar-Minastir sends you fair greeting, lord, and says you will honour him by going to Armenelos and being his guest at the blessed day of the Erulaitälë,

walking the pilgrimage to the mountain Meneltarma and witnessing the Midsummer prayer to Illúvatar." He proffered a scroll.

Aelfwine and Soup clustered by Pengolod to read the invitation, silent with respectful amazement.

The first thing that came to Pengolod's mind was the face of Ciryatan, which had not hidden anger well. Perhaps other tale-tellers from the feast had let Tar-Minastir know that there was an Elf in Rómenna. But it was very likely that Ciryatan was behind this summoning. And for what reasons? It was not for fondness on Ciryatan's part, that was certain.

Pengolod smiled, and accepted the messenger's invitation with elvish grace, and resolved to find out.

The Erulaitalë

After the King's invitation, Aelfwine's shop began to fill up yet again with curiosity-seekers. Pengolod took refuge in his room upstairs and wrote away the day. He was still writing an hour before the summer nightfall. Troubles lapped at his mind as he scribed. He had enjoyed Rómenna much because it reminded him of Gondolin. The invitation, hard on the heels of the Prince's conduct at the ship-feast, was reminding him more of lost Gondolin; of its less pleasant side.

Pengolod heard Aelfwine's uneven steps ascending the stairs. He kept up the polite fiction that a knock on the door was needed to call him, and only after it sounded did he open to Aelfwine. "There will be dinner, in a while, and since you turned down nuncheon...Is all well? You have been silent for hours."

"Hours?" Pengolod finally noticed the way the light had changed. "The time did not seem long to me. But it is sometimes that way, with Elves. I've gotten a good deal done for you, to make up for what I missed –"

Aelfwine shook his head. "It's been busy as a sprat-net downstairs. I don't blame you for wanting to be out of it."

An awkward moment passed.

Pengolod felt the air between them, thickening with ambiguity. They had laughed over the feast, but they had had no easy words since the King's invitation. "Aelfwine. Are we friends?"

Aelfwine replied, "Of course!" Then he looked startled, as if amazed at what he had said without thinking. "I wouldn't presume, of course, since you're going to Court. That isn't why I say it. We talk with ease. We like the same matters. What else makes men friends?"

Pengolod exhaled. "Then I am glad. For more words and deeds passed at the ship-feast than I have spoken of, and I think some of them are behind Tar-Minastir's call to me. I could use some counsel. Perhaps we can talk in here."

"Not for Soup to hear, eh?" said Aelfwine, his mustache lifting to one side.

"Definitely not." Pengolod closed the door after Aelfwine.

Pengolod sat back where he had been writing, so Aelfwine seated himself upon the sleeping-couch. Soon Pengolod was pacing back and forth, telling his tale of the ship-feast; what he had thought of being drawn out by the mummers, and his more private encounters, first the fair woman, and then his sharp exchange with Ciryatan. When he finished, Aelfwine said, "I can see why this wasn't for Soup. Hm." He hunched forwards and formed his fingers into a tower. "Surely you misread our Prince? I have never met royalty, myself. Perhaps he was just speaking to you as if you were any commoner. It might not have been Ciryatan behind the invitation. News runs through Rómenna like a sieve. The town is also full of the King's men and mariners, plenty of whom know one of the Fair Folk when they see one."

Pengolod paused. "It is true that Minastir's men met my elf-ship at the docks. And their conduct was like to the herald who came this morn."

"The King wishes the Elves to be honoured whenever, and wherever, they appear. And if Ciryatan wished you ill, why invite you to the most exalted event in

all the year? For such is the Erulaitale." Aelfwine said, bright and proud, "The King goes to the sacred mount of the Meneltarma and gives thanks to the Valar and Illúvatar for Númenor itself. Anyone in Númenor may attend and add their good will to the King's prayers. It is our tradition to make a pilgrimage to each of the three rituals, to go to each three times during our lives; as child, youth, and man. I have gone seven times, even on my lame foot. You may see many wonders in Rómenna, even the Fastitocalon that comes to harbor at times, but they are not the joy of the Erulaitalë."

Pengolod ceased pacing. "This is good counsel. I am over-wary, by the sound of it. I've felt the ill-will of a prince before. It is no small thing."

Aelfwine's mustache twitched with amusement. "Another reason I like you. By now I know that you always have a fine tale up your sleeve. Is your tale of this malefic prince fit to tell over our meat?" Aelfwine levered himself to standing as he spoke.

It came to Pengolod that he, too, was learning his friend's ways. He knew by now that Aelfwine, being proud, would not want Pengolod's hand to pull him up, and that it was better if he nipped quickly down the stairs and let Aelfwine take his own time. The wait for his companion to catch up was not much longer; just long enough to contemplate some of the ineffables of friendship. It was yet a mystery to him, why some people liked each other well on sight, and others were sworn foes after one meeting. *If it was less of a mystery, he thought, I would have been on better footing with Maeglin.*



I have spoken to you of ill-will between a noble and myself. Before I explain what came to pass, I must tell you more of Gondolin, where all this took place.

The last time I spoke of Gondolin, I had told you of Rúmil's prophecy that the lady Aredhel would return to the city. Soon after the prophecy, we loremasters of Gondolin completed the great work of writing as much history and lore as we might for the King's library. The library was one of great splendour, with thousands of books and scrolls – its like has not existed before or since. We had had hundreds of years for our task, and the arts of the Eldar combined with the innovations of the Sindar. Some who had helped us went on to other trades. I took my place as one of the library's clerks and guardians. Rúmil was in charge – in name.

Rúmil had not come to Middle-Earth to be a peaceful custodian; he had wanted to venture and gain new wisdom and knowledge. The great challenge of Turgon's shelves had satisfied him while it had lasted. With this task done, his spirits declined, and his body grew frailer; spirit and flesh are closely linked, for us Elves. Privately, I thought that part of Rúmil's new grimness came from being in Gondolin, where most everything to look upon was fair, and travails and suffering were sliding back in our memories. Later I understood that it was the visions of Rúmil's scrying that had brought on his sorrow and weariness. All I saw then was that Rúmil withdrew greatly, and spent more time in his private chambers.

Eighty years after Rúmil had given Idril his prophecy, it came true. Aredhel did return, and she stood before Turgon's throne. She had been wedded in her

sojourn, and she brought with her a son, Maeglin, old enough to have come of age. Her husband, Eöl, followed after, not of her will. And before that throne, Eöl, attempting to slay his son in madness and wrath, slew Aredhel instead. Turgon commanded that Eöl be put to death for his crime; Maeglin did not protest. To us common folk of Gondolin, this series of events was a bewildering horror, and we lamented much.

My sister Thingodhel had raised her four children, then taken up the trade of keeping lore of families and kinship. She took down her ledgers to see if we might trace the background of this Eöl through the clans of the Sindar, but we could not, nor could anyone we asked. I never saw Eöl, but the rumor in the city was that Maeglin was like his father only with his dark eyes and black hair. A week after his arrival, I laid eyes on Maeglin, and learned what manner of elf-man he was.

Our lord Turgon took immediately to Maeglin. His sister-son's face and bearing recalled Aredhel's proud, impetuous beauty, and Turgon considered Maeglin's graveness very seemly. Maeglin was to have all the princely privileges that were due to him. Turgon gave him a mentor, the chief of his smiths, and bade that he be shown the city where he had lordship.

It was upon this tour that Maeglin was brought to the library's workshops. On the day that Maeglin came to us, I had been at work gluing new bindings upon old volumes. Thus Maeglin and his escort found me wearing a bespattered apron and my worst shirt. My one handsome feature (though I say it myself) is my hair, and that was drawn back in a single plait, a habit I had from my Sindarin father.

Maeglin's mentor, being a fellow craftsman, introduced me with respect. Nonetheless, I did not find it unusual that the newly arrived lord looked down his straight nose at me. His midnight eyes were remote with unconcealed boredom. Richly garbed for the court, even with half-armor and a sword, he kept well back from my glue-pots. Maeglin only began to attend to me when the mastersmith added, "He is half-Sindarin, as are you, my lord." At this, Maeglin looked me up and down.

It is often difficult, when meeting a person of greatly different rank, to say anything sensible. I asked Maeglin, "And how do you find Gondolin, my lord?"

In a flat tone, Maeglin said, "Through my lamented mother's navigation." Maeglin's guide and I both flinched at this response. His sharp glance pinned me thoroughly. "And you're a loremaster. What does that mean? Were you a servant of my mother's? She read and wrote better than anyone else in my father's halls."

I suppressed a second flinch, for Aredhel's handwriting had been notably bad. Sidestepping the second question, I told him that I taught, wrote, kept books in more ways than one, and explained what I was doing that day. Maeglin's ennui returned when it became clear I had little to say about his mother. I was relieved to note, on the edge of my hearing, the thump of Rúmil's staff approaching, and concluded my ill-received monologue with, "The leader of all Turgon's loremasters will be here in a moment. He taught your mother, once upon a time."

"Very good," said Maeglin, in lordly approval.

Rúmil was having one of his better days, and he arrived but an instant after I had heard him. "Well met, Pengolod; what is this? Guests on a gluing-day? Pity

you fellows didn't come around later, when we get the wine out." It was midsummer, and Rúmil, in the library back-rooms, had foregone his cloak and hood. All his scars and ugliness were plain to see.

Clearly appalled, Maeglin gaped and reeled back, then clenched the hilt of his sword. His guide intervened hastily, introducing Rúmil as my master's knowledge and courage deserved, and saying apologetically, "This, Master, is Maeglin son of Aredhel. As you know, he is new to our city."

Rúmil peered at Maeglin with his good eye. "Yes, you would be. You've a look of – " The young elf-lord was still staring in horror, and this cut off Rúmil's warmth. Rúmil said haughtily, "We are honored by your visit." To me, he said, "I will be back shortly, with some matters for us to go through. With your leave, my lord." Tactfully, he departed.

There was a moment of hissed conversation between Maeglin and his guide. Maeglin, embarrassed at his own fear and disgust, was blaming the hapless fellow for not warning him. I stirred the glue bubbling over a small flame and tried not to listen until someone cleared their throat and said, "Thank you for your time, Master Pengolod." Maeglin, at this cue, thanked me stiffly as well, and the guide tried to shepherd him along before Rúmil returned.

On his way out, Maeglin looked back at me. Cool and sharp once more, he asked, "Does anyone give you leave to wear your hair so?" His own black hair was also in a single plait, not as long as mine.

"No leave is needed, my lord. It's a very Sindarin way to wear it – I remember my Sinda father braiding it up for me when I was a boy," I said, trying to justify what had never before been questioned.

Maeglin surveyed me with a curl of his lip. He looked at the smith who was guiding him, who had short hair – or should I say, cropped at the shoulders like yours. Then he looked at me again. Without saying anything further, he took up a pair of shears lying by and clipped his long braid off four inches below his nape. We watchers both gasped.

Casually, Maeglin flung his severed braid into the burning brazier that heated my glue. "If that's the way it is here, nobody is going to mistake me for Sinda nor servant." He shook out his remaining hair, looking relieved. Freed from the weight of its length, the locks sprung into black waves around his face, softening his expression. "Come, mastersmith, let us go. We will forego the potters and jewelwrights. I am eager to see the forges again." I paid little attention to their departure, occupied with fanning away the black smoke from Maeglin's burning hair.

Rúmil came back, cloaked and hooded, while I was still coughing. "So that is Aredhel's son. I am told that he's already been taken up by Salgant, the son of the Lord of Harps."

I leaned on the table. "Ai, Valar. Salgant's going to love this tale." Rúmil had been right when he said, my first day as his prentice, that I had an enemy in the House of the Harp.

My family was very interested in my tale of Maeglin. They came to the same conclusion I had; that he was still uncertain in his new home, and would be gentler

when he knew our ways. This was very common, at the time. Gondolin treated the orphaned lordling as if he was a lovable hound-whelp, to be forgiven its trespasses. Too late did we learn that he was more like a wolf's cub. He was nourished as if by meat with the commoners' adulation, the teaching and exchanging amongst the high crafters and nobles, and Turgon's indulgence. This might have come to little but intrigue at Turgon's court, if Maeglin had not been a singularly gifted smith.

What did he gain from that particular art? I will tell you. He was not just a smith, but a prospector as well, and he had his mentor tell him everything that was known about the mountains that ringed Gondolin. This bore fruit at a great council that autumn. We were discussing the disbursement and economy of the recent harvests. I was there for the duller part of my work, clerking, taking notes when Maeglin came late to the council hall.

Maeglin slammed the door open and glared about as if everyone present had personally insulted him. "My lord Turgon, I wish to say that your people are all fools!"

A ripple of shock went through the council. Turgon arose from his great seat, astonished. "Explain yourself!"

Maeglin swaggered into the hall, wearing traveling clothes, and carrying two crude sacks slung over his shoulders. The smith who had been his guide four months ago was now at his heels, and looking stunned. He said naught as Maeglin cried, "For the many long-years of Gondolin, your smiths have scraped for bog-iron, and your folk have husbanded peat-fires and nubs of charcoal like nervous wood-tribes. And all this time the treasure of the earth has been waiting for you!" Maeglin slung down the sacks and drew out a chunk of earth. "Can anyone here tell me what this is?"

"Tis a rock, and a very fine example thereof," quipped the Lord of Harps. His son Salgant, looking alarmed, nudged him.

Maeglin sneered, "Tis a rock; and would you say so to ore of gold? That is the only treasure you recognize. But nobody needs gold. This is iron ore, fine and pure. Aulë's own miners, the Khazad-folk, showed me how to find such. Turgon, a wealth of iron is waiting for you; yea, and a wealth of steel as well, through my arts."

He opened the other sack. "Perhaps you charcoal-pinchers let it lie for lack of fuel to make it. Your smiths' furnaces are too often cold. Let them be idle no more! All the fuel your realm will need for a thousand long-years is folded amongst the ore-veins. Turgon, I bring you the burning-stone of the Khazad, that they call coal. Watch." He strode to the hall's hearth and emptied the sack over the logs there. Several folk cried out to see him smother the fire in black stone. Yet a wonder took place. The stones themselves began to smolder and send out heat. They became burning embers, exactly like well-made charcoal.

Maeglin had timed his revelations to perfection. The gathered nobles and wise ones were not only impressed, but at the ready to give Maeglin laborers to work his mines. Maeglin, in his one humble moment that meeting, asked Turgon if he might attend the nobles' councils in future to plead for his interests. Turgon granted this boon. By the time the council ended, Maeglin was lit from within by a

fire of triumph. He swaggered all the more when he departed, with the mastersmith still following. I was by the door, with the other clerks, and I heard him say, "Of course I am wise beyond my years. I survived a hard teacher." I softened with pity. After all, my goodly family, gentle and loving, were still alive.

Maeglin's harsh nature and his discoveries spurred Gondolin into a new phase, a sharper phase. He gained much power through his knowledge. I have told you that Gondolin had some hungry winters at first. Once Maeglin's mines were producing coal, this happened less, for we put more fields in our limited valley into tillage, needing less timber for firewood. All this benefited Turgon, and he elevated his kinsman in appreciation. Politics sharpened, and one was either for or against the young lord and his innovations. Factions came into being. I would not have thought that there could be even more gossip, but there was.

Soon, Maeglin was established enough that he required his own clerks. I was not one of those who he recruited, and he made his superior disfavour clear enough on the rare occasions that we met. I will spare you the litany of displeasure and ill-luck that came my way through this. Rúmil, and several others, reassured me that it was only my bad luck in having witnessed Maeglin's loss of composure that brought me his disfavour. But the disfavour remained, and the joy of Gondolin lost some of its glitter, for me.



When Pengolod finished his tale, they ate more quietly than usual. Later, Aelfwine drew Pengolod aside for another private word.

"Your tale makes me think anew. I cannot imagine that a Prince of Númenor would wish you ill – unless he was jealous of your success with the fair lady. There is a way for you to be safe, if that is so. How would you feel about taking Soup along to the Erulaitalë?"

"Soup!"

"We didn't want to politic in front of him. I wager neither Ciryatan nor the noble King would either. He is from Armenelos, but he hasn't gone to one of the great rites since he became a youth. With him by your side for the journey and at the camp the night before, you will be well guarded by his innocence."

Pengolod contemplated this for a minute. The boy was at exactly the wrong age for anyone to take much ease around him. He was too tall to treat like a child, and definitely too young to be a man, though of the age when he listened keenly for any scraps of knowledge that would bring him closer to manhood. His bright guilelessness and keen eye for what was happening around him would not escape Ciryatan. "Perfect."

Soup was ecstatic at the prospect, which was presented to him as a reward for his help to Aelfwine. The rest of the week, he ran double errands to show his gratitude, visiting the laundress to make Pengolod's white silks and a borrowed linen robe for himself spotlessly snowy. He ran back and forth from the royal stables three times, responding to the King's assurances they would ride to Armenelos and the Meneltarma, instead of jouncing along in one of the many wains that conveyed the pilgrims to the hallowed mountain.

They left Rómenna at dawn for the day's ride to Armenelos. Pengolod

enjoyed the ride, his first time leaving Rómenna since his arrival, after he corrected Soup's terrible form in the saddle. Soup was at the age where, given leave, he would talk forever if had a listener. Pengolod was free to ask as many questions as he wished about the byres and the folk they passed, and Soup's guileless answers often revealed more than the lad knew. "No, all the land from the hills to the mouth of the Firth is in tillage to the King and the folk of Armenelos. It's called Arandor, Kingsland. Rómenna's just the port and the fishers. Are they richer up there at Armenelos? I guess so. I thought Rómenna was shabby 't first. And there's Armenelos. See, it's on that shelf, at the east side of the Sacred Mountain, higher up 'n Rómenna, so it stays cool in the summer. And all built of grey stone that comes down from the North on great wagons." Even from that distance, Armenelos was contained and formal. Above it, green and guarding, was the mountain of the Meneltarma.

The Númenoreans spoke of the Meneltarma as tall, Pengolod realized, because it was the tallest mountain on the isle. Compared to the sheer peaks of the Echoriath he had once known, or the Misty Mountains, it was still a mountain, but just barely. Low slopes eased up into a smooth cone; a road wrapped about it once, to a plateau that looked south, east, and west. The mountain's peak rose above the plateau, shielding the space from the north wind. The road would be easy for a hale man or woman to walk, though tiring. Pengolod noted some indentations along the westward mountain-road, and wondered what they were. Below both the mountain and the city, there was a great encampment. People from all Númenor had come to the mountain, anticipating climbing it the next morning, and nearly every hawker in Rómenna had come to vend to them.

The multitudes they rode through were like the varied crowds that passed through Aelfwine's shop, and more besides. Many nobles were amongst them, from different regions. There were those newly returned from war, by their uneasy, disbelieving glares, and those who, by their empty looks, had lost someone to that war. Some of Middle-Earth's past was there to be seen. People from the northlands of Forrostar were clearly descended from the straw-haired tribes of Haleth. The deep-eyed, dark-haired folk from the west of the isle were very evidently from the tribe of Beör. Rare and few among the crowd, Pengolod glimpsed the stumpy Drúedain, still a folk entirely apart. Soup gaped after them. "They live in the forests in the middle of Númenor, where they can't see the sea. Imagine never wanting to see the Sea!"

At King's camp, they were escorted to a noble's tent, to be guests until dawn. The King, though their host, was in silent seclusion that night, praying before the Erulaitalë. Their own evening was blessedly quiet, save for the coming and going of servants. After an interval, their host said that the King would be honoured if Pengolod cared to visit Armenelos, and that young Areleinion's kin, hearing of his travels, would be happy to host him until Pengolod was ready to return. Pengolod said, "I would not wish to impose upon the King," and was assured by his host that, indeed, the King was most eager to meet him and show him the wonders of Armenelos, particularly its library. Pengolod managed to express enthusiasm while staying noncommittal, turning the second invitation over in his mind through half the night.

Nobody mentioned it again the next morning, but there were other things to think on. For they joined the vast progress of the Erulaitalë.

As soon as they had – with the crowd of several thousand – begun to ascend the mountain, Pengolod tapped Soup's shoulder. "These caves we pass?"

Soup bowed his head and whispered, "The tombs of the Kings."

Pengolod understood instantly. The tombs were on the West side of the mountain road, facing Aman. Each one had a carved archway. The first one must have been the tomb of Elros, and its entry-way was heaped with fresh flowers, laid down by the people as they passed. As the road turned upwards, other tombs were present, each one with a carved archway. Some had graven names and faces, but as each ruler had a cave, it was easy to link the refuge to the ruler. As they went forwards up the trail, the tombs' carvings increased in both size and ornateness. Apart from Elros, only two of the past Kings merited offerings from the people: the monarch Telperien, who had preceded Tar-Minastir, received fruit and blooms from those who remembered her reign, and, curiously, Aldarion. The entry to his tomb was heaped with scrolls or graven stones, and twigs of green *oiolairë*. Pengolod picked up one of the stones; a common man's name had been scratched upon it. He set it down, and moved along.

The marchers in their thousands were all silent, and all in white. White hoods were drawn up over reddening faces, and children and graybeards were helped along. Yet at the steepest part, the marchers put on a burst of eager speed, and their silence thrummed with a sense of imminent pleasure. Pengolod understood when they reached the plateau where the people gathered.

When they reached the top, a gentle wind struck instantly, cool and refreshing, drawn down from some higher air. Fresh grass brushed around their knees, and each blade, if stepped on, quietly righted itself, so that the multitude stood amidst a sea of living green. Seeing some people looking at the sky, Pengolod turned his face upwards. There, circling surely too far for the mortals to see, were three eagles. Above them, he would have vowed that, though it was day, the dome of the heavens was deeper in its blue than it had been at the mountain's foot. The plain purity of the space, wind and grass, stone and sky, was only fitting. For standing in the hallow of the Meneltarma, the sacred came in with each clean breath and thrummed in the turf beneath their feet.

Pengolod was struck to the heart. He had only felt such hallows, echoes of what Arda might be had it not been marred by evil, once or twice in Middle-Earth. But they had never been hallows of his people. The Elves really had transgressed against the Valar, he thought, and really were earthly, if they had no places as divine as this.

The plateau of the hallow was nearly full with its silent multitude. Pengolod's host had drawn him and Soup to the western edge. They had waited there some time when the silent multitude parted for the King.

Pengolod was touched yet again by unexpected awe. Of all that mortal multitude, Tar-Minastir alone bore ornaments to the hallow, a gem-topped scepter in one hand, a sword in a ruel-bone sheath by his side, and a green branch that bore fringed red blossom, *oiolairë* in bloom. He was leaner than Ciryatan in his

white robes; in his youth, Minastir must indeed have been like to the Eldar. His strong face was indeed clean-shaven. Age had just begun to touch him. His dark hair, bound by a fillet of silver and a white gem, blew about his face, but his grey eyes stayed remote in their exaltation. He had the face of a man carrying a great and somber joy within him, anticipating this hour of communion with the One.

The crowd swayed in obeisance like the grasses as the King went by, progressing to the western brink of the plateau. Soup went to his knees, and stayed there; by a tug at his sleeve, Pengolod realized that he should do the same. The multitude were all kneeling by the time the King came to his place. Then he, the vessel for their prayers, began to speak.

The King's words were simple, and half of them were lost in the endless wind. Tar-Minastir addressed Eru by many names; Illuvatar, the One, the Creator, the Endless, the Song and the Light. He offered up his thanks for the One's many gifts to humans, naming the gift of life in Arda itself, the presence of the guarding Valar, the continuing richness of the summer and the sea, and the gift of victory in their recent battles.

Tar-Minastir held up the flowering branch. Then he laid it down on an undistinguished grey stone, one of a few boulders tumbled about. As he did this, the three eagles swooped down from their height, circling above Tar-Minastir in view of even the weakest mortal eyes. Nobody said anything, or even gasped, but a pulse of joy at the divine sign coursed through them all. Following this, all of them prostrated their kneeling selves in the direction of the stone, guided by the King, who did so first. Pengolod mirrored the crowd. There was no shame in the sign of honor and surrender. He felt himself given fully over to the place and moment.

The King was also the first to right himself. Now lifting the scepter, he addressed the throng. His words were simple. "We live in the Land of Gift, and all that comes to us here are the gifts of the One and the Many, Illúvatar and the Valar. Be blessed. Go forth, and be merry and fruitful. Peace has come again." With this, he lowered the scepter, and began to move through the crowd once more. Once he passed, the folk began to stand. None of them left their places until he had begun the descent from the plateau.

Pengolod watched the crowd. Some looked happily dazed; a few were weeping, and others were thoughtful. Many folk went to where Tar-Minastir had been standing and looked westward for a few moments before leaving. Pengolod, curious as ever, joined the patient throng waiting to see what might be seen. Soup stayed by his side. Though the ritual was over, he was, Pengolod sensed, still eager; by the law of the hallow, he could not speak to explain what everyone was looking at. When they reached the edge, Soup pointed out to indicate where to look.

Pengolod's eyes raked all that was before them. He saw the central plains of Númenor. Like the Meneltarma as a mountain, the isle of Númenor was smaller than everyone spoke of it, the land below them largely in tillage and grazing, with vales here and there of clearly bounded woods. No wonder its mariners were restless. Beyond were the tree-fringed shores, and, past two great spurs of land embracing a bay, the great sweep of the sea. On the horizon, Pengolod saw at first a white glimmer. He fixed his eyes on it and saw there another land, beyond the great gulf of water, the shores of Avallonnë.

Avallonë the fair, Tol Eressëa, Elven-home. One of the eagles swooped down, cutting his line of sight like a curved saber, before soaring to its two mates again. Joined in flight, the trio chevroned towards Avallonë. Pengolod felt the reproach in their unerring path westward; that he, too, should journey without tarrying to what was his. The sight clenched him with the Elves' Sea-longing, even as the idea of departing the hallow wrenched him. He knew now how forsaken the Elves had been all their time in Middle-Earth. Was there this sacredness there, where Elves might know it, or was it never for his folk to feel? Grief and fear touched him, even as the light turned gilded about them.

Pengolod felt a gentle pull on his sleeve turn into a hard tug. Turning to look at Soup, he realized that he had yet again sunk into one of those elvish reveries that seemed peculiarly long to mortals. He must ask later how long Soup had needed to pull at his sleeve. The sun was lowering, and only a few folk remained on the mountaintop. Two of them were their host and one of the King's messengers, hovering in assumption that he had accepted Minastir's invitation.

With all this, it still took a hard internal pull for Pengolod to make himself depart that place of doubled exaltation. He looked back. One other person stayed by the viewpoint, sitting cross-legged, smiling and serene. He looked back and nodded as Pengolod left, then closed his eyes to rest before taking the long path down. Even when, looking back, Pengolod could no longer see Avallonë on the horizon, he glimpsed his fellow pilgrim's silver halo of hair, catching the lowering sun.

As soon as they had descended a seemingly distance, the officials repeated the King's earlier invitation. Still transported from the ritual, Pengolod accepted at last, deeply ashamed of his wariness. After witnessing the Erulaitale, Pengolod felt certain that nothing ill would come to pass in Tar-Minastir's company. Pengolod glanced at Soup. "You are nearly a man, but I cannot leave you alone here."

Soup was flushed after all the sun on the mountaintop. "Papa's a clerk at the court. The messenger said they made the arrangements anyway and sent a message, and sounds like my folks said they'd wait at the bottom for me," he said, looking anxious.

"I would be remiss if I did not make sure you were safe with them," said Pengolod. Soup cheered notably at the prospect of meeting his parents in Pengolod's company. The representatives of the King hovered close behind the elf and the youth.

Once on the path, it went downwards swiftly, and they passed the mouths of the tomb-caves once more. Pengolod looked into the open mouth of one. There was only darkness within. The entire mountain was a riddle, he thought, and when you understood it, you were ready for the mountain's heart. Númenoreans knew well when they were ready, he recalled. They lay down to die of their own will, embracing their mortal fates. Pengolod, like all Elves, was convinced that they were going on to know in full what he had tasted, briefly, today.

Pengolod stopped rigid. Thinking of this, he remembered the man at the top, who had sat and smiled and stayed...Gripped by a chill of intuition, he turned around and looked up the path.

He was rewarded, after a fashion. Some people carrying a white stretcher were the last ones to come down, looking calm and a bit sad. The figure on the stretcher had a white cloak over its face. The carriers did not have smooth elvish steps. They rattled the stretcher, and the cloak fell away. It was indeed the man who had stayed on the mountain, serene still after his chosen death.

Pengolod did not understand why Tar-Minastir's officials, on the way to the palace at Armenelos, kept apologizing about what he had seen on the path.

Armenelos

Still under the spell of the Erulaitalë, Pengolod was bemused by the even dignity of Númenor's City of the Kings, Armenelos. Its tall spires and archways and its joined houses were all made of fine-grained grey stone. For the night of festival and thanksgiving, the streets were adorned with lanterns and garlands of branches, and the white-clad people drew aside and bowed for the riders of the Palace. Pengolod strove to see if, as Aelfwine and others had said, the men of Armenelos truly resembled the Elves in their garb and bearing. Since they, too, still wore the white of the Erulaitalë, all he could tell was that they went clean-shaven, until age took them, and it was no use seeking to resemble an Elf any more. The only beards he saw were grey.

Where the city began to ascend the slopes of the Meneltarma, there was the palace of the King, its clean-faced stone unmarked by any siege, nearly white in the moonlight. Surrendering their horses, they entered through a tall gate. Pengolod turned back to see more of that gate, made with beauty, not defense, first in mind. Arched hallways were hung with varied banners, but no shields or weapons. Pengolod was led through to a green courtyard, where pillars reached to the open sky. Some past King had journeyed to Lindon and been taken by the patterned tiled floors there, Pengolod thought, to have such a similar patio laid out here.

Minastir was standing tall in the garden, between two pillars wound with vines and their starry flowers. He bowed his head, making his crown-jewel flash, and said, "*Elen silumen ontaro.*"

And Pengolod's own tongue turned to stone in his mouth. For Minastir's voice revealed where all the messengers in Rómenna, and indeed many of the nobles who had come to war in Middle-Earth, had all acquired their bad Sindarin accent. Some tutor, long ago, had told him how to treat the s-sounds and end consonants of Sindarin, to gentle their contrast to the harder-edged language of Men. Minastir must have taken it too much to heart, and he made the words too "elvish" for their own good as language true.

Fortunately, Pengolod was meeting a King, so he had a moment to kneel and give honor silently, and recall the rote reply to the ancient hello. "*Gilthoniel a Elbereth*, Tar-Minastir! You speak the truth indeed, in this fair garden of your fair realm."

Minastir held out a hand in fellowship. "Fair words indeed; and do you know you are the first of the Fair Folk to see it? Most of your people who come to Númenor only touch upon our Western coast, and during my reign, your High King has been occupied with war, unable to visit. I am delighted to welcome one of the noble Eldar, come to honour Armenelos at last."

Pengolod smiled and bowed his head, and struggled again to respond. "Noble King...it is most unusual to be greeted in this fashion, purely because of my kindred. Rather, it is I who am honoured a thousand-fold." This was true, but he was also feeling that this was nine hundred and ninety-nine times too much honour for him. At any moment, Pengolod thought, his fancied Elvish nobility would be shattered – he would mention his father being a roper, or Minastir would notice his eternally work-stained hands, currently hidden in his deep Elvish

sleeves.

Pengolod slid his hands further up his sleeves as Minastir confidently declared, "You are too modest for one of the Firstborn, Lord Pengolod! I have seen your name writ in some of our texts of eld, as Pengolod the Sage, and my son Ciryatan said that you were one of your King's counselors for years beyond count. It is my pleasure to give you the welcome that you deserve. Come; we feast this night, for thanks at Midsummer. I hope that our humble celebration, mortal though it be, has some pleasure for your palate."

Pengolod smiled again. "I am certain that it will," he said. They progressed from the garden. Pengolod was distressed that his wit had fled him; all he felt able to produce were empty listener's phrases.

Minastir spoke like a man who was used to not being interrupted, and his speech was all about Pengolod's folk. His long face lit with sincerity, Minastir said, "I assure you, I have nothing but admiration for the Firstborn. You lead the Speaking Folk of Arda in every way, in beauty, art, craft, noble natures, unity with birds and beasts, and most of all, how lucky and blessed your people are to live forever amidst the beauty of Arda."

Pengolod replied, warily, "Elves think mortals admirable for as many reasons, Tar-Minastir, and in addition, fortunate to not be burdened by all of Time."

"That is said also here. It is told that old men feel that freedom more. My time draws on, yet somehow that eludes me." Minastir laughed at that, albeit dryly. "More, you can know the emissaries of Illúvatar here on earth; the Valar. You even have leave dwell in their realm, amongst them. We are luckier than other mortals that we can look upon it. I have a tower in the West, my private retreat. When governance is less pressing, I spend time there in study of sacred lore, looking towards the West in mind and in body."

"I saw Avallonë clearly from the Meneltarma," said Pengolod.

Minastir smiled. "Yes! And long you looked, I heard. Perhaps, in the winter, you will journey there with me and see it from my tower; if you have not gone Westwards already."

Pengolod evaded the invitation by saying, "Your ritual reminded me how lucky I am to be able to look at all. I was in The War."

"That seems impossible, to look upon you now, peaceful and fair. My theory is that the higher creative urge of Eru is purer in you."

Pengolod inhaled, both over-complimented and, as a warrior, insulted. Memory flashed in his mind from the recent war. He could think of nothing but being dragged from his horse into the mire by three orcs, reeking of musk and rotten hides, the fierce flailing and quick stabs that had won his life back, mud-stained and furious, hands stinging from their black blood. He held his tongue. This was a King.

Again, his silence went unnoticed. "Come! First, meet our Queen, my wife; here she is garlanded about by her handmaidens, lovely herself as one of your ladies. Tarinya, my love, come meet one of the Fair Folk."

A woman of austere loveliness, on a bench surrounded by maidens in white, stood and smiled. Like Tar-Minastir, she was taller than Pengolod, though on her part only slightly.

She resembled her husband in another way; mortality had laid its hand upon her, and her cheeks creased and eyes lined as she smiled in greeting. The clear eyes of this Queen looked sad and deep at Pengolod, not into his own eyes – she glanced across his skin. Then she forced her face smooth again and held her head up, sadly. “Welcome to Armenelos, my lord,” she said, gravely. “Here are maidens as fair today as I once was, my handmaids from the five corners of our Isle. Nessamelda, Mallorn, Lairelosse, Aranel, and Laurinquë.”

Each of the young women stood and curtsied in turn, giving Pengolod looks ranging from curiosity to awe. The last one was clearly the star of the group, the most dignified and most secure, even as she was the least curious. With her hair of reddish gold, and her simple, almost Elvish dress, Lady Laurinquë gave no hint that Pengolod had turned her down upon the quay of Rómenna. Pengolod’s eyes widened, and he took an involuntary step back.

The Queen said, “I see Laurinquë’s beauty has made an impression upon you,” and her voice had a note of pride restored.

Pengolod recovered, barely. “With maids so lovely, who could not be moved, my lady?”

Laurinquë curtseyed again. “Perhaps one of the Eldar might not be. No tales tell of it,” she murmured, and gave him an edged glance. “But all tales say what pure and honorable folk you are. Welcome to Armenelos.”

Pleased by this exchange, Minastir said, “My dear?” offering his arm to his wife. They progressed in to the feast. Though Laurinquë fell into step beside Pengolod, she looked straight ahead, her chin as proud as the Queen’s, lips curved in a smirk when she thought Pengolod was not looking.

Welcome to Armenelos, indeed, he thought.

After the first night, Pengolod had realized that his terms here were essentially the same as at his lodging with Aelfwine; he was housed and made welcome in exchange for elvish lore. The King gave as unstintingly of what he had as Aelfwine did, and Pengolod did his best in turn. He had performed direct the lays of eld every night, from the first evening when a courtier had pressed a harp into his hand. Yet the differences between his mortal hosts were vaster far than their similarities, and so too the gulf between Tar-Minastir, a King, and himself. Pengolod still often found himself falling silent with Minastir, or bringing out rote phases. For what to say, what to say, in the face of blind adoration? He bit back half the lore he knew, lest he crush one of the favored illusions of Númenor.

That very day, he had been placed upon the spot. Minastir was eager for Pengolod’s good word about all that was Númenorean, both old and new. On earlier days, other lords (or trusted servants, some with more power than any lord of Númenor’s tilth) had shown Pengolod the city of Armenelos, its stables and newer buildings, and its libraries, and Pengolod had dutifully praised these each night. It had not been difficult; mortals had made the most of the Land of Gift. Declaring himself neglectful, Minastir had himself shown Pengolod the chief

heirlooms of the realm.

So it was that Pengolod came to see the only weapons to hang in the tranquil halls of Armenelos. Some of them, he had seen before. There was the axe of Tuor, not wrapped in a greasy hide as Tuor had kept it at the vale of Sirion, but in a fitted, gilded leather case. Minastir had such delight at Pengolod's recollections of Tuor that he unsheathed his own sword, Aranrúth, from its sheath of ruel-bone, and bade him see if the runes upon it could be interpreted. "I am the arm of the wrath of King Thingol," he had read, aloud. Pengolod had not completed the translation, leaving the next runes unspoken: "Eöl made me." A chill had gone through him at that. Hours later, he could not decide if he had been discreet, or craven, in saying nothing to Minastir of the blade's fell smith, a madness-touched kinslayer and yet an Elf.

Once the last of the treasures had been replaced in their cases or displays, Minastir had unbent, somewhat. "When I was younger, I thought that I would be able to spend the greater part of my days as a scion of the House of Elros, studying Elvish lore. You see, I was not expecting to be Númenor's King."

At his urging, Minastir explained. "Tar-Telperien, may the Valar bless her, lived and reigned an exceedingly long time. By the time she was ready to surrender the scepter, my elder sister was past her prime – even for the line of Elros – and declined. I took the scepter because..." He sighed heavily. "It was the right thing to do. I was younger by far." Pengolod nearly bit his tongue out of vexed curiosity, but you did not ask a King if his parents had quarreled, or if there was a perished sibling in between. "And when it came to it, I found I had many ideas. Why should not Númenor be as an Avallonnë for Middle-Earth? I have striven to improve the lot of our people, to make them more like to the Elves."

"Never have I been to Avallonnë; but I am most impressed, as I have said before, with both Rómenna and Armenelos. There is much new building, all of it done most excellently. Practical – business – seems, ah, well-designed as well." The nightsoil arrangements of Númenor, enforced by the King's laws, were similar to those of the fastidious Elves, and an improvement over every other mortal dwelling he had ever seen. Pengolod tried to turn this improper topic into something more suitable. "I dare say that you have succeeded, Tar-Minastir. This is the fairest mortal realm that ever I have seen."

Tar-Minastir inclined his head and said, with his proud brand of humility, "I have only done the best I could. Hopefully my son will not make my mistakes. From the day he was born, he has known he will be King some day. After his success in The War, I have every confidence in him."

That would explain a lot, Pengolod thought.

Blessedly, after this, Minastir had been drawn away, and Pengolod had been able to do what he had longed to in all his stay: bury himself in Minastir's library. He was glad of the King's audience earlier, for with that known, he was able to wheedle the mortal loremasters into showing him some of the works of Vardamir Nólimon, the King who never had been. He had been Elros' son, and might have been the second King of Númenor, yet was remembered instead for his love of books and lore. By the time Elros stepped down from life, Nolimón was advanced in years himself. He too had given the scepter to another relative, to his son.

Pengolod wondered briefly whether it was better or worse when the Kings did this. Tar-Minastir might have been like free-handed Nólimon, who had taken the time to limn crisp, witty illuminations in the books he loved to make. Nólimon's fate had made him happy. Tar-Minastir's, somehow, did and did not. It was not that being a King suited him ill; it was when he compared himself and his folk, again and again, to the Elves, sowing the persistent seed of envy. These thoughts did not hound Pengolod long, not with the absorbing works of Nólimon to draw into his memory. When the hour for the evening meal came, he went to the feast-hall with a light step, only to stop short in the doorway.

A new figure was drawing attention in the hall, dividing its energy. Ciryatan had returned. His bright Rómenna garb and red beard stood out in Armenelos, defiant and novel among the softly colored, elf-mimicking fashions. Minastir was standing beside his son, and raised a hand to hail Pengolod. "Master Elf! I have not had the honor of introducing you to my son, the Prince Ciryatan."

"He and I have already met, Father, in Rómenna," Ciryatan noted, coolly. He gave Pengolod a nod. "Well met, elf-master. A surprise to see you still here."

Minastir frowned. "You would not be so surprised, had you been at the Erulaitalë."

"Rómenna keeps the holiday, as well, and a transport of soldiers returned around that time. It was fortunate that I was there to greet them and lead the City's rite on the day. Your pardon; I will see my mother to her seat." The Queen had entered. She greeted Ciryatan with a cry of pleasure, and her beauty bloomed when she saw her son hale before her again. When they embraced, Ciryatan's hair was only a little darker than his mother's. He took the seat beside her, and nobody in the hall could say that it was improper when the lovely Laurinquë demurely took the seat beside Ciryatan. Watching Ciryatan welcome this, Pengolod felt his stomach sink.

This meal, while simpler than the feasts of the preceding nights, still involved five courses. A humble note was the oily pepper sauce, the same as could be found on any table in Rómenna, even on the pastie-seller's tray. Here, there was one to each place, in a carved bowl of silver and hard amber, which Pengolod assumed was the refined way to serve it. It was wasted on him; he had given up trying to acquire a taste for it. He suppressed his curiosity about the fierce condiment and filed the question away to ask Aelfwine when he returned. Minastir was beside him, but he was discussing news from Middle-Earth across the table with his son.

Pengolod started when, as if touched by his thought, Minastir turned to him and asked, "And what do you think, Pengolod? Is it wise to support Gil-Galad's new outpost of Imladris? Or should it be as my son says, that we encourage him instead to send folk to the haven at Vinyamar?"

"I cannot say, sir. I have not been to Imladris since The War, and I heard little of what Gil-Galad had planned for it." Pengolod might have, if he had wished, but he had not been interested.

"No need to be modest; you are more informed in this than any counselor who has not been to The War. What are your thoughts?" Minastir pressed.

"Sir, I must demur. I gave some counsel in the past to my lord, based on what

I saw in my travels, or knew from my lore. But I left Gil-Galad's service, and the dealings of Middle-Earth, when I went to go over Sea."

Ciryatan tore a piece of bread in two and dunked it in his dish of pepper sauce. "Then what are you doing here in Númenor?"

"Ciryatan!" Minastir snapped. "We are both corrected by our guest. Let us speak of something we all find seemly. Pengolod, we will not have the minstrel's circle after the meal tonight, so I ask you, tell us one of your tales now. Something to teach all our lords here wisdom and respect for the days of eld."

All the table turned to see how Ciryatan took this rebuke. He calmly finished chewing his bread, then cleared his throat to say, "Please, my father is correct. A tale would be a fine thing to honour our table. We appreciate all wisdom from our esteemed allies."

Pengolod was impressed, both that Ciryatan, put to the choice, showed fealty to his father without even a flash in his eyes, and that he treated the pepper sauce like sweet oil. With both ease and sweetening in mind, he asked, "What manner of tales do you prefer, Prince Ciryatan, that I may speak of something you would hear?"

"A good rousing battle, or a tale of the Sea," he replied. The Queen sighed openly, provoking a chuckle from some of the lords.

Pengolod said, "I like such a tale myself. And we Elves esteem our allies as well. Perhaps you would hear of a mortal hero who, like you and your troops, was the salvation of my people, once. His name is – was - Húrin Thalion."



This tale takes place in Gondolin, the Elves' hidden city of old, in the years of its prime. I dwelt in Gondolin then as loremaster and clerk, with much coming and going to the court of our lord, Turgon. Elves live forever, it is said, but some of these years are better than others. During the time I speak of, our city was established, and our alchemy and husbandry, our artists and crafters, had reached a point we never did excel. Our spirits were also high, and fear had not yet come among our people. For hundreds of years, we had been innocent of war and loss. This changed between the two times that I saw Húrin, the first and the last.

Húrin's herald was the Eagles.

Our lord Turgon had a high tower, the spire of the city, where no-one ascended but him – like to your Meneltarma, in a way. For there, at times, he would speak with the great Eagles of Manwë, and learn news of our folk in the lands outside Gondolin. One bright morning of spring, the Eagles flew over our city, swooping lower than they ever had before, their wingspans shadowing our rooftops, and they called as they flew. Those of us in the streets murmured to see them skim our slates, and wondered if we had heard another sort of call amidst the birds' voices.

By noon, the Eagles were gone, spiraled up into the high airs that they love. Whatever news they had brought Turgon kept him in his tower until the midpoint of the afternoon. When he descended, he did not come down alone; two strange youths were with him. A runner came to summon the loremasters who were wont to sit on Turgon's council. My master Rúmil was among them, and he bade me

follow. "Come, Pengolod. I have heard rumours of this. Any of the Lambengolmor would give the tip of their tongue to speak to these new folk, brought on the Eagle's backs. Either they are Maiar, eagle-spirits who have taken the form of young fellows, or they are the fabled Atani."

Mortal men! You folk of Númenor have shown me more wonder than I deserve. In that year, when mortals were still new upon the earth, five generations from your first fathers, you were a miracle indeed to us Eldar. This hope excited us more than that of meeting a Maia. We smiled in our eagerness as we went to meet these new folk.

Upon meeting them, we immediately saw where the rumour of their being eagle-men had begun. It was born of Húrin's fierce glance. His eyes glinted under ferocious brows, and his features were clean-cut and hard. His hair was tawny gold, like an eagle's feathers catching the sun, and to our amazement, he bore a set of fine mustachios, curved at the ends, and a short beard. No tale says that Húrin is tall. His brother Huor, six years younger than him and still a lad by looks and bearing, overtopped him in height. Yet Húrin's frame was that of a strong-thewed warrior, as if he concentrated the manhood and vigor of a warrior two feet taller in his bones. He looked at the gathering of staring elf-folk with a scowl.

For a moment; then Húrin smiled, and began to laugh, flowing over with mirth. He said to Turgon, "I feel direct at home here, despite these stone walls – your maidens are as beautiful as my favorite girl back home. Now I see why we name her Elfsheen." He spoke the Sindarin tongue, with the facility of one who had learned it in early youth.

"They're even more beautiful, brother," Huor gaped. Húrin elbowed him sharply. To my further fascination, they had an exchange in a different language, like Elvish and yet not, their own mortal language.

As they muttered to each other, Turgon spoke. "It is the law of the Hidden City that none may leave who have found their way here. We did not foresee that any of the Atani would come to us; but these two have been brought by the Eagles of Manwe, who protect us yet, despite the Curse of Mandos. They went to fight Orcs with a band of mortal men, being young but valiant. Separated from them and in peril, the Eagles saw fit to rescue them and bring them here, that their lives might not be lost to evil blades, and thinking that I might benefit from their knowledge. For their lore of the world that is, and their goodly hearts, I bid you my people to welcome them to their new home." Polite bows and nods followed this.

Once or twice before, Turgon had introduced some noble newcomer to our people. Being wise, he had learned what did and did not work in the past, and he introduced the mortals to those of us who watched in turn. My master Rúmil was scarred with many travails, but Húrin and Huor met him without a flinch. Huor, more open and less fierce than his brother, asked if Rúmil was the only aged elf in the city. Rúmil said, "True, I carry many years. But so does Turgon, and so do many others here." At this, they were amazed. And they told us of old age amongst mortals for the first time.

Later, Rúmil said to me, "I see why Turgon has taken them in. It is the same reason I used to take apprentices, that young rawness in life. Young people here, amidst all our sameness, do not have that quality, any more. Turgon never had

sons, you know."

"That is true," I said, "but he has his sister-son, Maeglin." You know, of course, the tale of Maeglin. That day, Maeglin had come late to the gathering, and he said little, though his haughtiness to the mortal fellows had cooled some of the gathering's adulation. For Maeglin was powerful, a fascinator though not beloved. Tall, darkly handsome, and notably strong-willed himself, he and Húrin had taken each other's measure. It had been like grey flint sparking off black iron, leaving both unchanged, just slightly marred by their antagonism.

Rúmil shook his head. "Maeglin came to us an elf-man of age, and darkened by tragedy, his father's crime and his mother's death. He had become who he was to be. Who knows what these mortals are, what they can be? They do not just have the possibilities of the young, but of an entirely new people. Perhaps they never felt the Shadow come to darken them, and never knew the curses of the bright Valar. Turgon will love them."

So it came to be. Within two months, we were all used to seeing them at Turgon's high table amongst his favorites. They ate like two warriors apiece. The simple clothes they preferred became the fashion for the time. Seeing their wonder at Gondolin, the city grew fresh and fair for us again, as well. Turgon himself introduced them to our courtly sparring, and taught them to ride amidst the fields of the Tumlauden. It is told that Turgon brought them into his counsels. I never saw them in the council hall. Surely it happened during those hours spent in seeming pleasantries. The young fellows were gilded, for us, in their evanescence and vigor. Yet they were strangers, too; and at times it is easier to give confidences to such.

They were young and awed enough to take Turgon's suggestions as law. Thus they wound up in the library where I spent my days, learning to read and write several kinds of runes. In those days, many Elves and many mortals did not read fully, though reading was the custom among Turgon's folk. Young Huor had particular delight in the library, marveling over the illuminated pages in many of our works. I noticed that Húrin did not linger over them in the same way. He absorbed what there was to be learned, then turned the page.

It seemed that they had hardly been there at all, just one short turn of the year, when I happened to hear the two brothers talking in their own speech. I had learned it, by then. They had taught it to us loremasters, for we value all languages, and learn them with facility. They might not have known how well I could follow them, or thought I could not hear from where I was sitting. Were they alive, I would be shy of my overhearing; but they are gone on, and their words live in my memory, to reach out and touch you, o King and noble folk.

Huor's first audible words drew my attention. He sighed heavily, and said to his brother, "I suppose you are right about going."

"Do not take me wrongly. I will miss the good living here, probably more than you, since I've had more years to put up with weevil-ridden acorn porridge." Húrin closed the book he was reading. "There's nothing about leaving the city in this book, either." He began to leaf through another tome.

Huor watched his brother skim the book for a time. "Would Turgon let us

leave if we took messages to his kin?"

Húrin snorted. "I plan to offer him more than messages. He asked us if we thought mortals would fight against Morgoth, if there was a great war. He did not ask if we ourselves would fight. We've the clans of our kinfolk and allies – if he lets us go to claim them." He licked a finger and turned a page. "That's what we should be doing, instead of hawking and sparring with blunted blades. If Turgon himself was offered passage back to Valinor, him alone, would he take it, and leave his people to suffer? We cannot stay here while our people suffer, and call ourselves men. Nor will it seem so well to sit at their high table and have ladies chatter with you - and no more than that - when you are of an age to be wedded, or when you are a wrinkled graybeard."

Huor cast a sad look around the library. Húrin, intense in his reading, did not see it, though he did hear when his brother said, more cheerfully than he looked, "You just say that because you're short."

"Back home in Brethil-wood I'll still be short. You'll still be taller than me. Besides, we shall sit at the great table as well, but as lords in waiting, not as living curiosities, and wield blade once more to guard our byres and folk."

Still wistful, Huor said, "Do you think Turgon will let us bring our kinfolk some gifts from here?"

Húrin looked up and grinned, and cuffed his brother, fondly. They set the tomes aside and went away, and I heard no more.

Everyone knows the fair words Húrin spoke to Turgon to plead their cause, and Turgon released them, under vow of secrecy. Soon the Eagles came to the tall tower again, and bore them away, skimming low once more. We knew the young men's voices now, and heard them shout farewell.

Húrin and Huor left us, but their influence did not. They left a wholesome restlessness behind them. The Hidden City did not reveal itself, but looked out from its hiding. It was at this time that Turgon sent forth mariners to try and contact the Valar, to plead for mercy for both Elves and mortals. There was also a trickle of messages, eagle-borne or carried by discreet messengers: to Círdan the Shipwright, and to other lords; the Sons of Fëanor. We heard of the deeds of Beren and Luthien, winning a Silmaril from Morgoth's clutches, and after that, the eldest of Fëanor's sons announced the plans for his great leaguer.

Turgon explained it to his great council. Maedhros was laboring to make a union of the Speaking Folk, mortals, Dwarves, and Elves, and hammer this united might down hard enough to break Morgoth once and for all. We debated much, for we had not been to war for over three hundred years. The lord Maeglin broke his usual silence and showed his fire, telling tales of the dwarves he had known in his youth, and of the foulness infecting the forests of Middle-Earth. For others of us, Húrin and Huor were not far from our minds. After the council, the decree went out: the Gondolindrim would go to war, and if we succeeded, our city would be hidden no more.

I heard little of Turgon's high councils that followed. I was fully occupied learning to be a soldier, with a company of archers. It was a grim and serious year, that one, and too swift. So that our Hidden City would remain so, our ten thousand

soldiers trickled out in small troops, and gathered our forces at the spring of Ethel Sirion, a week's march north. Assembled over the course of two weeks, we sallied forth, marching twelve across, proud in our strength, and proceeded to the field between the end of Hithlum and the start of Thangorodrim, to assemble with the troops of the other folk. Turgon's great trumpet rang, and our multitude was hailed with fierce joy. Yet we only increased their strength by a sixth part. Yes, greater than sixty thousand was the multitude gathered there for war. A fair measure of them were mortal, the tribes of Haleth and Beör, the Easterlings, a thrown troop of the Drúedain, and the men of Dor-Lomin, Húrin's people. He and his brother were there, leading their men, as they had planned so few years past.

The sun gleamed on banners of every color, on hide shields raised upon poles, and on pure dwarvish steel. All this glory was laid out like a seething tide waiting to slam against the high wall of Thangorodrim, that fortress of stone, dark and dirty, emitting its vapors like an evil, patient breath.

We played there a waiting game, each waiting for the other to break and sally forth. Morgoth had the victory of it in the end, goading the Elves of Narogthron with a captive of that folk. Battle was joined with a howling, keening clamour. What chaos! Our forces, in a mighty phalanx with Turgon and his sister-son at our peak, clove through the Orcs to win to the side of Turgon's brother, Fingon, and their shared ally, Húrin. We archers ringed around them as they stood upon a hillock, and heard their words and counsel.

Mortals' battle-fury had Húrin, and his laugh was fell. "We will be avenged for many this day, by the looks of it! See the orc-spawn run!" Yet as he spoke, the gates of Angband creaked. The orcs that we hewed down like sick sheep fled to make way for newer, stronger horrors. First, a veritable herd of warg-wolves ran out, baying for our blood. We archers were busy – and when we were grasping for arrows, the Balrogs came, fell demons twice the height of an elf-warrior, wielding whips of flame. To one side, where the silver and black banner of Maedhros was lifted, chaos erupted. His elf-troops were suddenly busy defending themselves against their alleged mortal allies. Turgon roared for Húrin, and the pair confirmed that all Húrin's men were true.

It is told that we might have won, were there but orcs. I would say further that in the heat of our wrath, we might have won even against the wargs and demons. But that battle was the first time the fire-drakes flew, and they blasted us like leaves. To be well-armored was death before them. In their midst came Glaurung, the mightiest of the cold-drakes, stinking and sneering amidst his scales of tarnished brass. His evil voice rang over the field, "Fools, to defy the Lord of Arda! The meat of three folk will be sweet to my teeth." At Glaurung's laugh, I quailed. The stink of the carrion-field became overwhelming, and blackness stole upon my heart. Such was Glaurung's power, in his prime. When my spirit cleared, I was too occupied surviving to observe the greater movements of the battle. Enough of us had fallen that I equipped myself with a blade. My technique was not fine, but I lived.

Eventually I realized that we of Gondolin were riven from the main elf-host, and driven into retreat. We kept our discipline and stayed by our lords as well we might. Duilin of the great bow, Ecthelion of the spangled shield, Glorfindel the fair

and Maeglin the dark; and Turgon. With his brother Fingon slain in battle, it came to him to be the High King of all our folk, and the forces that harried us clamoured for his head.

When we came up against the foothills of the Pass of Sirion, a hoarse call went out for archers to ring a counsel, and we staggered there. By then more than half Turgon's forces, my kindred-in-arms, had fallen. There I heard Húrin's voice, for the last time. He spoke for his folk, urging Turgon to leave and defend our Hidden City, for the hope of our mingled peoples. There was more debate there than is commonly related in the histories. It was agreed that Húrin and the mortals of Dor-Lomin that he led would take the rearguard, and if fate would have it, follow us. Then it was that Húrin laid on Turgon that rede that if they let in another wanderer, it would do Gondolin nothing but good.

I do not know if Turgon meant to open the Gates to the mortal survivors of this defense. You see, there were none.

They were hewed down behind us as they stemmed the dark tide. Our captains had to use the force of their authority to keep us Gondolindrim on our path. For by the echo of the pass, we could hear Húrin's mighty cry. His anguish at the fall of gentle Huor echoed back to us. After that, like a toll of doom, he cried out, "*Aurë entuluva! Day will come again!*"

We strained to hear it, even in our retreat. It was all hope and all despair, all of the enormous sacrifice of goodly mortals that day, laying down their brief lives to go swiftly to their fate. The tail-end of our retreat lingered hopefully, for the raw, bright cry could still be heard. Until the echo came:

"Aurë entuluva! Aurë entulu---"

That call of courage went down into a cry of anguish. Then, it was overwhelmed by the bawls of trolls and the fiery roar of Balrogs – the sound of rejoicing darkness. Húrin was downed.

Hearkening back no more, we fled, with tears in our eyes – the first of the tears unnumbered shed after that dreadful day.

Húrin sacrificed his life. Though he did not die. As the great tales tell, he was captured by Morgoth, and set in an enchanted chair. From there he was condemned to watch the misfortunes of his kinfolk, a long tale and dark. It is told that he was set free when bent and aged, with his eagle's fierceness changed to raven's battle-bitter wisdom. The best I can tell of him after that is that he once more saw Elfsheen, and laid her in her cairn, before casting himself in the waters to perish. His soul was free from griefs at last; we Elves were bound to endure the dark days that came. Knowing each other for a time lightened our respective fates, though briefly, like the sun of noon.



By now, silvered trays of sweetmeats and tall tumblers of iced drinks had been served to the nobles, who sipped and munched as they listened. Politely, they applauded when Pengolod fell silent.

Pengolod started. He had been so absorbed in telling the tale well that he had felt himself nearly reliving that terrible hour.

Minastir nodded. "A most excellent example. Through Húrin we may all see how even then, mortals admired and sacrificed for the Elves."

Ciryatan added, "Very true, Father. I am pleased that, even then, mortals were known for their prowess upon the field, though we have only one life to live, even now." He bowed slightly in Pengolod's direction. "Thank you, Master Elf, for your instruction. Being reminded of my mortality, I will make the best I can of this fair summer evening, with your leave. Lady Laurinquë. Might I have the pleasure of your company on a moonlit stroll?"

"You certainly may, Lord Ciryatan. One thing I did not like in his tale." Laurinquë pouted, and inclined her chin towards Pengolod. "He admitted that he was afraid."

Ciryatan laughed heartily. "Why, Lady, all that shows is that he has been in battle, and his tale is true. Truer than many." Was his glance at Pengolod sardonic, or knowing? They proceeded proud and decorous from the hall, chaperoned by two more of the handmaidens.

Minastir seemed pleased by this final word from Ciryatan. "You see, Master Pengolod, my son meant no ill when he queried you before. As you can see, now that the week of festival is through, we are at times less formal. I believe I shall take Ciryatan's counsel. Do have a pleasant evening. My dear?" He proffered his arm to his wife, and told the trailing servants, "Attend us in my lady's Moon Salon." The other folk present stood and began to leave, and servants, relieved at the prospect of an earlier night, began to clear the table. The public evening was clearly over.

Pengolod abandoned his last course, untouched since he had been speaking, to go back to his chambers. He was dazed with his remembered grief, and weary; weary as if he had been ground upon for a week. Which he had been. Minastir might be honoured by having an Elf about, but he made of Pengolod what suited him at the time. Alternating between counselor, lordly guest, and minstrel grew more taxing every night. With Minastir's adoration on one side and Ciryatan's confined bluster on the other, Pengolod felt painfully that he was the lens sharpening unease between father and son.

The tale he had told brought up all the battle-sickness that drove him from Middle-Earth to start with. He had known Húrin; had heard the cry of his strength giving out. Speaking of it so deeply was like reliving it. And it had taken him until this night to understand Húrin's restlessness in Gondolin, what it was to be seen for too long as an adored other. He looked out over the moonlit view, unhappy. *Ciryatan is right. What am I doing here?*

Before he could consider the reasons, someone behind him cleared his throat. Pengolod turned to see one of the King's servants standing there, with a salver of sweets and one of the iced drinks in a crystal tumbler. "Refreshments for you, sir," he said. "Shall I put them on the table?"

Pengolod watched as he did so. It had not been the representatives of Minastir who had charmed him into staying. He longed to eat simple meat and drink the red Rómenna wine at Aelfwine's table once more, and talk all this over with his friend. Would Aelfwine have caught it, in his tale, that many had died, and asked who he had known among the fallen? He liked to think so, but perhaps

not. Yet he knew for certain, from the tales he had told at that simpler table, that Aelfwine would have waited until he, too, was done with whatever was served, as a host with an equal, not a lord sated with pleasantries, leaving his guest's care to his servant.

Pengolod noticed that the sleeves of his white robes were graying, growing slightly dirtier each day, from his constant gesture of hiding his hands. He frowned. To send his clothes off to be laundered would open him up to yet more of Minastir's lavish hospitality. He had accepted two gifts so far, and done so with a clean conscience, having entertained Minastir's court four nights running. After more than two thousand years to compare himself to other singers of the Eldar, Pengolod was aware that his chief virtue in such entertainments was infallibly remembering all the verses. When songs could be long enough to fill a folio of forty-five pages, this was something, if not the same as a voice of pure silver. Whatever his deficiencies, the gifts were a fair exchange for a minstrel's labors – and, also, not the sort of hospitality that indicated he was making himself at home in Minastir's household. Fine laundering, or even worse, an offer of clothing, would cross that line. It was time to decide if he would linger under Tar-Minastir's patronage.

Pengolod dismissed the still-waiting servant. Ignoring the tray of sweets, he began to stack up his papers. There were the notes he had taken from the King's library, and the small scrolls bound in silver and gold that had been Tar-Minastir's gifts for his unremarkable minstrelry. The most precious thing that he would be bringing back, in his estimation, was leave to view the Lord of Venturer's archives in Rómenna – where Aelfwine could come with him. He had the rest of the night to compose a suitably gracious farewell to Minastir.

Unien's Race

Aelfwine looked up and squinted. Through the open door of his shop, the evening sun came in, along with Pengolod. He said, "Well met! I suppose you're back for your things, then?"

Pengolod's face fell. "You've taken another lodger?"

"No, but Soup was ushered back two days ago with the message that you were now a guest of the King."

Pengolod folded back the graying cuffs of his white robes. "I was, but I'm back. If you've got space for me once more."

"But of course..." Aelfwine gave him a quizzical look. "It can't be that you missed hearing the carts rattle past in the dawn, or having all the goodwives stomp in and say that you look marvelously elf-like."

Pengolod laughed freely. "I have leave to look at the Venturers' records, which would bring me back to Rómenna at any rate. And your place is very convenient to their great house on the water. You'll want to take a look at some of the lore I've copied from the King's library – wonderful to see the way Adunaic developed over the years. Besides –," Pengolod lowered his voice, "the King's palace had its peering goodwives, too, as we thought it might."

"You must tell me all about it," said Aelfwine, beginning to smile.

"I came back to do so." At the broad ink-stained shop table, they ate a simple meal of smoked fish and bread, and compared what Soup had told Aelfwine with what Pengolod had done. Pengolod had greater appetite for both food and talk than he had felt the past several days.

Next morning, after with the late night of talk for their fellowship renewed and the wine they had shared, Pengolod had some choice curses for the rattling carts in the early morning. Soup brought his morning water with a cheerful hello, and Pengolod managed to make it down in time for breakfast. He had just finished comparing headaches with Aelfwine when Rothinzil, with her usual bustle, entered with her great basket. "Morning, Master Elf," she said. Turning to Aelfwine, she went on. "I said yesterday, didn't I, that he'd be back in time for the race? Nobody misses Uinen's race, greatest of the year."

"You haven't said yet if you're going out in a boat to see the race," said Aelfwine, addressing her.

"I'm not a nobody to miss it. Some friends of mine are hiring a boat, and I'm going in on it. Uinen's day is the women's day, the one day we can do as we please, and we will make the most of it," she replied.

Aelfwine tugged on his mustache and cast a side glance at Pengolod. "Have you, ah, put your money in already?"

"Mmm. We, we all settled yesterday," she said, also with a quick flicker of her eyes towards the listening elf.

"We'll see you on the water, perchance. I've got a small boat of my own. I hope your boat is very fine, fitting with your name."

Rothinzil grimaced. "My family! They thought Númenorean names would hide the source of our darker skins, but instead of naming me after a tree or flower

like all the other women here, they named me after a boat."

"It's a very honourable name," said Aelfwine, gallantly. "Perhaps you'd like the Sindarin version of it? Everyone is familiar with the Quenya, Vingilot. No charge, of course."

Rothinzil, evidently pleased, arranged her arms more becomingly around her basket. "Tell me what it is first, and I will see."

"The Sindarin for Rothinzil, meaning foam-flower, is *Gwingloth*."

Rothinzil gaped, and said direct to Pengolod, "Is it really so?"

"Absolutely correct," Pengolod said, firmly.

"Gwingloth...Gwingloth...that sounds terrible! I thought Elvish was beautiful all the time," she protested.

"You don't have to use it," said Aelfwine, hastily.

Pengolod added, "Other Elvish names are less than charming. Elmo, Argon... there was one lord who tried translating his Sindarin name into Quenya and gave up...he said that Teleporno sounded like an out-of-tune trumpet. I didn't see the problem with it, myself."

"Teleporno," Rothinzil repeated, saying it gently, as if tasting it. "No, that isn't so bad. Gwingloth, though – no, no offense meant. If I change my mind I'll let you know tomorrow." She left, shaking her head.

Aelfwine gazed after her thoughtfully, not touching the muffin he had bought. Pengolod broke his own muffin open. It was flavored with fresh apricots, and its starch soothed his wine-roiled stomach, so he let Aelfwine meditate for a moment before saying, "These seem to be getting better – she's got a fine hand for them. I suppose if she stops here early in her rounds, she can give you the best of the batch, if she's a mind to. She's got a good ear, hasn't she?"

"The people from the south-islands have great singers' voices, it's said." Aelfwine dug into his own muffin. "Yes, very good," he added. "Maybe you're right." He emerged from his reverie with his easy smile. "I can't believe I didn't tell you about the boat race."

"It might have helped if I'd let you get a word in edgewise last night. You've got a boat? Will you be racing?" Pengolod asked.

His voice blunted by a mouthful, Aelfwine said, "No, no, it's just a boat like everyone has, a dinghy with a sail, for one or two fishermen. It's kept at the low boat pier. At times I go out a-fishing in the evening, or Soup hares off in it. That's just what everyone does."

"I saw the little boats all up and down the Firth, when we came in, now that you remind me."

"The boats for the races aren't anything like them, and not like the trade-boats or barges or seafaring barques. They're sleek, with three sails and narrow prows. The lords of each part of Númenor put their best sailors on to crew. Some of them pulled more than a few strings, to keep their best racers out of The War! The lord of Adúnië spent more on one racing boat than on his son's wedding, that's how mad they can go for it. This race coming up is the chief one for the year in all Númenor, centered at Tol Uinen in the Firth. Everyone for leagues about comes down to the harbor, or goes on the water, with food and wine."

"Is there room in your boat for another watcher? I've been in small boats many a time and with much liking, though I haven't a mariner's heart," said Pengolod.

Aelfwine did not answer this directly. "The Prince didn't say anything about this race at all, while you were in Armenelos?"

"Not a thing, no."

Aelfwine looked thoughtful. "The boat-race is his darling. He has even been known to cut short a long venture to return for it, and if he cannot, he leaves messages to be read out, and sends his most favored officers. His barge is always laden with many folk."

Pengolod caught Aelfwine's drift immediately. "He had no idea that I was returning to Rómenna in time for the race. I saw him but one night, and – I told you how it went. We did not like each other well, but I see his qualities, now."

"His boat's loss is my gain, then. When else in my life will I be able to say that?" Aelfwine said this happily, and carefully wiping his hands on a linen rag, unrolled a piece of parchment. "My boat is simple, but my wine will be good. This street's wineshop asked me to limn a broadsheet with the details of the running boats, so that the drinkers there can place their wagers." Reviewing the broadsheet led to discussing the boats, which led to delivering the broadsheet and receiving the bartered payment, which was followed by the pair tarrying at the shop with their opinions about boats of all kinds. It was the first time Pengolod had mingled in a Rómenna crowd instead of staying quiet. The topic of the race eased him amongst them like an elf-boat wending its way through Rómenna harbor.

The morning of the race, master, apprentice, and elf-guest traipsed down to the low dock where lesser boats were clustered like bees against their honeycomb. They let down a rope ladder and jounced into Aelfwine's dinghy. It was perfect for two fishermen and their gear, and for two race-viewers and their victuals and wine-skins (filled, despite Aelfwine's bold words, with well-watered vintage to avoid headaches in the sun). But they were three, and Soup was very cramped in the center seat beside the tiny mast. Aelfwine took the stern and handled the oars with ease, his arms showing themselves firm with muscle.

The boat rocked and swayed in the churned water, amidst the wake of larger boats lurching out, until Pengolod stepped in. He himself paid no heed to the boat's sudden balance, thinking it only natural that it should be firm when weight was balanced at both ends. Aelfwine, pulling out from the dock, said, "The water's uncanny smooth today...or my arms are getting stronger than I recall. I should be hauling for all I'm worth with three in this boat."

"If it's Uinen's race, I suppose she's here and making it easier for everyone," said Pengolod. Beneath the brim of a borrowed hat, he was more absorbed with taking in the crowd. The visibility on the bay was splendid, as was the sight of nigh a thousand boats churning merrily in the water, as well as canoes, rafts, and what seemed to be a few washtubs. It was as if the entire city of Rómenna had tipped towards the sea and spilled all its population onto the water. They all seemed honour-bound to get in the way of the racing ships. In light one-man canoes, men in the tabards of Númenor's troops rowed back and forth swiftly, bawling out to

direct the crowd along the two sides of the harbor.

Aelfwine maneuvered them to a good spot and dropped an anchor-weight. "Small boats can get right up to the front," he explained.

"You said it, good man!" Pengolod looked about, startled. There was another dinghy beside them, the jaunty, painted toy of two prosperous older men. One of them said, in a plummy voice, "Leave the misses on the barges, it's the only way to do it. They're all mad today anyway. I don't know if they do it to honour the Lady of the Waters, or to get back a bit of what they give up to her every time their men go to sea." He stopped at the tolling of a great bell. This signal for the start of the race threw the other boats on the water into a panic, and the ones at the front were soon hemmed in.

Aelfwine deposited the oars in the bottom of the boat beside his crutches and dared to lean forwards. "Soup, take the back so I can tell Pengolod what's going on." They changed places without falling into the water. "Now see, there's the first of the ships coming out." They read off the names of the narrow racing-ships, inscribed in white along their prows, but the main sign telling them apart were the different colours of their sails, varicoloured and harlequin with stripes and squares of fabric. "You can see which is in the lead from a distance, then." Pengolod admired their sleek, shining sides as they cut through the water, leaving smooth runnels of foam behind them, rocking the watching boats. As the racing-ships danced out, a great barge with gilded railings and crimson pennants slid alongside, rousing cheers and waves from the audience, whose hands bloomed with coloured scarves and pennants of their own.

Ciryatan stood at the front of his barge, splendid in gold and scarlet, a great banner of Númenor in his hand and smiling as Pengolod had never seen him. Pengolod recognized several of the nobles, also with more cheer about them than they had shown at Armenelos. He did not need his elf-sight to identify Laurinquë with her bright, uncovered hair. Even the peering mortals beside them saw her clear. "There's our gel. She's a bright one, isn't she? About time the Court favored the Venturer's daughter again. A Rómenna girl," they murmured, approving. Pengolod drew the brim of his hat down further over his face.

He knew that the race boats would sail out soon from Tol Uinen, to sail halfway up the Firth of Rómenna, across the great gulf of water where it started to widen, then back down the other side of the Firth. The royal barge drifted up to a mooring at the side of Tol Uinen, and it was tied fast, as the dhows arranged themselves along a yellow rope held out by two of the canoe-boaters. The watchers shouted and waved all the harder, until the race was begun by Ciryatan lifting the great banner high and the canoe-men diving into the water, taking the rope under. Uinen seemed to love her racers, for a great swell of the retreating tide arched under the prows, and a fragrant wind caught all the banners and scarves before filling the great sails. The noise of the crowd grew deafening and echoed from the Firth's cliffs and the tall sides of Uinen's isle.

Pengolod felt Aelfwine hammering the sides of the boat and laughing, then saw him reach out and grab Soup before the lad fell in. Pengolod smiled, then laughed as well, for the men in the boat by them were placing bets about when the hobbledehoy would wind up in the sea.

As the great crowd waited upon the water, holiday prevailed. Deft dinghies went between larger boats, ferrying people back and forth, or piloted by those who loved the freedom of the water. They took food and drink to exchange as they went. The first time someone fell in, everyone cheered, and took the chance for a doubled toast of whatever they were drinking.

Some paddled up to Aelfwine's boat and said to Pengolod, "You're the elf, aren't you?" But others came and turned out to be long water-mates of Aelfwine, fellow small boaters. It turned out that he went on the water far more often than he had hinted to Pengolod, who felt somehow cozened to realize this. He brooded until Rothinzil's long, low hired boat slid up near their dinghy.

More than a dozen women were dangling their arms in the water, sleeves rolled high, so heavy was their flat-bottomed boat laden. Rothinzil was one of a pair wielding long oars in front. In response to their general hail, Aelfwine doffed his hat. Pengolod hastened to do the same, even as Aelfwine gave the gaping Soup a nudge to keep him from staring too openly at the sun-warmed, sea-dampened women, who had let their hair down. At the prow of the women's boat, Rothinzil hailed them and was echoed half-mockingly by the rest of the crew. The woman at the tiller growled, "Hey! Speak fair to the gentlemen, you –" A shriek went up at the harsh tiller-woman's reprimand, drowning out the last coarse word of insult to her fellow boaters. The tiller-woman peeled back the edge of her straw hat, revealing the sun-reddened face of Pudani from the boat-launching feast. "I'll make them leave off if you've got anything good to drink. Boats and beer go together," she yelled.

Aelfwine held up a wineskin. "We brought our best ink! Would you like some?"

Most of the women shouted in amused disgust, but Rothinzil stayed dignified. "I'll have some." She leaned over and took the proffered skin. After as decorous a sip as she could manage with fourteen women whooping behind her, she asked, "Do you want a muffin? They're yesterday's, but still good."

"Yeah, we brought them for ballast!" another boat-woman shouted. Rothinzil's temper broke, and she turned back with a choice retort about someone else's food. They bickered amongst themselves until the two men in the next boat began to flirt with the stern-women.

Rothinzil took advantage of this to turn back to Aelfwine, her face flushed with more than sun. "We'll row along now and stop embarrassing you. Really, usually they're more respectable than this."

"Usually everyone's more respectable." In unison, Rothinzil and Aelfwine said, "It's Uinen's race." This sudden harmony made them both blink. Aelfwine obscured his expression by putting his own hat back on. Pudani bawled out for her oar-women to row, and their boat bellied off. Rothinzil turned back to wave.

The plum-voiced man beside them said, "Handsome visitors you get. That gel with all the black hair, she's a corker. Look, she just splashed the other oarswoman so's you can see right through her shirt." Soup half-stood to try and see this. As Aelfwine roared, the dinghy dipped in protest, tipping Soup into the water. The man nodded. "Gotcha, son. Pay up!" he said to his boatmate.

By the time Soup was seined up, the noonday sun was growing hot. Just when the heat began to grow irritating, trumpets rang out from the deck of Ciryatan's great barge. The crowd turned their attention that way, like a flock of birds shifting at their leader's change. "The racing boats aren't in sight?" asked Pengolod.

Aelfwine gestured to the deck of Ciryatan's barge, which was suddenly given over to men clad in nothing but loincloths. "Swimming races, while we wait." He explained what was happening as the swimmers dived overboard, to race to the furthest spar of Tol Uinen and back. Another set of swimmers dove deep to retrieve a silver-bound shell that Ciryatan tossed in the water. Each of the winners was drawn back up to stand beside Ciryatan, who crowned them with *oiolairë* wreaths handed to him by the lady Laurinquë. Pengolod looked at the diving winner, sleek and beaming, water still running off his muscles. "He won't sleep alone tonight, I'd wager," Pengolod said, admiringly.

Aelfwine turned to him abruptly. "You elves talk about that sort of thing?"

"Certainly we do," said Pengolod. "I haven't said much because, just as you did not mention the boat race to me, we have been speaking of other things." He looked out over the water again. "They do not have women swimmers?"

Aelfwine coughed. "It's thought that the male swimmers, ahem, please Uinen more, diving around in the intimacy of her waters. Do, ah, do elf-women swim in similar races? Soup, if you're sitting in back, stay on the sternboard, or we'll all be at Osse's mercy."

"They may do whatever elf-men do, if they choose it. We Elves do not have such races, though many women at Lindon dive for pearls. What's this on the water now? Another boat race?" It did not look like it. A broad coracle was careening out into the space awaiting the returned race boats. The nobles aboard the barge were still praising the swimmers, and the water-guards studiously ignored the coracle.

At first the coracle seemed to be another crowded women's boat, until its passengers called out in cracked and piping voices – those of the mummers last seen at a boat-launching feast. The clowns dressed as elf-ladies yodeled and waved garish scarves at the crowd. Standing in the middle, the tallest one, again in white with a long straw wig, twanged an ill-tuned harp and roared out a bawdy song, his voice loud enough to carry over the water. As before, the mummers were greeted by applause and laughter. The coracle stopped spinning in the water long enough for Pengolod to see that it had, at its front, a crudely painted duck's head. He set his teeth at this mockery of a swan-prowed elven-boat.

Suddenly, some black-tarred kayaks darted out of the crowd of boats, swift as sharks towards the glittering coracle. The false elf-women shrieked, swooned, and held their hands to their faces. "We are attacked! Attacked by orcs! Help us, oh help us!" they wailed. The orc-boats were manned by mummers daubed in walnut-stain and black paint, wearing rags and leather scraps. They grinned and cackled, so like to orcs in their mockery that Pengolod winced, though orcs never went upon the water. They reduced their threat by clowning splendidly on the waves, some spinning their kayaks so that they went under and emerged again, others tossing false wooden swords between boats in swift juggling. One abandoned ship

and swam towards the duck boat, making to climb aboard it as he leered and stuck out his red-dyed tongue.

Just in time, another out-of-tune instrument blatted, and another mummer's vessel toiled along the water. At the front of a long canoe stood the tall, obese form of the Little King, wearing a crudely embroidered surtot. Behind him, the slimmest clown that could be found was nearly lifted out of the water as he struggled to row the imbalanced boat. "Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!" boomed the Little King. "We must rescue our Elvish allies! Faster, I say, faster!" When the canoe reached the disputed waters, the orc-clowns all turned and grimaced. "Begone foul creatures of darkness!" He struck his stomach, straining against his over-small clothes. "The might of Númenor will drive you away!" With that, the Little King jumped like a great boulder into the water, splashing every boat.

As before, the crowd heralded this low humour as the utmost in hilarity. The orc-clowns howled and floundered in retreat. "My Hero!" yelled the mock elf-queen, pulling the Little King up into the duck-boat.

Pengolod turned yet again to Ciryatan's barge, to see how the nobles were taking this. Most of them continued to studiously ignore the spectacle. Ciryatan was watching, though, with an expression of grim amusement, for all that he stood up markedly straighter and tightened his belt a notch. Pengolod turned to Aelfwine and called above the din, "If they're making fun of Númenor's troops, why do they allow these clowns?"

Aelfwine said, "The clowns are to appease Ossë, as a rule. They tend to mock whatever the news of --" A clear trumpet call cut him off. The call went on and on, and brought out all the boats' banners again. They had been on the water from midmorning to an hour past noon, with the entertainments, and the race-boats were returning. The mummers, suddenly able to steer their boats without any problem, cleared the harbor swiftly.

The crowd added to their earlier hullabaloo with horns and bells. When the winning boat cut into the harbor, every lesser boat erupted with noise and waving, and those who had already fallen in the water dove in once more, being wet anyway. The only glum faces to be seen were in the boat next to them. "Cheer up," Aelfwine called, "We didn't win our bets, either." The winning boat jammed up next to Ciryatan's barge, but the speech honouring the winners could scarcely be heard, and the harbor was soon a-tangle with the other returning boats. Hard put to slow down, some of them sent their prows into the encroaching crowd, with chaotic results. Aelfwine shook his head. "This happens every year. Half the folk will stay on the water and carouse, and the other half will go back on land and carouse." He looked about the water longingly, then said, "You should see it, if you never have. Soup, are you going to stay in the water, or row back in with us?" Soup scrambled back into the boat for the fourth time, making all of them soggy, and they extracted themselves into the revelry on land.

By the time the sun went down, Pengolod was relieved to drift onto one of the benches behind Aelfwine's shop. "I have never, never seen such mad feasting in all my days. The mummers, the musicians, the women pulling up men's tunics..."

Equally weary, Aelfwine sat down with a pained grunt. Hauling his clubbed

foot up into his lap, he loosened the lacings of its boot-like wrappings. "Good thing we both wore trews beneath, eh?" They laughed again. That was one thing, Pengolod thought; laughter ran free and easy in Rómenna. "It's partly for the end of The War, you must understand. The revels were not half so wild for any of these past seven years. Most of the soldiers who went are back now - the ones who weren't killed, of course - and the widows are mostly out of mourning. You don't mind if I take off my boots?"

"No, not at all." Pengolod carefully looked about, anywhere but at Aelfwine's lame foot, until Aelfwine sighed, evidently out of some pain.

He said, "I can't believe the women were taunting me this year, despite my lame leg."

"They were after you more than I saw? Vulgar and crude," said Pengolod, upset for his friend's honour.

Aelfwine's smile had a wry twist. "Not what I mean; they don't do it if they don't have an eye for you." He lowered his twisted foot slowly, grown somber. "You know I think about getting married."

"You do?" said Pengolod, thinking that even amongst mortals, surely Aelfwine's thirty-and-some years was young for that.

Gruffly, Aelfwine replied, "I'm male and not dead; of course I do, despite my marred leg." After a moment's quiet, he went on. "Do you remember the family that sat by us at the ship-feast? The girl's father came around and had a word while you were away. He offered her hand, in exchange for my hands for his business."

For a moment, Pengolod felt as speechless as he had been with Tar-Minastir. "Are you going to?"

Aelfwine said quietly, "I'd thought it would be the best I could do, me being lame. Better than naught." Pengolod nodded, his mouth tight, recalling some of the harsh words about Aelfwine he had overheard. "I'd probably have done it if I wouldn't lose my own business by it."

Pengolod exhaled.

Aelfwine went on. "But the point is, that wouldn't have happened before The War. The girl wouldn't have agreed enough for her father to come around. I did not miss it that she did not come by herself! Still, today. And - I don't know what to make of it, that of a sudden, I'm seen, instead of passed over. Did Elves change this way? After your battles, after many of your elf-men died in the Nirnaeth that you told me of, did your disfigured master Rúmil have, ah, relations?"

Pengolod said, "No. Rúmil's wife remained in Valinor when he came back to Middle-Earth. We Elves consider marriage ever binding. Not that it mattered, by the time I met him. In the dungeons of Thangorodrim, he had been gelded."

Aelfwine cursed softly into the dusk. Pengolod continued, sadly. "They took to doing it to those they kept as thralls, with the other marring, to make it - so they thought - less likely that those who had loved them would seek to rescue them." Turning to face Aelfwine, he said, "I am sorry. This is shadowed talk, after the glad day we have had, and all your kindness in showing me the revels. I haven't talked a lot about Elvish marriage, being a bachelor myself, but I've a tale that will interest you. And in sooth, you remind me far more of the man in this tale, than you do of

Rúmil."

Aelfwine missed nothing and asked, "Man as in mortal man?"

"Indeed. For this is the tale of Tuor."



Before I left, I told you over our wine of the battle of the Nirnaeth Aenordiad. I told that tale again at the King's table, though not in such detail. Of my own kinsmen, two of my great-nephews had perished, and my family's house was grieved thereby. Most in the city had such a loss upon their doorsteps. The calamity of it was worse for those who, born and raised in Gondolin, had never known the world outside. Their kin had gone off to a mystery, and perished amidst unknown horror. To these, it seemed meet and good that Turgon was now High King of all the Noldor, and that his first decree was that the Great Gate should be shut. No more messengers would enter or go forth.

Following the Nirnaeth Aenordiad, Gondolin curled in upon itself. Grief absorbed the Gondolindrim at first. When our separation from the greater world began to be felt, our people strove to fill the gap by increasing the news noised about the city itself. The least piece of gossip was magnified. More games of skill were held, and these used more weapons than we had been wont to do. Maeglin supervised the building of a seventh Gate, using all the arts of the Gondolindrim at their peak to make a fantastic fence of steel, high as one of your tall ships.

I have spoken before of Rúmil's withdrawal. After the Nirnaeth, when called upon, he counseled Turgon, now our King, with words other than what he would hear. Rúmil lost some favour thereby. But what the father set aside, the daughter took up. Idril had become troubled with many visions, and was wan and restless. She remembered Rúmil's trance of foreseeing, and came to him for further counsel. I used to let her in, and stand guard over their conferences. After a few such times, Idril lost her grieving look. She seemed to have mastered her inner sight, and gained gravity and wisdom from it. This would be well in the days to come.

The first herald of these days was the breaking of Turgon's Ban. I said that the city was sealed shut, yet two won through the cold of the Great Gate. There was a power guarding them, the warding hand of Ulmo himself that could not be denied. As all tales tell, mortal Tuor was one of them. I heard the hue and cry that hailed him, and darted to a window looking onto the street to see. Tuor was clad in a bright hauberk, and carried a long blue shield painted with a white wing. Turgon had left these tokens at Vinyamar at Ulmo's bidding, to be brought hence in the future by a messenger with Ulmo's grace. It had been so long since this was done that we thought ourselves forsaken. Yet it was not so, for here was a warrior fit to bear those tokens.

Tuor was not a handsome lad, as his forefather Huor had been. His life had been hard, and though he was less than thirty years, his face was blunt and harrowed. Yet he was a man at the height of his powers, given potency by the Valar-driven fate upon him. I saw but one of his glances around, wondering yet wary.

My friend of eld Voronwë strode after him, chiseled by hunger, his hair matted into its sailor's braids, and with a look in his eyes like that of some of our

soldiers, those who had left some of their spirit on the field of the Nirnaeth. I called to him, but in his shock and weariness, he did not reply. Soon after I glimpsed them, Tuor stood before the King and delivered his rede; that Gondolin should be abandoned, and its people return to the Sea.

You of Númenor revere the Valar, and I see that you wonder at how we could deny a message sent by Ulmo himself. I can explain. It was joyous to see my friend Voronwë alive again, but, alas, his return turned into a political catastrophe for Tuor's message. We learned that, of seven ships of messengers that Turgon had sent, he alone had been spared the wrath of the Valar, and that only to guide Tuor hither. He told a fearsome tale of the others' drowning, boat by boat, thinking only to assure the lost sailors' folk that their kin had been valiant. There was a great outcry in our council, led by Maeglin. If the Valar truly favored us, he said, would they not have let our mariners survive, and bid one of them to bring the message instead of this mere mortal? The debate on this lasted for many a day. In the end, Turgon was swayed. He ordained that we would remain, and that Tuor as well was bound to Gondolin for all his days. Do not forget that, at this time, we were yet under the Curse of Mandos, so that many an elvish deed that might have seemed well, such as the Nirnaeth, came to naught or to evil in the end.

Thus Tuor was trapped with all the rest of us Gondolindrim. By his powerful presence, he showed us after the fact how wise Húrin had been to leave. More than one person wished to have Tuor kept out of the way, and Turgon agreed that Rúmil and his subordinates would have the teaching of Tuor. Maeglin proposed this, but Turgon agreed, for he knew that Tuor would not change Rúmil's mind – they agreed already, though it did them no good. More, Rúmil was powerful in lore, but weak in arms, and thereby unlikely to lead to any rebellion, as had happened amongst our folk at Narogthron.

To find out what we loremasters could teach Tuor, we had to find out what he already knew. For days we were rapt hearing his tales of his early life among the Green-Elves, of his endurance as a thrall for a cruel Easterling, and of his desperate, bloody quest to find his scattered adopted elf-kin. He was far more like us than Hurin and Huor had been, for he had been fostered by the Green-Elves since his birth, and he was wise and wary beyond his years. Indeed, his life as a thrall had been a better preparation than he could have hoped for the wasp's nest politics in Gondolin had become.

After several days speaking to him, Rúmil said, "I have great hope in you, that you may yet accomplish the aim of Ulmo, save for one thing. You must learn to read, and speak the Quenya of Gondolin, to be given greater credence in Gondolin's councils." The Green-Elves did not read, you see, nor did they speak Quenya. Tuor could cut his name in runes, and knew about half the alphabet in the runes of Daeron. And that was all. He had hardly spoken to the Noldor until he met Voronwë. Not speaking the city's Quenya dialect, Tuor was also trapped speaking only to those who kept their Sindarin.

There was more to this than equipping him to read and speak. The Noldor always held it that a noble was also a master of lore, capable of artistry in words and letters. I can vouch that this was not always so. Maeglin, ill-taught by his mother, wrote a dreadful hand and would delegate his letters and records, so that

his signature could be seen on sheets in four different handwritings. He did this because he knew the image of having a fine hand was important.

We only had to explain this once to Tuor, and he flung himself into his studies with the fervor he used to give to hunting Easterlings. His ignorance was his guide. Having no faults to unlearn, he learned right the first time. Voronwë accompanied him even after he had mastered the city's dialect and had no more need of an interpreter. My friend, now Tuor's friend as well, was glad himself to be kept out of the way, still harrowed after his journeying and loss, and bewildered at how his words had been turned against him.

Letters mastered, Tuor learned deeply of our lore and laws. Within two years, he was fully equipped to manage in Gondolin, even when some were still wary of him, and others looked after him with jealousy. Turgon spent some time with him out of guilt, at first, but genuine fondness came soon after. Tuor's mood had lightened enough that he recalled the vigorous mirth of Hurin and Huor. We loremasters had gone out of our way to show Tuor the city's armories, reading the runes on the weapons being an excellent learning exercise, we said. As we had plotted, after seeing him handle some of this reading material, a challenge-hungry swordmaster had taken him on as a sparring partner. Thus Tuor was fit to sport with Turgon in wit and strength of arms, and won his respect.

This was not all he won.

I said before that Idril took council from Rúmil, even in my master's disfavour. Now, some of these counsels took place while Tuor was yet in our tutelage. I remember the first overlap of this pair very well. Tuor caught a glimpse of Idril in passage as he recited, and the trail of his words fell off into silence as she went by, her bare white feet glimmering beneath the hem of her blue summer gown. I cleared my throat to collect him to himself, and he picked up his speech again. And over his shoulder, I saw that Idril, when Tuor had looked away, had turned her bright gaze on him, as he sat and read a recent tale that he had helped us write, a tale from the Green-Elves' lore of Beren and Luthien. To see such a look on her face, a look somehow open and bare – I felt very much that I had imposed. Swiftly, I turned back to the books.

Idril began to time her visits to match Tuor's, and would linger in passing, even once or twice asking to sit in on his lessons. Tuor was no craven. Once he realized that she had some regard for him beyond thoughtful charity, he paid her small compliments. To himself, he told us later, he wagered that since his heart was gone out of his keeping anyway, he might as well speak of his admiration. She returned his fair words, more than was needed for mere politesse.

When Tuor was deemed fully learned, he still frequented the halls of our library. It was become, by then, their honourable trysting-place. They would sit and speak for hours, and ever had something to say to each other. She coaxed from him his tales of what the world outside Gondolin had become, and vouchsafed stories of her youth in Valinor. Most certainly, other confidences were exchanged. I recall to this day seeing the pair of them, their heads bent over some volume as an excuse to sit by each other, her hair of bright gold, his hair darker gold, never silent, their voices alternating like the rhythm of the left page and the right in a book.

They agreed to become affianced in one of those private moments, between the high stone shelves of books and the ink-stained desks. Being a loremaster, this charmed me more than the wedding that followed. It had banners, flowers, feasting, all the usual, even as we of the city were mystified as to why Turgon had consented to it. Only once before had an elf-maid wedded a mortal man, and a fate exceeding strange befell them both. Some said that Turgon yet feared Ulmo's messenger, and offered up his daughter as a sacrifice to mollify the Valar. Others said that, since Tuor was mortal, he would soon perish, by our measure, and leave Idril to be Turgon's daughter and no more very soon. It was also said, by those who wished it to be true, that perhaps this was a sign that Turgon would consider Ulmo's advice after all, a first step towards breaking the seal set on Gondolin.

This rumor seemed unfounded, overall. The state of Gondolin at large did not change. As weddings do, it changed Tuor's life, as well as that of us loremasters. Tuor, as Idril's consort, spent his days in court, and organizing his own noble house. Rúmil was seen more often at the King's counsels. I returned to clerking, and had the ill luck to be summoned for a winter stretch of labour at the city's mine for iron and coal, Anghabar.

Idril herself had a woman's change. Soon after being wedded, she went with child. She retained her duties as Turgon's chatelaine, which astonished some people more than her unusual wedding had. I was one of the few who found out why she held onto this position.

It was natural for a chatelaine to call upon a clerk, at times, and so she came to the library and summoned me in particular. Drawing me off to one of the window-seats where she had been wont to sit with Tuor, she said, "I need your help, and I trust, good loremaster, that you will be discreet about it?" Mystified, I said that I was at her service. She asked me to bring her all the maps of the city that could be found. (With most users of our great library, we told them where to find the materials. For Idril, I brought them.) Simple maps were not good enough. She wished for highly technical diagrams of the city, and asked me probing questions about foundations, drainage, and tunnels, taxing my knowledge sorely. Eventually, I asked her why she sought to know these things so discreetly.

Idril continued to scan a map as she answered me. "Let us say – purely in thought – that it was a good idea to build, in case of some unimagined disaster, an escape route out of Gondolin. A tunnel. As someone aware of city's labourers and resources, would this possible? It seems to be, from how Gondolin is made, but the workers..."

"My lady," I replied, "it is more than possible. Because of Anghabar, most every elf-man of strength in the city is capable enough with stone. We are all made miners, whether we will or we nil. I spent some time there myself, recently. Is this a project of the miners?"

Idril's light voice said, as if she was requesting tea, "Say that this needed to be done in secret. Could a fellow with access to the city's ledgers contrive it so that workers' hours were freed here and there, tools were made available, and suchlike?"

I was shocked to my core. "For someone to lie in the King's records, to cover this secret work? Lady Idril, why?"

Idril laid her hands over her belly and met my eyes. "I could face my own doom, should Gondolin fall, for my father's pride. But not that of my child. Would you not want such for your own kin?"

I was obliged to own that I would.

"This must be done; and it has come to me that it must be secret until needed, so that those who might stop it for their own reasons never learn of it." Her cornflower-bright gaze met my astonished stare. "You can help. Will you?"

Thus I joined Idril's underground of wary rebels, at no little peril to me. If I had been caught out manipulating the King's resources, I would have said, to keep Idril's secret, that it had been for my own gain. I know not what punishment would have been meted upon me. Whatever it was, it would definitely endanger Idril's work. I was careful as could be.

She gave me a list of those she trusted - Rúmil of course, and altogether too many handmaidens in the tally - and I set to work. A city worker here; a cart detail there; matching up Idril's list of allies with those who had done their time in Anghabar and learned stonework; eventually, covering up the pilfering of supplies to feed the workers when they were deep underground for days at a time. I requisitioned these from the few lords who were also Idril's secret allies.

Idril's tunnel was dug in the gazebo of a less than successful garden struggling against the cold winds, under the excuse of creating a new well. The project was so extensive that I worried greatly about what calamity she had foreseen. The tunnel was meant to extend for some way under the plain of the Tumladen. I tried, as far as possible, to nudge my family to be prepared for some disaster without revealing anything. They agreed that the idea of a fire in the city was a fearsome thing, and a good reason to keep supplies packed for flight at hand, though they did make merry of my sudden worry. I did not mind, as long as they listened.

The secret work was not finished by time Idril's son, Eärendil, was born. I saw the babe when I went to Idril's chambers, ostensibly as a conscientious clerk aiding the keeper of Turgon's castle. Plenty have told of Eärendil's beauty as an infant. Tuor happened to be there as well, grinning with delight over his sleeping son. What struck me was the lack of difference between Elf and mortal, at this time in their lives; for the man blooming in fatherhood and his babe.

Eärendil went on to grow swiftly, markedly more quickly than most elf-children did. Like his mother's prudence, this would be well in the days that came.



When it was clear that the story was done, Aelfwine said, "I wish you knew what it was about Tuor that unlocked Idril's heart."

"Does not every man want that secret, to gain the one he desires? There are some who say it is at the first gaze upon meeting, and if it is not there, then there is no hope. Others say that it can only come to pass upon knowing someone well and long."

"Which do you find more true?" said Aelfwine, hungrily.

"I have seen both make matches." Aelfwine gave a dissatisfied snort. Pengolod lifted his hands. "What can I say? I am not young. As the saying goes, I have seen one of everything."

Aelfwine had to laugh at that. "Your folk who thought ill of the marriage...it sounds almost like something that would come to pass here in Rómenna. Did anyone speak badly of Idril for her choice?"

"Yes, but why linger on that? It turned out well; blessed Earendil was born, who sailed the ship Vingilot – or, as you call it here, Rothinzil. Look you there, through the branches of the walnut tree. You can see the star of Eärendil, borne through the skies in Rothinzil." Pengolod took care to have an encouraging note in his voice, thinking of the other Rothinzil who had sailed that day. Surely, he thought, Aelfwine had the wit to see the link between the tale he had told and the story that was unfolding in his own life.

Aelfwine sighed and stretched out both his legs, tucking his hands behind his head. "These fair old tales! Some of them I have heard from boyhood, but I never cease to wonder at hearing them from someone who was there. Amazing – that you saw the birth of yonder star."

Disappointed that no confidences were forthcoming, and instead Aelfwine was suddenly sounding like Tar-Minastir, Pengolod found that he did not have much to say but goodnight. He retired, for once, before Aelfwine, who remained to contemplate the star.

The Hall of the Venturers

The Lord of Venturers was not at his hall when Pengolod took Aelfwine there. They were escorted through the great hall of feasting, which had been turned over to clerks managing Númenor's navy, and walked by salons where the furniture was draped to keep dust away. When they arrived at their destination, the busy steward left them.

The Venturer's archive was quiet, but not deserted. The chief archivist apologized profusely, saying that his lord and lady would have been honoured, had they been present. "I beg that you are not offended, sir." Eager to leaven his long, silent day with some conversation, he added, "A well-learned woman herself, my Lady is. She heard the tale of Erendis, and decided she would not let her husband's venturing part her from his side. So they have both been in Middle-Earth for all the War, and their daughter at Armenelos as the Queen's prime handmaiden."

"Is she one for lore, their daughter Laurinquë?" asked Pengolod.

"By all Varda's stars, no," the archivist chuckled. "I wouldn't expect a pretty thing like our Lady Lauri to worry too much about wisdom, between her courtly dances and her next frock. I'm sure she'll be pleased you asked about her, if you remember her from court," he said, insinuating that he would pass the remembrance on as a favour.

Pengolod bit the inside of his cheek to hold back his curses.

"You are here to see the old texts, yes? I will show you." The archivist drew them within the great reading room, illuminated by tall windows with hundreds of small panes. The books were kept in alcoves curtained against the daylight. The archivist took one look at his guests' ink-stained hands and gave them white linen gloves to wear as they handled the books. He spaced out blocks wrapped in gentle velvet on a table, as well as a velvet mat and two velvet-covered rods. Then, he took out an antique book and a curious scroll, and showed how to open the book balanced over two velvet blocks, leaving its spine free in the air, and how to use the velvet mat and rods to keep a scroll gently open. Pengolod had been working with texts two thousand years before the archivist had been a glint in his mother's eye. Aelfwine did so every day, with immaculate writings being his bread and butter. They both listened politely to the archivist's quavering demonstration, it being what either of them would have done when offering precious books to a stranger.

Nonetheless, when he was gone, Aelfwine muttered, "What an old gossip. If he was the teacher of the Venturer's daughter, no wonder Laurinquë disliked her runes."

Pengolod said, slyly, "I suppose you'd do a far better job as the Venturer's archivist?" They both smothered a laugh.

"Seriously, my old master said it was the worst flaw, to be so enamoured of your own standing as master that you held your knowledge too tight. If others never learn it, you are ever the expert, but more isolated each year." Aelfwine looked around the library. "Perhaps he was not her teacher. I cannot imagine letting a child near these treasures. That's another thing my old master said, that if

I ever had a child, to make her little books from scraps at first, so she could tear them up to her heart's content, but she'd learn to like them that way."

Pengolod said, "I did just that for my sister Thingódhel's children. I'll never forget seeing her husband take a little pamphlet away from his daughter who was chewing it, and give her a blank scrap of paper instead, saying she might eat that, since it had no ink. Thingódhel heard, and nearly knocked the slates off the poor fellow's roof."

Aelfwine turned and looked at the shelves. "So many books – this is the largest library I have seen in all my days. It is hard to know where to begin. By the by – no children of your own? Was there never a woman you loved?"

Pengolod's mouth twitched, for an instant. He had been waiting for this question since they had spoken of marriage three days ago, the night after the boat-race. Sitting together on a bench by starlight, both warmly drunk, had not been a good time for Pengolod's own answer to that, if he wanted to be sure of keeping Aelfwine's friendship. Calmly, he said, "I love all women as I loved my sister. For such things and myself, perhaps you know the Elvish phrase for it, "warrior-turned?"

"Ah. Hm." Aelfwine tugged his mustache. "Common enough among sailors here. Saw it enough at sea as a lad. Myself, I always thought men far too ugly, compared to women. I'd wondered ever since you turned down that...certain lady...on the docks."

Pengolod said, "I'm sure that certain lady did not know what she was missing by not requesting your attentions, instead." When Aelfwine laughed in relief, he added, "What I said to Laurinque is true; we Elves must break our fates to be intimate with mortals. Any mortals," he added, meaningfully.

Aelfwine nodded, then looked over his shoulder. "Don't forget our good gossip there." Every word they had spoken in the library had been Sindarin. The archivist had clearly enjoyed showing off his fluency. "Feel up to scaling these shelves now?"

Pengolod agreed and asked, "What was your favorite tale of eld? Perhaps we can find it."

Aelfwine was quiet for a moment. "I never told anyone before, but it seems like it's a day for hidden things. "The Tale of the Children of Húrin."

It was Pengolod's turn to pause and say "Hm," hearing that this tale of ill-fate and disaster upon disaster, capped with dreadful incest, could be anybody's favourite. "Túrin's tale? Interesting. One of the better told tales, but tragic to the point of pain."

Aelfwine said firmly, "It was my favourite as soon as I heard it. Not for the gore, or the – unfortunate coincidence. It is the only tale in history that tells of a lame man like myself, the chieftain Brandir."

"The only?" said Pengolod, partly thinking aloud, as they went slowly towards the shelves.

After racking his brains for a moment, Pengolod truly could recall no other. He nodded in agreement when Aelfwine said, "The only. I am glad Brandir was a good one, and wellborn. Leader of the folk of Hador, skilled healer, man of peace.

He loved truly and well, for all his ill fate. Hearing of him made me feel like I wasn't some unspeakable cast-aside, but part of history, instead. Did you ever meet Brandir?"

Pengolod shook his head. "No, I never had the chance to. He was –"

They said it together. "Slain unjustly."

Pengolod looked abstracted for a moment. "Perhaps you would have also liked the tale of Rúmil, had you heard it sooner."

"It would have been balm to me. But he never was mentioned in the tales of Gondolin. I think this shelf has the tales of Túrin's time." Together, they pulled back the canvas curtains that protected the books.

Pengolod reached out immediately to a slim cream-colored book, its leather binding touched with gold. He held it as Aelfwine cased the shelves, drawing out several volumes, his mustache curving up in a smile. "My day of luck. They've got three different versions of it. What have you found?" Pengolod held up the book. Aelfwine read the cover and said, "Why read tales of Gondolin when you lived through them? To make sure they have it right?"

"This one, no. I wrote this one myself." He opened the book and looked at the frontispiece. "The Fall of Gondolin. Gil-Galad sent Aldarion many books – looking about this library, I remember packing them up. I suppose, Aldarion being both King and Venturer in his time, many of them came to rest here. I wrote and bound this one myself. I always prefer that the story has a white cover, like the white city of eld."

"You wrote that!" Aelfwine leaned against the shelf to steady himself. "But – then why no Rúmil? Nor any of what happened to you?"

Pengolod began to go back to the table. "Some things make better stories than others. A loremaster and his kin compel the listener less than the battles of great lords and ladies."

As Pengolod pulled out his chair for him, Aelfwine said, "You confuse me. I thought Rúmil was not your kin?"

"He was not, but he became a good patron to my family. And amidst Gondolin's ruin, he said to me –" Pengolod paused. "I'll tell you, then. I'll tell you. As you said: it is the day for it." He opened the small book and scanned it for a moment, before he began to speak.



What this book here tells of, the fall of Gondolin, began on the day you Númenoreans name the Erulaitalë. An Age ago, we in Gondolin celebrated the day as Tarnin Austa.

Tarnin Austa was our celebration of Midsummer. Under the Curse of Mandos, we did not, exactly, honour the Valar. Nor did we look beyond the circles of the world to honour Illúvatar, as mortals regularly do. That day was as close as we came to such things. We heaped praise upon praise on the Sun the Valar had made to light Middle-Earth, and celebrated its brilliance. The night before, once the garlands for the holiday were hung, all the city was vowed to silence. In silence, we

arose early and arrayed ourselves in finery. Nobody spoke until the dawn. The sun's rising was heralded by splendid choirs, who sang the sun over the mountains, nearly, with their ravishing voices. The time of silence was held to be as sacred as the song itself. It was a holiday of great beauty and dignity.

That is, unless you had small children.

That particular year, my family did. We were a considerable clan by then. My sister's sons and daughters, their children, and even a third generation were a delight and a bewilderment to myself and my parents. Thingódhel, with her beauty and loving sternness, was more the matriarch of this little clan than my mother. Thingódhel had taken it upon herself to try and keep the three youngsters quiet, as they were almost, but not quite, old enough to really understand. This led to several pantomimed exchanges as the children fidgeted, waiting for the singing. They became more restless as the sky began to lighten towards a red dawn. A child would forget itself and open its mouth, and Thingódhel would hiss "Shhhh!" After the smallest had piped up three times running, her sibling mimicked "Shhhh!" then said, "We have to be quiet for Tarnin Austa!" in a ringing voice.

Somehow, we managed to keep from laughing. I placed my hand over my mouth, wishing greatly that Rúmil had accepted my invitation. Rúmil had declined joining my family's group, saying that the long stand would weary him, and that he would not cut the day's festivities short for us with his frailty. A glance towards the royal family, standing at the peak of the eastern walls, showed that Rúmil was not there, either. I might have imagined it, but I could have sworn I heard Idril saying "Shhh!" to her son, Eärendil, who at seven summers seemed to be growing twice as quickly as most elf-children. She knelt and picked him up, and he looked beyond her shoulder, past the walls.

Perhaps the next moment proved me right. Eärendil uttered a shrill shriek. Everyone turned towards the sound, mouths open and frozen silent at this breach of etiquette. Equally shocking, the high group on the wall's peak did not silence the child at once, but began to buzz in whispers to each other. Maeglin alone was silent. This lasted for an instant before all of us, united in the quiet, heard the sound of a horn, blown by an elf-rider upon the plain.

The guards upon the walls were the next to break the silence. "The foe! The foe!" they cried, recognizing the horn's call. At these words, the city's joyous silence was shattered beyond repair. Frightened murmurs burst into weeping and bluster. Many openly denied that we could have been found by our enemies – were we not the Hidden City? To put the lie to this, Turgon was shouting for his lords to come to council, even as guardsmen hollered for all armsworthy men to join their troops for defense. That meant me.

Of course, I would go. In the face of the improbable, wrath to defend Gondolin burned me like a fire. However, for seven long years I had kept the secret of Idril's tunnel for escape. I considered what Rúmil would do. It only took an instant: Rúmil was a survivor. "Thingódhel! I need to tell you something important, now," I insisted. And I revealed Idril's secret to her, begging her to take our kin thence, if the battle went ill.

I only had to tell her the directions once. She repeated, "The Garden of the Honeysuckle, the one that should have been Garden of the Roses but the flowers

never took; the ladder under the gazebo, to go down the well. Right." She looked around swiftly, counting our kin. "That'll be a treat with this lot. Help me herd them back to the house. I suppose you'll take the lads to their troops." She picked up her shrieking, tear-stained great-granddaughter, and called our own troop to order with a shout.

As we went, I looked back, once. Maeglin, alone on the high wall, was still watching, silhouetted against the red light from the North. Only later did I learn that he was watching his own handiwork. He had, unknown to us, betrayed Gondolin to Morgoth, hoping to gain an unspeakable price; the city's lordship and Idril's hand. I learned this not from him, for I never saw him more.

Two hours later, counsel and readiness were done. The enemy was at our gates. And so were we. Being an archer, I was sent to a high place, and from there I could see that which meant to ruin Gondolin. Morgoth's forces did not march. With Gondolin in their sights, they roared across the verdant plain, vast and unstoppable in their hordes, an avalanche of fire and darkness. In the forefront of the van were great fire-drakes, scorching the green Tumlauden as they went. Some dragons carried Balrogs as riders, the terrible demons twice the height of an Elf, with black skin cracking to show the earth's fire beneath. As they came, we could see their fiery maws and horned heads, each one horrifically different from the others. Above them, already vying with the Eagles that protected us, fell beasts with wings wheeled, darkening the sky.

Then came unthinkable mobs of orcs, some in streaming lines, some rushing forwards in shielded formations. At the rear, huge siege-engines were towed. It was the horror of the Nirnaeth, brought to our home. The sight made strong warriors groan for Elbereth and their mothers' swift deaths. Double guilt struck me; that I had perhaps ruined the way of escape by telling its secret before time, and that perhaps none would make their way to it, in the coming tumult.

The mass of evil came forward, split around the northern hill of Gondolin, and flowed towards the Gate, where we thousand bowmen were waiting for them. Then, battle was joined, as never before.

It was as I fought that I saw the great deeds of which I spoke in The Fall of Gondolin. For all our shooting, the vast forces against us won the gate. Lord Duilin was shot down from the great wall, and the stones forty feet below finished what the blazing Balrog-arrow began. We who were his troops fell back, and joined Penlod's men, in time for him to order our retreat. Alas, lordly Penlod was less familiar with the city's alleys than we humbler folk, and seeking a shortcut, found ambush and death from the evil that had invaded. Our lessened troop, fighting every step of the way, sought Ecthelion and Tuor, in time to see Ecthelion take the brunt of the defense of the King's Fountain, slaying the great Balrog, and losing his own life, even though Tuor called again and again for Ecthelion to come away. Stubborn-valiant, I described it; and so it was.

Horror upon horror we saw. The white ways and the grey ways, ruined with flame and gore; the shrieks of elf-women born and bred to Gondolin's safety, shrieks that never lasted long enough for us to find who was calling; our own men not just slain but devoured before our eyes. The stink was unforgettable. The dragons and Balrogs set their fires about, and soon smoke obscured the bright day.

Even the fountains were steaming from the heat. The worst of it was the fall of the King's palace. A great burning went up, sending a pillar of smoke into the sky, and even from far we could hear the screaming – ai, Valar, the screaming! Then came a great rumble. Weakened by fire and rampaging creatures, the palace collapsed onto itself, down into the blackness and flame. Thus was the fall of Turgon; our Lord, later our King.

After fighting for so long that day had turned to night and day again, we were reduced to a band of two hundred about Tuor. All of us were so filthy with smoke and soot that you could not tell us apart by our livery. Nor could we be distinguished by our weapons; we had plundered our comrades in advance of the orcs, throwing our own marks of rank into disarray.

I had taken several hard blows. If I had not been, by chance, issued a helmet of a new design when I reported to the armoury, I would have been twice dead. Another warrior had seen me go to take a sword from someone fallen, and said we would all be better off armed with spears, to keep foes at a distance. The spears also were useful levers amongst the fallen stones, and staves to help us stay upright in our numb exhaustion. We had spoken among ourselves, and come to peace with our deaths. More than one of us would have lain down to die, did we not fight in our Gondolin. Tuor was more fortunate than we. He fought for Idril, and they had found each other, just in time to witness the collapse of the palace. With our battered lady – now our Queen – weeping in her armour by his side, he was the tiger to her tigress, and our star of hope.

After their reunion, Tuor looked around, panting with weariness, eyes bloodshot. His voice was hoarse as he called, “All right! We’re through. While the hordes occupy themselves with the fallen palace, if we would live, we must get out of here! Go find your people and tell them...” He then spoke of the tunnel of escape. *At last*, I thought. I felt blessed that we were near to my family's abode. I staggered there as fast as I might. Though smoke was coiling through the open door, it was not burned; it was not even sacked; and nobody was there. After five minutes of seeking and calling, even to the cellar, I was filled with hope and fear in equal measure. I could only pray that Thingódhel had used the secret I had given her.

I paused before the table, smoothed from many meals and many scourings, and felt the house begin to tremble, to the rhythm of great steps of doom. Something was coming. With no wish to find out what, I fled through the back. Stepping out that way almost brought me to tears. Thus had I gone, every day, to the Gondolin's library and scriptoriums – and from memory's steps, I remembered Rúmil.

Rúmil would have gone to the King's council, and then? I did not know. It had seemed wisdom when, in Gondolin's planning, Rúmil had insisted that his private apartments be built within the library, saving his lame leg hard walking. But the square that included the library was fearfully close to the fallen palace. I was on my way before I could think. If I had thought, I might have decided that Rúmil would have been at council in the Palace, and perished with the King, or that he would have had the sense to flee to the tunnel long ago. But, with my blood burning anew with fear and hope, I was beyond sense.

I passed corpses and tumbled houses, and the blood on the street was still fresh. A skirmish along the way gave me more slashes for my pains. Battered as I was, I could still outrun the bow-legged orcs of those days. A side alley fed into the square I sought, and I stopped in my tracks.

Gondolin's library, the Hall of Books, still stood, but not for long, by the looks of it. A great dragon, longer than two wains, crouched in the midst of the square and hissed at the library's gate. The dragon's thick tail had battered other buildings as it entered the square, and its neck stretched. I strove to peer around it, through the smoke and mazy mists. It was addressing a person, or persons, standing before the library.

"Come thou," it was hissing. "Give over. Thou saiest that thou will defend thy treasure to the death. But thy death is here!" Clearly, the great worm thought that the library's defender was taking his desperate stand before some great treasury of gold and jewels. It licked its lips with a forked black tongue and said, "Better and wiser, give some of it over to me, and keep your life."

"You disappoint me, worm," a deep voice rang. My heart leapt, even as my blood chilled. That was Rúmil's voice. He lived - and he, halt and withered, dared challenge the dragon. I crept forwards to see, staying downwind. Rúmil was deep below the arched entry to the library, standing where an echo caught his voice. Wrapped in a great maroon cloak, his frailty was hidden. "I have wished to bandy wits with one of your kind since I heard of you. A pity you are so limited."

With a roar, the dragon reared up, arcing its thick neck down. "We fire-drakes have few limits, cur! This you shall learn," and it began a deep, sucking inhalation to stoke its fires. I lifted my foraged spear and drew in my own breath, picking a spot on that scaly vastness for my strike.

Before it could belch forth its stinking flames, or I could try to spring, Rúmil's voice rang again. He chanted in Valarin, which he had taught others but little, and the words of power in his song made the dragon writhe and choke, like something stuck in its craw. It roared wordless defiance, shaking its terrible head, but staying put as it was heaved and wracked, as if it tried to vomit, but could not. At its greatest shudder, Rúmil ceased, and cried in words I knew, "Your darkness is cast out. You are what you were before Morgoth stole you for some foul spirit - a beast from the Age of Lamps. Be free!"

The huge reptile, dragon no more, lurched up. Bewildered, it gazed around, black spittle drooping from its coffin-wide mouth, which now hung slack and open, exposing its knife-like teeth. It looked left, then right, growing afraid of the strangeness about it, marooned out of its rightful time, an age long lost. One instant was all it took for its fear to turn to anger anew, kindling mad embers in its eyes. Drained by his song of power, Rúmil swayed and staggered. I shouted to him, "Rúmil, 'ware!" Our foe jerked to angry life. Had it still been a dragon, I too could have tried my reason, but now it was only a beast. Its dim eyes saw me, and it swung about, rearing onto its hind legs with a cruder roar. As its tail flailed out to balance it, it caught the columns before the library, sweeping the graceful arches aside. Shaken by the other disasters, the elegant front of the building fell - upon Rúmil! I shouted in despair, and darted to the side, as the beast lurched forwards.

Just when I thought all my hopes were destroyed, another dragon, of sleeker

breed, slid into the square. "I say, what's all this? You were supposed to finish here ages ago. Fry that fellow and have done with it." The newcomer's speech awoke some ancient rivalry in the beast. It opened its jaws to the fullest, and charged the new dragon. "You never could take criticism," hissed the dragon, and sprang to the attack. Soon they were tumbling more building-fronts as they scuffled.

I paid little heed. I tore over to the rubble that had once been the library's great entrance. Soon I found what I sought, just a corner of maroon fabric, dusted with stone. Beyond my hope, when I seized that fabric, an arm flailed. "Rúmil! Rúmil, it's Pengolod," I said, levering the last stone that I could off him. This still left him more than half-buried amidst great chunks of archway. "You're stuck," I said, after another moment.

Rúmil groaned. His hood slid back, showing him white and livid-scarred. "I think...the dragon...has finished what the orcs began, long past." He coughed, and there was blood. My own face was wet with my tears.

Choking, I said, "I am sorry. This is my fault. If I had not called out, if I had come sooner...I'll use my spear as a lever, shift these rocks -"

He rasped, "No. I am broken, I say. You have something better to haul out of this rout besides my ruined bones." With his head, he gestured to the library gaping open behind us, and grinned like a skull. "Still my library, even to the end. Damned if I'd leave while it had a chance. But the end is now. The books. The old tales." He coughed again. "Damned I will be if the orcs shred them for their filth. Take what you can to Idril's way. The rest – burn."

"I swear it," I vowed.

His eyes shut slowly. "I knew you would. Go well, my son," he said; and he was gone.

I was wracked, for an instant. A roar of triumph from the other side of the square made me jerk up. The thick-necked reptile was tearing into the fallen dragon, hewing off great gobbets of flesh with his butchering jaws. Black smoke was billowing anew across the square. I had little time for my oath.

I used the spear as a lever to climb over the rubble. The library's tall beechwood doors were splintered on their hinges enough that I could squeeze through. I limped through the ornamental vestibule, half-fallen and cracked, and into the main Chamber of Scrolls. It had been my master's last wish, that his books be saved, and it fell to me to choose what I could carry from ten thousand and more volumes.

Yes, I hope you never have to make such a choice, either. After a moment of my head spinning, I followed that last wish to the letter. I dug up the vastest clerk's satchel that I could find, made to haul ledgers to cases called before the King, and stuffed it with what I knew Rúmil had written himself. Books are heavy. One shelf, one shelf only, could I carry of all that treasure, and I felt it might be the death of me as a burden. I thought about setting fire to what remained, and then a smell of smoke came to me. I would not need to do so, it seemed.

Even as I snatched up items, I had heard the front of the building collapsing further. When I left, I trusted to what had worked before and fled through the back, forcing myself to shout as I went, before I set Rúmil's final fire. Amazingly,

this routed out three weeping library-matrons, to burden me further on my way. So I saw it then, sick with grief and fear. I think having them to escort saved my life in the end. It was one of them who fulfilled Rúmil's last wish, throwing the lantern she had carried into the library's tannery, setting a blaze behind us. With them by my side, I did not tarry for vengeance or to seek any others, focusing on defending my burdens and winning our way to Idril's tunnel.

At Idril's tunnel, we saw a gladsome sight indeed. The Lord Glorfindel lived yet. So bright was his wrath that he seemed barely dimmed by Gondolin's fall. He was harsh; having appeared, we must enter and go, he decreed. There was no turning back. I lost my dislike of tunnels that day. The long dark passage, after its first tumbled way, seemed safe and wholesome.

Our escape from Gondolin, after that, took as long as the battle we had endured, and led to more battle along its way. We were a small company out of Gondolin's populace, less than eight hundreds, but the mountain trail we had to traverse, along the fell pass of the Crissaegrim, could only take one person at a time. It was a terrible path for the wounded and burdened, and to look back, at Gondolin smouldering in the ruined valley, was to weep. Halt as I was by then, I was forty walkers from the back, amongst the warriors, when we endured our final attack, and Glorfindel's last stand. The way the mountain wound about, I was at a place where I could see it all, and yet do naught, save recall it for later. It would become the heart of the tale I told of Gondolin's fall, for their battle summarized all the struggle; something good and fair and precious, toppled by evil of exceeding power, yet with some success in its own defiance.

Still, this was not the last of it, for me. We descended to the other side of the Crissaegrim at last. Tuor, knowing me, commanded me to take the roll of the survivors, which I did eagerly, to find my kindred among the throng.

But they were not there.

They had not come out of the sack of Gondolin, my mother nor my father, my sister nor her spouse or children, nor her children's children. Nor had anybody in our dwindled folk seen them in the streets as they fled. They had not even been with the party that, emerging from Idril's tunnel, decided to try the main gates instead of the Crissaegrim. A thousand ill fates might have overcome them, slain by orcs or trolls, consumed by dragons, caught in fire or falling stone, dying cleanly or dishonoured. I never learned.

A fog of grief took me, then. I recall little of our journey down to the mouth of the Sirion, where we took refuge for a time. Arriving at Sirion, my few surviving friends gently shook me out of my grief. We all had to work through the remaining summer and autumn, lest winter claim us and finish Morgoth's work. We did our work well, but painful it was, to be reminded of my youth in Nevrast at every turn. It was then that I composed the great lay, The Fall of Gondolin. I rhymed it out nearly in a trance, seeing again the great events and valiant battles. That autumn, we held a feast for the memory of our departed kin. I sang it there for the first time.

Yet I could not vent in song what I did not know. These long years past, I cannot say which haunts me more: seeing the library where I spent my days scorched and tumbled to the ground, with my master in its wreckage, or my family's empty house and mysterious fate.



Pengolod ended his story calmly. Returning to himself, he said, "That was longer than I intended. Once those memories begin, it is hard to emerge..."

Aelfwine was wracked and fascinated. "That is the most terrible tale that ever I have heard. I am sorry," he said. He reached out to clasp Pengolod's closer shoulder in one hand, a hearty thud with a slight shake to it.

"Thank you," Pengolod murmured. He touched Aelfwine's hand briefly, then closed the slim volume. Aelfwine sat back, and Pengolod said, "People ever wish to know how things end. So you see, with me not knowing, my family's fate makes a poor tale. As for Rúmil – I did try a version with his ending. I could never make it through that part for guilt. The audience was supposed to weep, not the bard." Pengolod traced the book's cracked, creamy binding with one finger.

"They should keep that book better," said Aelfwine, huffily. "A gift from the Elf-King, and the tale of the great city fallen, allowed to decay like that."

Gently, Pengolod replied, "I am glad that this is worn. If nobody had read it, it would still be as fair as this book, over here – this 'Salt Production from 1506 to 1647 for Hyarrostar.' Some glue would not be amiss, I admit."

Aelfwine levered himself up. "If you will give it to me, I will tell the chief archivist, there. I'd like to see his face when I tell him the scribe is right here." Pengolod handed the small book over. Aelfwine, in his outrage, hardly limped at all as he made his way down the great table to the archivist's desk.

Compared to the enormity of Gondolin's loss, a book was small indeed. It could be fixed. It was, Pengolod thought, all that remained; that and himself.

Aelfwine was speaking with the archivist now, and indeed, the fellow had doffed his purple hat and was floundering amusingly, promising that the book would be splendidly repaired in short order.

Pengolod smiled sadly at this act of friendship and sympathy. At first it had seemed good to tell all these tales, but the deeper he went into his past, the more he felt the cracks in his own binding. He looked around the library, and out its tall windows, with the panoply of the city below, followed by the glittering harbour, full of boats. His friend was framed in one corner, by the archivist's desk, and the archivist had gone so far to stand and half-bow.

They were both about to walk over to him. He composed himself to be the loremaster of the Eldar once more, and to see if all the good things before him, the fellowship and honour and liveliness, could heal him, somewhat.

The Fat Man's Tale

One night, Pengolod slept badly. With the warm air still oppressive, even after dark the linen sheets felt hot as wool. When he arose, the sky over the firth of Rómenna glowered low and pearly. Aelfwine took a look at his elvish lodger lingering down the stairs, tying the sash of his robe, and said, "You'll want something cooler, surely? The hot weather set in last night. I can feel it in my foot."

Pengolod said, alarmed, "This is only the under-robe to my daily garb. I thought we were already in the middle of the hot summer weather that all you Rómennans spoke about." It was, after all, a month after the Erulaitalë.

Soup's face was already glossed with sweat as he said, "No, sir, spring's been pulled out long this year. Master, can you make up tonic water today?" he added, pleading.

"Yes, we'll definitely want it. Ask next door before you take the sorrel from their door-plants." Soup hustled off to draw water from the well before the heat grew truly punishing. "The air gets heavy, and we all must drink tonic-waters for our thirst while the sun is up. Wine only after sundown, until this weather breaks, say the healers. Since Elves don't fall ill, I suppose you won't need the tonics."

Pengolod replied, "Perhaps, you know, I should try them. I had been thinking already that Rómenna is warmer than any city where I have dwelt."

At first, Rómenna flourished in the height of summer. With "the city in its shirtsleeves," or no sleeves at all, children romped and shrieked, vendors changed their wares, and the smaller boats swarmed the harbour more than before. Tavern gardens filled at night with people comparing the efficacy of the temperate tonics, herb teas or flavored waters they drank during the day. These summery pleasantries changed as the stew-like weather did not break. Women grumbled on their doorsteps. The fast night-drinking led swiftly to fights. Worst of all, every breeze from the sunny docks was a malodorous, fly-ridden reminder that Rómenna was a working fishing-port.

Pengolod also worried that Aelfwine's business fell off noticeably. Aelfwine said, "It's normal in every way. Every ship's at sea right now, and the higher folk take off to their places in Forrostar or Emerie. Usually I wouldn't even have the lodging filled." Nonetheless, he or Soup went out in Aelfwine's small boat more often, and came back with fish or crustaceans for meals, which had not been their habit before.

Aelfwine's leg ached more in the humidity, and he showed the sharp side of his temper to Soup, especially about the use of the boat. Soup, not an argumentative lad, responded by darting away from the shop the moment his duties were finished each day. These excursions suited him. When Soup showed up at the late sunset, his skin looked healthier, rosy and brown from the sun, and his mild tiredness allowed him to concentrate. It was evident that he spent his time wangling his way onto various boats, talking about them avidly, with the excuse that maybe Aelfwine could get some business from their comings and goings. After three nights running of this, Aelfwine snapped, "I'm no fool to have my prentice tell me my business, boy. If you want a good word from me to get you on board

one of those ships someday, as something better than a galleyman, you'd serve better here, where I need you. Do you hear me?" Soup caught his breath and agreed. "Then show willing and run off to the well again."

When Soup was gone on this errand, Aelfwine confessed to Pengolod, "His folk sent him away from Armenelos for his gangling and greasiness, as much as for his ill work at the great Academy. They had the idea that they'd get back at least a respectable under-clerk once he'd grown beyond his awkward years and was fit to be seen once more. They will be sorry. Their lad will spare them the sight of him for many long years, when he's at sea."

"You will not try to keep him to aid you? It would not take much, if his family are as you say," said Pengolod.

Aelfwine pulled his mustache and slowly shook his head. "No, he's in love with Uinen. It is stronger in him, this year. I know what it is to go to sea – the green waves and the blue, new shores and strange isles. Knowing, I cannot keep him from his own chance."

Pengolod marveled at this selflessness and asked, "How did you come to be such a good man, Aelfwine?"

"Am I so? I do not feel it, lately, with the damp air knotting up my blood." Aelfwine drew on his mustache again. "In my youth, every time someone tormented me, or said ill of me – I vowed to act the opposite way. I had plenty of such examples, being a cripple."

Soup came back with the water, then. The two mortals made up another batch of Aelfwine's preferred tonic. Peace was restored as Soup peeled cucumbers without any protest (Aelfwine said the peels made the tonic bitter.) Aelfwine stripped the leaves off sorrel and mint. The lamplight flattered both of them, with their sun-touched skins and their hair thick and clean from swimming in the sea. Pengolod flicked his long braid back as he watched, and flinched to feel how deeply greasy his own hair was become in the heat.

The next day, he took himself off to one of Rómenna's public bath-houses. There were several of these, tucked into the hillsides of the Firth to capture water racing down from the cliffs. The one closest to the Kingstown neighborhood was a sodden-looking building of grey stone and wood, split into halves for men and women. The ablution that awaited within was nothing like the marvelous marble tubs of Tar-Minastir's palace. Pengolod, used to changes in fortune, was pleased enough with the wooden tub and handful of soft soap. Under the louring eye of the keeper of the men's entrance, he had paid the extra coin to partake of this in a wooden cubicle, instead of beside the public men's pool.

The good long scrub made Pengolod feel himself again. When he emerged, the bath-keeper seemed to anticipate his next question. "The courtyard's round the back." Evidently the man knew what his customers wanted, thought Pengolod, and he went happily enough to the courtyard, where he expected to sit until his streaming black hair dried.

The men sitting on the benches ringing the small courtyard were other fellows who could afford the best of the bathhouse, most with damp hair curling or straggling in the sun. The few men with shiny bald pates, Pengolod assumed, were

sitting out for the joys of sunlight and fellowship. Some of them were talking quietly, but a big bristly fellow beside an empty spot was, to Pengolod's amusement, snoring gently. In the mood for some silence, Pengolod joined him, sitting sidewise on the bench to allow his hair to fall straight for its full length.

That was when he realized that only a thin wooden wall separated the men's courtyard from the women's next door. He could hear a conversation taking place on a bench on the other side, and the voice was one he knew; that of the widow Rothinzil.

Behind the partition, Rothinzil was saying, "Ouf! It's a blessing to get off my feet, for once. If I was rich, I'd come here every day, not just once a month." Pengolod did not doubt that Rothinzil would change that wish, had she seen the King's palace.

"You said it, sister," said another woman, her voice coarser. Pengolod remembered Rothinzil's watchful friend, strapping Pudani. "My own feet ache clear up to my neck after last night's work."

Rothinzil chuckled. "And here you want me to take up serving – and fending off – all those tosspots with you."

"By the time they're all soused, they think I'm as good-looking as you are. I get my pick! And I get to sleep in of a morning."

"I should think so, you being up until cock-crow, as a rule." There was a pause. Rothinzil said, "My hours are worse than a dray-mare's, it's true, but I had to do something. If I'd have stayed where I was, I'd always have been their son's widow. Their son's barren widow. No, the good woman Ezellen was right; this muffin route was a good way to meet respectable fellows." Pengolod turned fully and glared at the wall that was expressing such mercenary opinions.

"Not much good with you going all soft on one right away. Still waiting for him to come 'round and start courting you proper?" Pengolod listened even more intently, to find out who Aelfwine's rival was.

"He started!" said Rothinzil, plaintively. "He started, and then – and then that Elf came back." Pengolod stared at the wall as if Rothinzil could see his shocked look. He had never said anything against her.

Pudani seemed to share his opinion as she asked, dismissively, "So what's the problem?"

"There are several. Beside him, I – his beauty is intimidating. I feel so lesser. I hardly know what to say to the elf. I am a widow as well, and if Aelfwine is friends with the Elves, maybe he thinks as they do – that widows shouldn't marry again." Rothinzil paused. "But it's not just that."

Pudani snorted. "That's good. 'Cause that's the stupidest excuse I ever heard. Elves always get another chance, is the thing. They have to understand we're human, we just get one go-around and that's it!"

Rothinzil sounded troubled as she said, "I wish it was like that, but I walked with the elf, I heard him tell one of his tales. It's like he casts a spell. It's as if – what if Uinen decided she liked you, and came to serve with you in your tavern, and tell you tales of how to enchant men like she does?"

"Now you're talking!" said Pudani, eagerly. "You think she would?"

Rothinzil said, "You like it already, see? It would be like being in one of those grand old tales yourself. You'd still be you, but special, picked out. Something from real life, our life, it's not the same. I felt that way, too, when I was listening to the elf's story. If the elf was in my lodging and gave me such mind, I wouldn't make time for courting, either." She sighed, sounding very like Aelfwine, in a way. "I'm not an enchanter. I'm not magic just by being. I can make a man feel like a man, even if he doesn't deserve it, but not like – not like his tale is walking with him."

Pudani grumbled, "So you're saying it's good but it's not good when the Elf is around? You're making my head hurt. You and the ink-man deserve each other. Why couldn't it just be something where I could have him beaten up?"

Rothinzil sighed again. "It would be easier if he was at sea, instead of seeing him for a few moments each day, and getting fresh gossip from all and sundry. Then I could worry about pretty cabin-boys and Middle-Earth women desperate to get off the Mud, like everybody else. As it is, it's too much and too little. I just want some time with him, that's all."

"Which him? Elf or Aelfwine? I wouldn't mind some time with either."

Rothinzil laughed. "You know who I mean."

Pengolod started as someone on his side of the wall addressed him. "Begging your pardon? Master?"

Pengolod looked up to find a man waiting with a soapy brush, a mug, and a long razor.

"Sorry for the wait, Master. Ready for your shave?" Just past him, Pengolod could see the man who had been beside him striding off, rubbing his newly-smooth chin with a satisfied expression.

Pengolod decided to nod. After all, he reflected, there was a first time for everything.

Though he tried to listen behind him as his face was soaped, he heard nothing more; the two women's voices were gone, or lost in the increased chatter.

After the shave, Pengolod was rubbing his own chin when the barber and asked if perhaps he wanted his hair cut. Pengolod refused and left immediately, before anyone could ask him again. Once his long stride had put a good downhill distance between himself and the bath-house, he rubbed his chin again. The skin felt slightly harder and flatter, though a glance in a reflecting window showed that he looked the same, save for his still-damp hair. He had fled before his hair was fully dry, and he started to seek a bench where he might sit and let the sun finish its work.

Pengolod had descended into a shabby-looking square. It seemed to be the haunt of chandlers and sailors, with a few wineshops and brewers, busy despite Rómenna's summer superstition. They had probably been the ones to build a whitewashed bench encircling the square's central walnut tree. Pengolod took a seat, prepared to watch the passers-by as he waited in the half-shade. He glanced up at the tree appreciatively. It was as tall and broad as the trees shading the courtyard of Aelfwine's square. No doubt they had been planted at the same time, fifty years ago, when Tar-Minastir bade the Kingstown neighbourhood be improved. Small birds, greenish wrens and scarlet *kirinki*, were picking at the green

walnuts. He let the birds' small noises soothe him while he thought about Rothinzil's words.

Pengolod had, of course, heard of the debate of the mortal wise-woman Andreth and the elf-king Finrod, which turned upon the axis of love fulfilled between Andreth and Finrod's undying kinsman. Since her day, long past, the gulf between elf and mortal had been bridged only rarely. Time tore at mortals, and memory tore at elves, drawing them ever apart even when they came together. *Especially when*, Pengolod thought. He had been congratulating himself about the friendship between himself and Aelfwine, who was – he corrected himself – who seemed always happy to share his thoughts and remembrances, and considered that they had rediscovered the fellowship of days past. Woman-wise Rothinzil, schooled in sadness and unmet dreams, had divined why it was so for Aelfwine. But for himself?

The leaves rustled in the walnut-tree as Pengolod considered this. Suddenly, peeping and piping, all the kirinki took off in a crimson flock, leaving the tree to the bolder wrens. They had been disturbed by a great wain entering the square. Pengolod's glance of curiosity sharpened at whom he saw bellying out from one of the wineshops to greet the wain's drover. And where else, he thought bitterly, would a fat man while away the hours? The bulk and beard of the master of the mummers, the Little King, were unmistakable.

Pengolod stared as the Little King stopped to chat with the wain-drover. At first he thought that the mortal had lost some of his poundage, for he looked less bloated and strained. A moment's scrutiny revealed that, in fact, it was his clothes that made the difference. They fitted his mass, instead of straining about it. The false finery the mortal wore as the Little King had been too small on purpose, to exaggerate his body all the more.

The Little King's time performing must have made him sensitive to all audiences. He screwed up his eyes and peered about, seeking his watcher, and saw Pengolod. His eyebrows lifted. Then he tapped the drover, and they looked Pengolod's way without pointing. The drover promptly went crimson with astonishment. The fat man beamed and walked over to astonish Pengolod with a half-bow. "I say! You're that elveny chap, aren't you? How d'you fare?"

Pengolod stood up. "And you are that mummer whose rabble mocks my people time and again."

The fat man replied, "By Ossë, 'tis nothing against the Fair Folk. Just that I've got to cheer myself up somehow after I look in the mirror, I say." His smile invited Pengolod's laughter.

Pengolod would not be appeased. "How dare you make a play of the Siege of Imladris? I was there – I starved there thirty months and two, and there I'd be yet if not for the soldiers you also mocked. We laughed little at the orcs, by the end of it, and it was terrible loss, not weakness, that brought our defeat." He stopped short. He had been so angry that he had railed from the start in Elvish, not Adûnaic, but despite that, he was being understood.

The man being castigated rolled back a step before he found his voice, to reply in Elvish as well. "I've seen humans come back to Numenor's shores still

fighting that war. Didn't know Elves did the same. Nothing like that, I've seen, to make a man lose his laughter. So I will ask your pardon. Twice over, I ween, for the mocking you took at Ciryatan's ship-feast. That did not offend you more?"

Disarmed by this second reply, Pengolod said, "The ship-feast? No. That kiss was just – foolery."

"Nothing's just foolery, good sir, not in my Little Kingdom. You are the sojourner Pengolod, are you not?"

Mollified but wary, he said, "Yes, I am Pengolod. And you -- Master? All I know you as is the Little King."

The fat man said, "You had better name me *Nûph*, then, as all the folk in this quarter do. Will you let me stand you a stoup of wine, which drowns all offense?"

"I thought wine in the sun brought ill health, with the heat running high," said Pengolod, privately nothing loath. People were starting to cluster around the edges of the square to observe the ill-matched pair talking.

Nûph allowed his voice a sarcastic edge as he declared, "Tar-Minastir did many fine things when he became king, but having that idea proclaimed to the common folk, as he did, wasn't one of them. Which shop will you have? The *Hen and Chicks*, or *Two Green Almonds*?"

Pengolod observed them both. The doorway of the *Hen and Chicks*, under its red and yellow signboard, was crowded with watching women, their eyes narrowed as they peered into the sunlight. Pengolod had not ridden through the corners of Middle-Earth for naught. Knowing how a "wine-shop" might stay busy without selling a cup, he immediately chose the other one. Nûph said, "Your way it is," and blew a kiss to the women as they entered the cool shadows of *Two Green Almonds*.

Two Green Almonds seemed to draw a more genteel crowd, if its sparse clientele of artistic-looking young men, their faces shaved clean, was any indication. Despite his invitation, Nûph's tippie proved to be a pitcher of tonic, albeit with slices of expensive citrus drifting among the required mint leaves. He took a great draught and said, "This heat, it's terrible. This is the only time when I wish I could take to home, where Uinen's breezes don't come by way of Ossë's midden, but one can't always have what one wants."

Pengolod took a more modest sip, appreciating that his red wine was cool from the cellar, and replied, "I hear that. We Elves like four seasons and a cool country. Where is home?"

"Hyarnustar in the southwest. Our wine country. The heat's to good purpose, on those fields." Nûph sighed dramatically and filled his tumbler again.

Pengolod asked, "Then how come you here, to be a mummer?"

Nûph said, "Unien's teats and tail, haven't you noticed? I'm obese! Enormous! A great tub of lard! The hold of the great ship Turuphanto had nothing on my gullet; they could light all Armenelos with candles from my tallow. Yea, was I to go to war, the orcs would fight themselves to death, quarrelling over who'd get to render my drippings for their goblin bread. I am, in brief, fat."

Recalling his first thought on seeing Nûph, Pengolod said, guiltily, "It does come to mind. But what does that have to do with being a mummer?"

Nûph put his tumbler down and said, "Your lot and mine, elf-man, are tied together in Númenor. I shall explain. You have gone to Armenelos and been the guest of Tar-Minastir. If some tattooed canoe-boy from the South-isles, or ambitious chit from Umbar, gets off a boat in Rómenna, they do not get the King's hospitality, oh, no. You were asked out of Minastir's reverence for the Elves, which all Numenor knows about. We know it, for thanks to Minastir, anything Elvish is the style, these past hundred years of his reign. Including –" Nûph cocked a finger at Pengolod's nose – "your fine looks. Elves have keen eyes, 'tis said. Did you see anyone young and ill-favoured, or any fat folk, at our good King's court?"

"No," Pengolod admitted. "Some with silver beards, but that was all, in the way of mortality."

Nûph nodded. "All mortals know that Elves' fine faces show their virtue. Hence –"

"Wait, wait! Where does that come from? We Elves do not say it of ourselves," protested Pengolod.

Nûph looked both irritated and amused. "You say you don't say it, which is exactly the sort of thing someone virtuous would say. I believe you don't say it, but you can see how we came to say it, yes? As I was saying before you said what you don't say, hence those who are less than fair are less than welcome in Armenelos."

Astonished, Pengolod said, "How can they make a law against that?"

"They don't need to. I saw it all as it came about. I was young when Minastir took the scepter. His wife was a beauty, of course, and nobles soon saw how Minastir groomed himself elfwise, the shaved beard, the robes like elves off the boats. They did the same, and the clever began to slide lovely pages and maids into their entourages. Theories on the unity of fairness and noble natures abounded. By now, thinking they know beauty, they grow even harsher towards it; no-one is well-favoured enough, especially when the real thing comes by, as happens rarely." Nûph gave Pengolod a pointed look. "A fat man at that court, though he hold fine lineage and title to the vineyards of Hyarnustar – not even the lowest of the pretty pages will speak him fair for all the vails in all the coffers." He stopped for yet another draught. As if at random, he said, "I've a sister at home."

By now Pengolod recognized he was the audience of a master storyteller. Instead of mentioning his own sister, he nodded, to give Nûph his cue.

"Yes; a sister. You'd know her as my sister if you saw her, have no doubt. I wouldn't want to be a woman. A fat man can manage, by day's end. He can trade and politic, use a quick tongue to beat others to their mocking and win them around. The Chief of the Mummers is always a fat fellow, for that reason. The one before me told me I'd find it a bloody relief, and he was right. After the way everyone's eyes slid away from my grossness, being the Little King gives them leave to look, and lets me be seen. But – my sister?" He shook his head. For an instant, real bleakness was in his gaze. "Better that her brother's off in Rómenna, living the low life and a-taunting Ciryatan. She's got the best of all reasons to spare herself sharp eyes, minding the family home. Yavanna's hallow knows her fair, even if she will not go to Illuvatar's at the Meneltarma." He tilted his tumbler to hide his face for a moment, and put it down, wiping his mouth. "Augh, listen to

me, I'm maudlin as if this was spirits. Barkeep, what've you been putting in this tonic, hey?"

As he had said earlier to Aelfwine, Pengolod said, "It is very good of you to leave your home so that she may have peace."

"Humph. Selfish of me, rather. When the weather behaves, I'm better here, amongst my fellow grotesques." When Pengolod raised his eyebrows, Nûph exclaimed, "Don't tell me you haven't noticed that, either? Kingstown's where the dregs of Numenor collects, all those who don't even come close to elven-fair. The boy and the chit who get off the boat, who Minastir won't have to Armenelos, even to scrub his pots? It's here that they come. Again, it's Tar-Minastir's doing. The old port was all right, though it had a bad habit of burning down, being clinker-built of wood not fit for the boats. Minastir built it up of new stone, with fine trees and wells, all good as his work at Armenelos – but he would put it about that this was made fine and fair for the working folk."

Accepting his own cue, Pengolod asked, "What's the problem?"

"Just as most Numenoreans are fine-favoured enough that they yearn to be elven-fair, so too they're prosperous enough that nobody wants to be working folk. Those who had the right to claim a dwelling traded their leases to shoehorn themselves in the good part of Rómenna, which became anywhere that wasn't Kingstown. All the fine new parts filled up with those for whom "working folk" was a step up from "rabble from the Mud." Then you come along, hah! That an elf likes Kingstown is one thing; that an elf likes it more than Armenelos, enough to stay the summer through, that's what's got the wind in everyone's sails."

"I see." Behind his quiet, Pengolod was going through several kinds of recognition. Nûph had the weapons of the quick-minded, wit and wryness and perception. Stronger than these was the sense that he had known a person of the same type in the past, living under a different name and guise yet akin in soul; that he had met someone cast from this same metal before.

His intense gaze impressed Nûph, who said, "You've listened to my wind blow long enough, I'm sure. Now I would listen to you, if I might. You are an elf of lore; you can tell me something that I've wondered about all my days."

"Ask away," said Pengolod. "Though I feel much the fool myself as I sit here and listen to you, and learn what I have lived amongst."

Nûph smiled and his rounded hand drifted up forgivingly. "Now, now, being a fool is the start of wisdom, at least in the Little Court! Anyhow, my question." He grew somber. "We mortals know Aule created the Dwarves for love, Morgoth made the Orcs for hate, and Illuvatar lavished every gift on his Firstborn folk, you Elves. You're all locked in neatly with the Valar and their fates. But what are mortals good for? What good do we do in this Middle-Earth? It seems the only time we matter is when we get tangled up with the Elves."

Pengolod sat back in surprise. "Some of our seers say your spirits will return and fight with us Elves in the Last Battle."

"Yes, but why? Why even bother having mortals? I just can't picture it, the Great Singing Creator saying, "Right, I've made people who never get sick, never grow old, love truly and faithfully, and stay always beautiful. Now to do better the

second time about," and he made...us? Me? Many a night, as I wheeze and ache, I've wondered why."

Nûph's eyes, in their folds of flesh, were a keen, icy blue. Their brightness would have been a by-word, had fate set them in a fair visage, not over thick, bearded jowls. Pengolod said, gravely, "I don't know. When it comes to it, some say we Elves were put here to be memory for mortals. But mortals – you – and mortality have never been explained by our philosophers."

Nûph exhaled, and looked diminished for a moment, before swelling with jocularly once more. "Does that mean that we should seek you Elves whenever we mislay our keys, or forget our wives' birthdays? Seriously now, if you ever do find out what both you and we are in Arda for, let us mortals know."

"You have my solemn promise," Pengolod said.

Nûph peered mockingly into Pengolod's tankard. "Solemn promises now, after such a greeting! The dregs often hit folks like that, when it's a good vintage." He laughed his easy laugh and stood, downing the last of the tonic. Seeing Pengolod drawing out his wallet, Nûph protested, "None of that, though Elvish silver be rare indeed in any wine-shop here. I invited you; and asides, I own this place. And a few others. And most of –" Nûph stopped with a chuckle. "Let's just say Ciryatan puts up with me for a reason. Men must drink. Ah, at last, I've made you smile. That took some doing. With this great deed accomplished, I will leave you, as all good mummers should – leave them laughing, is our motto."

Pengolod said, "I will walk out with you."

At their passing, one of the few other drinkers said, "Come back again, handsome," adding a scandalous wink at Pengolod. The drinker recoiled a moment later as the Little King rotated his way to cry, with exaggerated bliss, "Darling, I knew you loved me truly!" Pengolod laughed with everyone else in the shop at Nûph's successful mocking, though his mouth went dry to consider the other types, perhaps unwelcome at Armenelos, who had found a niche in Kingstown. He slipped out the door in the lee of the huge, laughing man, who brushed off Pengolod's thanks. Nûph waved it off. "Not enough of an audience for me to make you put up with that."

"So you say. But you set yourself forwards to be mocked, instead of, ah, what he meant," said Pengolod.

Nûph said, blandly, "And here I never said why it's always a fat man who's the Little King. That's our specialty, you see. Blunts the sting if we mock ourselves first, and others second."

This said, the Little King took his leave promptly, in the wain that had waited all through their talk. When the wain-drover bawled to his oxen to spur them along, Pengolod realized that he had seen the drover before as well, clad in a white gown and a wig of golden straw, announcing that he was a beautiful elvish lady.

This last strangeness made him feel deeply weary. With the Little King gone, the square's inhabitants felt more hostile. Pengolod retreated to Aelfwine's shop.

Business was still slow when he arrived. Aelfwine and Soup were cleaning the shelves. They seemed to have been working together well, for Aelfwine was cheerful as he said, "Looks like you found the bath-house all right. Come look at

this, it's from my old master's time..." Pengolod went, grateful to slide so easily into the safer part of their friendship, after his day.

Pengolod stayed quiet that evening, drawing Aelfwine out for their conversation. He heard stories of Aelfwine's youth on the trading-boat, and the scrapes of his own apprenticeship. When Soup was sent upstairs, Pengolod (dutifully silent about overhearing Rothinzil) spoke of his meeting with the Little King. Aelfwine, fascinated, responded with the centuries-sordid history of the square where Pengolod had had his encounter. This ended when Soup came down from his baking-hot garret and was granted leave to sleep on the small tiled porch.

Pengolod, staying up through the night to write, heard the lad snoring gently, regular as a bellows. After their first talk at the Venturer's library, Pengolod had meant to write out the full *Narn I Hin Húrin* for Aelfwine. (None of the copies in the Venturer's library were the complete version – yet another sign of Minastir's cleansing upon becoming King, he suspected.) His gritty day had him in the mood for both the grim tale, with its ill-starred friendship between mortal Túrin and Beleg of Doriath, and for a gesture to Aelfwine. It was the longest such lay known to the Elves. He could not have written it all out in one night, but he had already begun the work of it, and finished with the dawn.

Aelfwine, greeted when he came down the stairs, looked at the pages and said, "Don't tell me you worked through the night on this."

"I did, and gladly, with the night's coolness. Your climate here has conquered me." Pengolod heard, before Aelfwine did, a voice he knew in the morning street. "Take a look while I scrub this ink off, for once. If Rothinzil comes while I'm beside the well, two muffins for me. Not sleeping makes me hungry." He stepped out the back into the courtyard just as she came in the front, and took his time.

The day went by with even less business than the day before. Aelfwine sewed up the pages Pengolod had written into a leather cover. Pengolod lingered by, and their conversation, as it often did, led to Pengolod recounting another tale of eld. He had remembered who it was that had been, in the past, the same type of person as Nûph.



I would never have met Dírhaval if we had not both had our fates turned upside-down. We who had fled Gondolin had, after several years at the mouth of the river Sirion, struck up an alliance with Círdan's folk. Many of them had dwelt in the great citadel of Brithombar, but this had been downed, and they had fled to the same regions of Sirion. The Teleri's seaward citadels had been built ages past, in the era when only stars shone. Their towers had been raised by the folk you call Dwarves. (They had taken their pay of pearls, and retreated before the Sun arose, far inland and south to the great Dwarf-home called Khazad-Dûm.) At this time Sirion was the great refuge of the Green-Elves and Doriathrim, fleeing the spreading evil of the North and the fall of Doriath.

Not all this evil was of Morgoth's making. The most famed of the refugees was young Elwing, and her home, Doriath, had been sacked by the Sons of Fëanor, in the second great Kinslaying. She and her mother had fled, with the heirloom of her house, Beren's Silmaril. Elwing was marked by her grandmother's beauty and,

perhaps, her mother's fearfulness. Brithombar's leading council could not turn her away, nor did they wish to, after seeing her piteous loveliness, made compelling by the Silmaril she wore. But they knew that the love of Ulmo and his waters, which kept Brithombar safe from Morgoth as might be, would not bar the Sons of Fëanor.

Thus it was that Idril was able to join the refugees of the Song of Stone, with our wrights and drafters, to Círdan's people. Guided by those who had been Gondolindrim, a great sheer wall was built arcing about the haven of Sirion, hemming it between the sea-cliffs and docks of the west and a single arched gate in the east. Once word went out into the war-ravaged lands that the Mouths of Sirion was grown to be a citadel strong, yet more good folk came, seeking refuge.

When we were permitted Sirion, I met the varied folk there, and the new knowledge they brought gave me pangs of grief again. At that time I had a higher rank than in the past, as Eärendil's tutor of letters – not that Eärendil vaunted me. The lad adored Círdan as his hero, and yearned for his ships. He came of age in body very early, and declared himself done with my tutoring at the age of twenty. I could hardly gainsay this strange man, who had a boy's years by our count, but was fair as his mother, virile-strong as his father, and tall as lost Turgon. With all his virtues, it seemed inevitable that he soon won the hand of fair Elwing.

Very soon after they wedded, I had yet another parting to endure. At least those who left chose to go. Tuor was growing grey. He and Idril, for love of each other, decided to attempt sailing to the West together. Several of their most devoted followers went with them as crew, including my friend of long years, Voronwë. Idril had me scry the omens for the journey. I had to assure her three times that they really were successful, and I was not simply saying what she might wish to hear. I saw amongst those omens that their journey was not my fate. So I remained.

Though I served Eärendil as I had served Idril and Tuor, this left me with hours of my own. I befriended the varied folk of Sirion. Never before, and never again, did so many different kindreds of Elf and Mortal dwell together. How Rúmil would have adored to learn of the origins of Daeron's runes, to compare the dialects of Ossirand and the Falathrim to the antique language of Doriath, and to hear the great Lay of Leithian and its release from bondage. But Rúmil was perished. I allowed myself some joy in life again through this expansion of my loremaster's art, and was privately glad that I had stayed.

You can surely see it coming that this was when I came to know Dírhaval.

Dírhaval came with one of the few bands of the House of Hador that remained, guarding his kin. The men of Hador were, like Tuor, blue-eyed and yellow-haired, with well-defined features that showed how elf and mortal are akin in our creator's mind. Dírhaval's band had escaped thralldom or worse by allying themselves to some of the House of Beor. Dírhaval himself had been born of the more intimate side of this alliance. He resembled the Hadorim not at all, being a great, thrawn, bearish man, with a dark beard and deep-set eyes, though he ever spoke of himself as of the House of Hador, and they had all his interest. When we knew each other better, Dírhaval told me that some of the wilder Beornings had said that he was born to be a bear-man, and offered to teach him their mysteries. But Dírhaval had refused the bear's sark. He was driven by another weird.

All good mortals at that time spoke Sindarin. Even those who had never met an Elf did so in rebellion against their Easterling conquerors, who banned the language. Dírhaval took it a step further. He would come early to the poet's circles, and leave last, and chase after those who spoke and sang with questions about their art. Few enough came after me when I spoke, and I was glad to give him some time. He talked to me at length about his grand, vague dream of writing a great lay about mortals, such as we had in plenty about Elves. I gave him my recommendations. I explained the main modes of verse, told him not to make his first attempt anything too long, and that he would keep his listeners longer if he kept grimness brief and necessary. Dírhaval did not take this lightly, and grew terse and quarrelsome over certain points. At the end, I still wished him luck. When he was not about his duties as a guard and labourer, I would see him sitting by himself, moving his lips as he composed. Watching him troubled by a line or so was painful, like seeing a bear fumbling a harp. But he kept on, alternately in black moods or transported, based on how the work was going.

Dírhaval had decided his tale for the House of Hador would be that of Húrin and his kin. Fortune must have meant his work to be. At no other time, before or since, could Dírhaval have met those who knew of this family's history in Gondolin, in Doriath, and in Hithlum. His best luck befell when a fellow named Andvir came in with a tattered group one midwinter. Andvir had been son of Androg, and was the last survivor of Túrin's outlaw band. Dírhaval's project was lucky for Andvir, as well – for Andvir caused trouble in plenty with petty thievery. Only Dírhaval's word kept him from being cast out the gates twice. Andvir was a wheedler, a beggar, and an outlaw ever, but his lack of love for his dead father balanced out his urge to please Dírhaval, and the tale he told about Túrin was close enough to the truth. Dírhaval's gratitude made Andvir over-confident of his place in Sirion, and of Dírhaval's protection. This was his undoing. It was Dírhaval who hurled him out after Andvir made a revolting attempt against a simple mortal woman's purity. At least it was spring.

When spring was full, Dírhaval said that he was ready to share his great work with a few of us. We who had helped were invited to a first hearing of the *Narn I Hîn Húrin*. At first, I was vexed. His lay was dark with grimness from the start, he had tweaked the strict verse conventions of the mode appropriate for the *narn*-type lay, and, as we listened, and listened more, it became clear that the piece was massively long. He had broken every rule I had lain down. At the first verse, I thought my courtesy would be sorely tried. Two hours later, seeing the bards and news-bearers weep transfixed, I cast away in my mind all the old rules. Dírhaval's art, like Túrin's fate, triumphed over any intentions to confine it.

Two days later, at our urging, Dírhaval sang it for a wider company, and was justly acclaimed. The remaining folk of Hador, whose censure he had feared, said that he made the old tale dignified. We Elves said it was a voice that would never be forgotten, and he smiled. I noticed that the mortal women were eager to smile back at him, now that he was a lauded bard. Still, it was a sad old man's comment that made him the happiest; he told us; one had said to him, "Now we of Hador have a voice for the long years."

Who knows what he might have done next, if not for the attack of the

Fëanorians?

Eärendil, the closest thing to a Lord that Sirion possessed had, like his father before him, taken ship to try and find Valinor, to beg mercy of the Great Powers for the sake of Elves and mortals alike. He had been gone at sea for four years, without any word or omen. Doubtless the Sons of Fëanor knew of this when they sent messages that cloaked firm demands behind purported alliance. I remember Elwing reading those messages, frightened yet stubborn (as her grandsire Beren had been), tangled up in the Curse of Mandos like all the rest of us. Three times, did Maedhros and Maglor demand that Elwing release the Silmaril to them, or be their enemy. Three times did she respond with a refusal. My hand shook as I set her seal upon the fair copy of her third response. We'd built the wall of the haven to keep out Morgoth's forces. I was not the only one to have a bad feeling about pitting those walls against someone else who might have built them, and built them better...

The force Maedhros and Maglor brought against Brithombar would not have been one of the great troops of the Nirnaeth, but it was enough that we were afeared. They drifted over the horizon like a long grey shadow in the early morn, and camped before the gates all the day. Once I had been glad to see their banners and shields. To have them serried against us was terrible. During the day, embassies were exchanged by war heralds. Elwing must have found the steel of her ancestress and the stubbornness of her grandsire inside her, to have told the hosts of Fëanor's sons that she would give no quarter. Thus battle was joined at nightfall.

We defenders had the advantage at first, as it started out an archer's fight. The Teleri shoot well, be it night or day. The mortals with us stamped and grumbled, for they could not see to shoot in the night. On a sudden, the attackers sprang small engines hidden in their ranks, firing hooked rods that became trapped in the very stone of the haven-wall. There were cords attached to these, and, swift as lightning, the more lithe among our enemies began to scale our walls, needing little more aid. Some of them tarried at mysterious tasks, weakening stonework, and we archers redirected ourselves to them, until we realized some of them were scaling to the wall-tops, to join with us there.

No sooner had we been warned of this than one leapt up beside us, with a piercing yell. I was struck to the heart – I had heard that voice before, raised in a revel. Once, he had been Maedhros' esquire, and been as much a friend to me as anyone met on a pleasant night. "Rodendil, stop! Remember me?" I cried, and I whipped off my helmet, that he might see my face. The others fell back, willing to let me try to calm him.

Rodendil heard, span my way, and lifted his light sword to meet me. I managed to parry with my knife, barely. When our blades connected, I saw his eyes deep in his own helm widen, recognizing. "By the feast of Narogthron, surrender!"

I shoved back with all I had and hooked a foot behind his ankle to topple him. "Don't make us do this," I shouted. He was quick as an eel, and caught himself in the fall, to duck and send his sword up behind my blocking arm.

Dírhaval barged up. He had climbed to our level the moment he heard battle was joined. With an eager yell, he slammed his mattock towards the back of

Rodendil's neck. Rodendil bent double, staggering as the blow glanced, and sprang in to slash left-handed at Dírhaval's belly. Dírhaval's leather chest-plate split from the cut, and I saw blood, but Dírhaval roared "You're no kin of mine – I'll see you gutted! Rrrrargh!" giving chase as Rodendil flew. Unwounded, I leaned against the wall. I shattered inside at this betrayal, and hardened to it, in the same second. This was our battle, then.

Soon, the fight became focused around Brithombar's gate. The few Fëanorians who had entered were, as it turned out Rodendil was trying to do, seeking to win their way to let the gate down. Some others, clinging to the archway, were chiseling at its very keystone. We archers set ourselves to take them out, and my fellows cheered me when I sank an arrow to fell a Fëanorian despite his plate mail, hitting the chink between an arm-piece and a chest-plate. I grinned with pride, then realized what I had done. Our attackers had made us, too, Kinslayers.

They realized what I had done as well. Where they perched, one of them, swifter than it takes to tell it, took out a slingshot, whirled it round, and sent a metal ball to bash the side of my still-unhelmed head, hard enough that my last thought was, That's a clever weapon.

No, I don't know if it was Rodendil who struck me down. They had helms too, you see.

I came to in an irregular wooden room, feeling that my aching head was responsible for my lack of equilibrium. My savior was by my side. He was a lad of Hador, who I knew admired Dírhaval greatly. He had been by when Dírhaval died of his many wounds. Seeing me fallen but breathing, he had dragged me out of the sack of Brithombar. The stronghold was taken by the Sons of Fëanor, but not its treasure, he said; Elwing had flung herself and the Silmaril into the sea. "Where are we now?" I asked.

"In a boat of Círdan's, with Gil-Galad's soldiers, going to the Isle of Balar."

When we disembarked, I was shattered anew. Few of our fellow fighters, elf or mortal, had emerged. Most who had been evacuated were our gentler folk. Sent away from the fighting to the waterside, they had seen Elwing's astonishing plunge, and the mists that came up to take her. All of us survivors pledged ourselves to Gil-Galad, and gained leave to dwell on Balar. We remaining Gondolindrim were strung tight at this second loss, but did our best to make a fresh start again. Balar was our refuge, for a time; as long as it took for the likely lad who had saved me to grow into a man and become wedded.

He was a good fellow. In thanks for saving my life, I took him as my aide, since he longed for it, and it was for him that I wrote the *Narn I Hin Húrin* down for the first time. He did many practical things, and was calm and even-tempered. I could trust him with any work. But he lacked the banked soul-fire, be it madness or gift, that set Dírhaval apart. I wonder what they both would have been, did they dwell here and now.



They sat silent for a bit after Pengolod's final word. Pengolod was wondering what Dírhaval, who had been strong-thewed despite the scanty food at Sirion,

would have looked like after the rich feasts and relative ease of Númenor.

Aelfwine set a weight on top of the newly completed book, to keep its covers flat as its glue dried, and broke the silence first. "Which sort of the two am I? The practical sort, or the kind on fire?"

"Neither. You've got more light about you than the one, and far more sanity than the other. Perhaps your balance is what they would have had, if they had been allowed peace in their youth." Aelfwine definitely had some light to him after his morning's words with Rothinzil, Pengolod decided.

Casually, Pengolod said, "I was thinking, in a day or two, of spending some time at Armenelos again. If the ships are out, and the lords at cooler lodgings, I could spend some time undisturbed in Minastir's library."

Aelfwine said, "Ciryatan's on the water, if that's what you mean."

They both nodded. Pengolod took out his wallet and extracted a carved token of whale-ivory. He held this out to Aelfwine, saying, "I can't be in Armenelos and in the Venturer's library at the same time. Take the King's token to open their doors to you, while I am gone."

Aelfwine took it eagerly. "I was about to say I'd miss having you here, but this nearly makes up for it – here, you've given me a coin by mistake with it, gold at that."

Pengolod said, "Did I? Why not keep it, to hold my lodging until I return? You shouldn't have to suffer for my comings and goings." When Aelfwine began to protest, Pengolod looked down. "You'd ask it of a mortal lodger, would you not? I would not feel like a good friend if I wasn't being fair." At this, Aelfwine accepted it.

Pengolod was happy to imagine Aelfwine enjoying the Venturer's library, along with how he might spend the sultry summer evenings without a lodger. Rothinzil would have nothing to complain about by the time Pengolod returned, and he had put the lie to her worries that his friendship with Aelfwine was unbalanced. He smiled, convinced that he had again kept one step ahead of the shadows that could fall between elf and mortal.

The Tomb of Elros

Pengolod arrived at Armenelos an hour past midnight. Shunning the heat of noon, he had begun the ride from Rómenna two hours before sundown. At any elvish settlement, there would have been someone of rank awake to meet him, but at one in the morning in Armenelos, there were only some surprised night guards. An impulse had come over him as he had drawn near and seen the Meneltarma's height rearing dark above Armenelos. Finding himself free until dawn, Pengolod left steed and luggage with them, and said he would return with the day. He would visit the tombs of Númenor's perished kings and queens.

As Pengolod ascended the sacred mountain for a second time, he walked up into mists. Clouds driven over the land were butting against the mountain, wrapping their moisture about it, allowing only glimpses of the stars. After all the well-finished pavements of Rómenna and Armenelos, the dirt and stone path felt appealingly natural beneath Pengolod's thin boot-soles. At one spot, he stepped off the path simply to stand on a patch of grass again, and enjoyed its soft comfort for some moments. He had not felt such since he had returned to Rómenna last, there being few lawns in the port city. Then Pengolod drifted onwards, inhaling the damp, cool airs with pleasure.

After a time, Pengolod came to the first tomb, Elros' tomb, its cave's mouth opening directly onto the path. Of all the tombs, this was the one that faced true West. The tomb-runes over the entrance were simple, with only Elros' name and years of Elros' reign. Pengolod had to stoop slightly to go inside.

Within, the cave was natural, with just enough room for someone to stand by the stone bier. The lid of the casket had been carved with Elros' full likeness, the length of a man in repose. Pengolod peered to see if it was a good likeness of Elros as he had seen the man. Very good, he decided, though not as fine as art had become in Númenor. It reminded him of the stonework of the mortal Wood-wooses, the Drúedain.

Pengolod was mindful that mortals' souls sometimes lingered as ghosts. He stood beside the bier and casket for a time, striving to sense any presences in mist, shadow, and darkness. If souls returned from wherever they went outside the circles of the World, he thought, perhaps one of them might answer his questions.

He felt nothing. Elros' departed soul did not linger. There would be no answer for him, here.

Pengolod slipped along to the next tomb in line. Elros' son Nolimón had been given a ruler's honour with his grave, though he had never reigned, between the long life of Elros and his contentment making books. Here, Pengolod tried even harder to sense something of the occupant's spirit. Failing, he went on, working his way up the mountain. The tombs grew more spacious and fine inside as the years of Númenor progressed, gaining columns and tiled floors and carved tablets, with more detailed likenesses reclining eternally upon the biers. For all their trappings, these other tombs were equally empty of souls.

At the tomb of Aldarion, Pengolod paused. Its entry-way was still blocked by

offerings. New ones had been added since he had last been there, for sailors gone to sea over the summer. More, there was a strange keenness to the breeze, which had taken on a disturbing whistle in the grass. Suddenly, Pengolod wondered whether it was permitted to ascend the Meneltarma if it was not a holy day. He lingered on the path, considering. Eventually, though he was curious about the other tombs, and wanted to ascend and see if he could discern the lights of Avallónë by starlight, he went down. With every step, he wanted to turn back more, even as he became more uncertain as to whether he had transgressed with his wanderings. When Pengolod returned to the King's door with the light of dawn, which was already summer-sharp, he said nothing of where he had gone.

After the Erulaitale and its great feasts and fairs, Armenelos was quiet, almost sleepy. Pengolod gathered that the King's Court was not the fashionable place to be at that time of the year. Tar-Minastir's near-empty hall and his greeting confirmed this. "Fair fortune brings you here at this time. Were we not concluding our great war in Middle-Earth, I would be by the Western sea, governing the people by day and gazing from my tower's height at night. This year, had you come later, I would have gone to Rómenna, to greet the last great transport of our returning troops."

"I hope that, after your victory, you will never more have to absent yourself from Andúnië in the summer, Tar-Minastir – or, if so, you have a reason that pleases all Arda better than duty to war." Pengolod bowed.

Tar-Minastir replied, "Fair spoken as ever! I share your hope, and add to it that I wish you spoke prophecy. Stay here as you wish it. Since you have returned for our archives, they are open to you."

Pengolod went on his way buoyed by this, a better start than his last beginning with Tar-Minastir. Perhaps it had been the ceaseless crowds that brought out Tar-Minastir's regal pomposity, before.

Far more than on his previous visit, Pengolod was left to his own devices. Minastir verily had quantities of kingly work, and trusted that Pengolod had been sufficiently flattered and impressed before. Pengolod kept to his night-owl's schedule, taking his sleep in the heat of the day. With his hours turned about, apart from the King's table, he rarely spoke to anyone who was not an archivist or a servant. Though Armenelos was notably cooler than Rómenna, Pengolod did not turn down the ices and chilled sweetmeats that were Armenelos' delicacies for the season. He felt somewhat guilty as he accepted them, recalling all the humble remedies for the heat in Aelfwine's house; but he accepted them nonetheless. He noted, too, that the page and maid who attended him were both in the prime of their youth, and singularly fair.

To reconcile himself to the luxury around him, Pengolod was diligent in the archives. Nûph's question preyed on him, and not for Nûph's sake alone. It would be something he could offer Aelfwine, to say, the way you were born; this is why; those who said or did you ill are wrong. His forays into the Númenoreans' knowledge of such things dismayed him. He was drawn into the texts and pamphlets of healers, healers from the past, for the study of imperfect bodies had fallen away in Tar-Minastir's time. He shook his head over a recent folio, a self-styled expert's dissertation of ideal beauty amongst mortals. It was lavishly

illuminated with the lines and planes of allegedly perfect faces, marked by their angles and percentages of symmetry, and Pengolod wondered that such a work had taken up so much of one man's mortal life.

Pengolod turned to a new section of the library without finding what he sought. Other questions emerged, like salamanders squirming under a lifted stone. Númenorean philosophers had not wrangled with lame legs and fair faces. To them, the greater issue was death. The silence of the tomb was a challenge in its mystery, and they too had beseeched the dead to bring back what wisdom they could. Pengolod was distracted for a full day by their extensive vocabulary for death. There were myriad words indicating all the parts of a funeral or mourning, and the accoutrements of the tombs. There were the diverse names they gave to what awaited their souls after death, beyond the Circles of the World, painting it as either paradise or cold justice. Pengolod read these with a kind of awe, torn between amazement at their imaginations and a sense that such thinking was, somehow, blasphemous, trespassing against the unknowable truth of the One. Their visions were all so different; how could one know for sure?

For in that matter as well, no answer had been vouchsafed to mortals, nor accepted by their philosophers. Pengolod even began to wonder if there should be answers to such questions. Regarding Nûph's query, was it not enough that he and Aelfwine simply were? Aelfwine had enough virtue and talent in him for ten men. Nûph was packing more life and wit into his span of years than many of the Elves Pengolod had known, Elves content to cycle in their lives' routine like trees through the seasons.

A good week passed as Pengolod researched, noted, and made his own stabs at philosophy. Though absorbed, he did his best to be a considerate guest, responding to invitations, thanking the servants even as he dissuaded them from the inappropriate fawning they fell into, they being, Pengolod thought, over-enthused in their youth. Then, at the hour when evening turned to night, he had his first unscheduled encounter with Tar-Minastir.

Pengolod had just set aside his first volume of the night in the library when he heard footsteps, then the sound of a door. Looking, he saw someone's turned-up shoes set outside the astronomer's balcony (which he had duly admired in midsummer.) It pleased him that he was not the only scholar enjoying the reaches of the night, and he kept an ear open for the astronomer's return. That the stargazer was Tar-Minastir surprised him for only a moment; if he watched the stars in Andúnië, why not from here, as well? "Good evening, Tar-Minastir, or should I say, good night?" said Pengolod. "What do you read in the stars?"

"Good fortune and prosperity for my people," Minastir said. He sincerely believed this; despite the late hour, some of the creases that had marked his face earlier were smoothed away. "Indeed, I cannot see an ill augur for the rest of the year, no clouds in the heavens, and the Sickle of the Valar sharp for the harvest, even in these misty skies. The best star-gazing about here is from the Meneltarma, but that is rare. You are up late? Were you comfortable?"

"In the heats of Rómenna, I fell into the habit of working at night, and it still suits me," said Pengolod.

"How little light you use – only one candle," Minastir observed. The

wavering light and shadow made all the contours of his handsome face firmly mortal.

Pengolod replied, "An Elf would remark that I had to use it at all. My old master Rumil had dwelled long in the light of the Trees, and could read by the glimmer of his own skin." Thinking of his master's old authority and faced with Minastir's kingly presence, Pengolod felt his conscience twinge, and said, "May I ask you something? Is it forbidden to go to the Meneltarma outside of the three holy days?"

"Not at all. Anyone may go thence at any time, as long as the law of silence is observed. Do you wish to go once more?" asked Minastir.

"No: I have been. When I arrived here a week past, I went up the Meneltarma's path in the watches of the night, to see more of the King's tombs."

Minastir looked impressed. "We say that ghosts walk at that hour. Did you see any?"

"Not a soul," said Pengolod.

Pleased, Minastir replied, "Ghosts are barred, by geas or ill deed, from leaving the world. So it is well that you met none of my ancestors: it means that they were all noble-hearted."

Pengolod said, "But I have met some of your ancestors in life. You are very like them to look upon. You resemble Elros far more than Aldarion did."

Minastir laughed, a little. "I should be used to this by now. Yet it is always astonishing, that you Elves have seen and known that which is the oldest history."

Hastily, Pengolod added, "With Elros, I did not know him well, or long. But I can tell you something of him, and of the war where he gained his kingship, if you will hear it."

Minastir took a seat across Pengolod, his gravity unsettled by his eagerness, the candle's light turned to a sparkle of alertness and wit in his deep-set eyes. "Speak away, then, Master Elf, and take all the night if you need to!"

So Pengolod began, thinking that, as with Aelfwine, this might be the first step towards the honest friendship with an elf that Minastir yearned to have.



We were living in some despair on the Isle of Balar when we received our first herald of the War of Wrath. Who were we? By then, a motley crew of Elves and mortals, the remnants of all good folk who had had the fortune to escape from our foes, the orcs and Easterlings and foul beasts of Morgoth. Balar, our refuge, was safe, but I have had other dwellings I preferred. The isle was wrapped in endless marshes, and the west wind lashed cold. We had dwelt there for some years, and many of us were growing concerned, or our prospects were limited. Our young rightful King, Gil-Galad, was starting to speak of returning to the shores of Middle-Earth, and when told we would have to fight for it, he said, "Then we will fight."

It was at this time that we saw the omen, like everyone else in Middle-Earth. A new star arose. We who had dwelled in Sirion and seen the beauty of the Silmaril recognized it for what it was, but we did not know its import. We thought that

Ulmo had salvaged it from the depths of the sea when Elwing fell. Soon, this good augur was followed by a sight I had never seen in all my days, an equal wonder to us. Ships from the West, at last.

They were fair ships and many, and when they moored in Balar's one anchorage, we saw that their cargo was warriors. Their herald required some interpreting, since the Elvish languages of the shores of Eldamar and of Middle-Earth were sundered by then. I was one of the translators who untangled what they meant. They had been sent to let us know that the Valar had hearkened to Eärendil's plea, and that the Powers were coming to cast Morgoth out of the Circles of the World once and for all. They, our kindred, had come to Middle-Earth to aid the Speaking Folk during this time of battle and tumult. We cheered them and made them welcome. They were of the high Vanyar kindred and of the Noldor who had repented and turned back before the Curse of Mandos. Valiant and fair they were, well-armed with steel from Aulë's forges, and, all in all, absolutely ignorant of what they were in for. I saw them gaping at how we lived – and, while we did not dwell in the stone halls of yore, we did not live so badly, for Elves in Middle-Earth at that time.

Gil-Galad showed what he was made of, then. He spoke to their putative commanders, and had soon persuaded them that they would do well to let us of Balar join their troops, as guides and interpreters. He told us that our job was to keep these newcomers alive, and if we had to run interference against the Kinslayers, that was as much a task as warding them from the orcs. So we went forth.

Our main task, the one given to the Elves of Aman who had come, was simply to warn all goodly Speaking Folk to leave Beleriand, soon to be the battlefield of the Valar itself. They could not tell us why this geas had been laid upon them, but we all worked hard to fulfill it, journeying to the few stockades that remained, fighting many skirmishes with orcs and brigands. At that time, all Elves came to be united under one banner for the great battle, another gain due to Gil-Galad. He managed to stay our wrath when we met the Sons of Fëanor once more. They were as tricky as ever, for they sent forth as herald, to our shock, Elwing's son Elrond, who we had thought slain in the sack of Sirion years gone. Gil-Galad did his own negotiations, and forged an alliance in the strangeness of the times. It was well that this had been achieved by the time the Valar came forth.

The first sign of this was that the new star that had appeared changed its course in the sky, traveling eastward across the heavens heedless of day or night, with the glimmer of lesser stars about it. Next, our horses and hounds seemed to caper for no reason, and then they stopped, laying back their ears and going still with fear. Many riders were taken far south by their steeds, against their will. But even those of us on two legs understood: by then, we too felt the silent throbbing of the earth beneath our feet, as if it was rocked by massive footsteps. The wood-elves among us climbed trees and peered to the West. The horizon, they said, was ringed with aurora borealis, and there were mountains in the sea – mountains that had not been there before. When all the birds in the land about took off in great flocks, streaking South, we knew the hour of great battle was nigh. The gentler folk, we sent south, too. Those of us minded for vengeance arrayed ourselves around

several passes. There, over the years, we ambushed many an orc and many an Easterling as they fled the ruin of the great battle, and the host of Hador had warg-skin trophies to warm them in the winter.

We had our vengeance, but the battle of the Valar, even from afar, was too awful even for the most doughty among us. At times the smokes and fumes of the broken earth in the North made day seem like night. Other times, the sky would flare with auroras and blazing, falling stars to make the night brilliant. Great storms whipped the land, and more and more often, the earth would groan and tremble, leaving great ravines. The world itself was breaking and changing. When the weather and land grew more perilous than the occasional battles, we gave up and withdrew south to join our people. Other groups of fighters and messengers straggled in over several years, all having come to the same conclusion. We dwelt cautiously, moving often to avoid the deep, frequent changes of the shore's waters.

One day, after a very severe storm, I awoke full of a great joy. I should have been ill-tempered, for the peals upon peals of thunder had robbed me of much rest. Instead, I felt as if some shadow had been lifted from me, giving me the first unmarred day of my life. I was not alone in this. The birds' dawn chorus was a glorious chain of song, and the other folk who were about were similarly blithe. It seemed a day of fair omen, and so it proved.

In the morning, the day's promise was fulfilled. A sizeable warrior-company of the folk of Hador, that had not been seen for many a year, found us at last. Gil-Galad summoned us interpreters, in case we were needed. Elrond delivered this summons to us, and this seemed proper to us, by then. At first, Elrond had been treated as a peer by Gil-Galad for politics' sake, but the two fellows, young for elf-men and come of age amidst the ruins of war, became friends true. Elrond also had a marvelous mind for lore, which has come to its fullness. I count myself fortunate that I was able to see Elrond's reunion with his brother, Elros, that morn.

The warrior-company had taken so long to reach us because they were grown to be a massive van of refugees. I admired a tall warlord striding at the front, decked out in wolf-skins and strings of amber, with the jawbones of orcs clattering from the bindings around his spear. When he came closer, we saw that though his face was painted, he was one of those mortals who was elven-fair, with grey eyes and dark locks. A warrior-maid of like kind was striding by his side, her long blonde braids looped about her head, her paint curled in whorls about her face and arms. He soon outpaced her as he leaped forwards, ignoring any politeness to shout out, "Elrond! Elrond! My brother! Vidumavi, did I not say that he lived yet? Elrond!"

Elrond's reserve fell away like dawn's softness before the full sun. He shouted and leapt forwards, showing the same long stride, and we marveled as they embraced. For beneath the silk and armor of the one, and the leather and war-paint of the other, they were like two fair copies of the same book. The kindred had, after a fearful battle, been separated in the strangeness of the times, and had each fought separate wars on the same side, until this reunion. Elros pounded his brother's back and whooped for joy, and all his mortal company took up a cry. No fine diplomacy would be needed to merge the many strangers with Elros into our company. Elros was evidently their leader, and beloved, and they were goodly at

his word.

We were very glad indeed. However, my joy was tempered by learning that a mortal who had helped me for long in Balar was known to these newcomers, but had been slain. They assured me that it had been a good noble death, especially for someone so hale and grey. I was saddened still. If he had been an elf-man, he would have just come of age, and he had finally reached something close to mastery of certain linguistic arts.

You would think that such an amazing reunion could not be capped. We were at feast at sundown when something even greater happened. Alerted by the crying of many birds, we looked skywards, and stayed looking in wonder. A vast feathered flock was coming nigh, silhouetted in the dusk against that which drew them, something none of us had ever seen: a star floating gently to the earth.

The light should have blinded us as it drew near, but it did not, softening and refracting. This was the Silmaril set in the sky, and the one who carried it. At last, to our surprise, we saw how it was borne. It had been carried in a white boat of strange design, its deck enclosed with great windows and its sails silver, which now drifted to the earth, spilling Silmaril-light from its windows and reflecting it from its sails. Upon its landing, we saw writ upon its side the name *Vingilot* – it was the very ship in which Earendil had left our shores, transformed. Very beautiful it was, yet to see it made one as giddy as strong wine, it was so strange. This feeling is why I rarely speak of that time, even to chronicle it, for who would believe such things?

In the side of the ship, a doorway fell open, the door turning into a ramp, and the strange vessel's captain and passenger disembarked. The passenger came first; the outline of a fair tall man, blurred and difficult to discern, through a halo of rainbow and aurora. When he spoke, the light about him changed, and his lines cleared. He existed the most when he used his voice. For he was Eonwë, the herald of Manwë. It was the first time I had ever beheld a Maia who had not been turned to evil. As the Maiar allied to Morgoth had inspired fear and despair, so he uplifted all our hearts by his very presence, and his words. "Rejoice all ye people! The World is delivered from the Great Evil: Morgoth has been defeated and cast out. Now the hour of fate is come to you. First, here is Eärendil, who has borne me hither, to tell you of his doom!"

Eärendil stepped out from behind Eonwë and told the tale of his successful errand. The only reason he could compare to his passenger in glory was that he bore a Silmaril mounted in a great silver helm. We still recognized him, though he was greatly changed, in fair and strange array, both aged and exalted by his curious doom. I was near Elros and Elrond, and I heard them exclaim, one to the other, "That is..." Elrond began, and Elros finished the thought, "Our father?" They looked at each other and, after a word I did not hear, each gave Eärendil one rueful glance. Together, they went to stand by Maglor in the crowd. Maglor had fostered them from early childhood, but he did not notice their arrival. His expression, as he looked on the Silmaril again, was consumed with hunger.

When Eärendil concluded, he received a mighty cheer from the gathering, and Eonwë spoke further. He told us that the Doom was lifted (this was hailed with wild shouts) and that any of the Elves who wished might, again, journey to

and dwell in Aman, on the isle of Tol Eresseä (news greeted with further cheers and muttering). Next, he said that the valiant mortals who had sought to flee the darkness could now do so and that the great isle of Númenor, safe and fair between Aman and Middle-Earth, awaited them and would be their realm and dwelling, where they would have long life, health, and good fortune. This gathered another mighty cheer. Lastly, he declared that there was only one matter to settle the chaos of the time. "Elros and Elrond, come forth!" They did, Elros boldly, Elrond hesitant, and their followers went to the front of the crowd, anxious. "The choice that is given to your sire and mother is given to you. Choose you how you will be counted for your fate: will you be Elf or mortal?"

Elros recovered first. "We must choose right now?"

Eonwë was merciless in his beauty. "Yes."

The two brothers drew together and spoke privately for some minutes, casting telling glances hither and yon. The rest of the crowd began to speak amongst themselves about their own fate. Eventually, Elros lifted a great horn he carried and blew it, and Elrond lifted the tall banner he carried as herald of Maedhros and gave it a flourish. With everyone's attention again, Elros spoke, shouting out. "I choose to become mortal, that I may take Vidumavi the Golden as my bride in full!" The tall warrior-maid who had stood by him often flew to his side, weeping with joy, and they embraced before all the company. The mortals started up a din of chanting, repeating Elros' name, and many Elves joined them in the heated moment. Elrond lifted his banner once more, but full silence was impossible to achieve. I did hear him say, "I choose to become an Elf; as Elros has chosen for the love of mortals, I have chosen for love of the Eldar."

The crowd's muttering and queries as those who had not heard asked what he had said was drowned out by Eonwë, who lifted one bright hand and said, "Elros, thy choice is sealed, and your bride is known; mortal you are and your kin to come. Elrond, thy choice is sealed as well, but your bride not known; thus thy choice will also be the choice of thy children. So mote it be!"

Our celestial visitors stayed for the rest of the night's feasting, Eärendil and his sons gingerly sitting at the high table and dealing with an endless stream of well-wishers and the curious. Elros was already taking audiences like the King he would soon become. I wandered and spoke with many. More of Elves than I had expected wished to stay in Middle-Earth, each for their own reasons. The Lords of Balar stayed; Círdan, who loved mortal shores; the lordly survivors of Doriath, Celeborn and Galadriel, Oropher and his son Thranduil. Celebrimbor, last heir of sons of Feanor, did not decide until the disastrous events of a few days later. Maedhros and Maglor seemed to be deferring their decisions. Maybe they were, until their own debate, after which they filched the remaining Silmarils and went to their doom. Following this, Celebrimbor took up the bereft followers of Maedhros and Maglor, many of whom had their own reasons to not return to Aman, whose shores they had sullied with Elvish blood. Celebrimbor was fiery and proud, but not one for politics, then; he swore his fealty to Gil-Galad, when Gil-Galad was crowned a week later.

But that all came later. I decided what I myself would do that night. Gondolin where I had long dwelled was fallen, as was our following home at Sirion, and the

isle of Balar had been rendered uninhabitable, all in eighty years, a blink of an eye. Anything next would be a change. I might have gone over Sea then; but after hearing others, I did not want to miss out on interesting times ahead. As many of them said of themselves, Middle-Earth was my home. By the dawn that ended the feast, I had been sounded out about a promising role in the court of Gil-Galad.

There followed fifty years of building and ferrying. The Halls of Lindon were raised, and many ships were wrought; one ship of Elves, then one ship of mortals, departed in turn. I remember the day we Elves waved at the last mortal ship to set sail, then went back to the lamps of Lindon.

Thus the world was made three parts; Valinor, Númenor, and Middle-Earth, balanced in their equilibrium for long years of peace. But as you know, that peace was broken. I do not know how the years will change the balance.



Minastir's serene self-possession was gone as he stood to tower over Pengolod. "Tar-Elros, wild as any woodman? His Queen, a warrior-maid from a motley tribe? Our tales, our histories, say she was noble and fair." He glowered like a father wounded to learn that his well-behaved son had run riot at a feast.

Pengolod stood also and said, "I suppose it is because your histories speak of the Elvish name she took soon after. She was fair; I saw her with my own eyes. And she was noble – by the standards of the day. Fine measures of kinship had not been kept since the battle of the Nirnaeth Aenordiad, among mortals."

"Still, to hear of Elros painted and whooping for war..." Minastir shook his head, as if trying to clear out the image. "Yet he was raised by your people – he had you as his model. You Elves never made war a revel, in that way."

"No. But Elros was not an Elf." Uneasy himself, Pengolod said, "He was the greatest mortal of his time, in both war and peace, and earned his kingship justly. More than that, he was free – more free than any Elf has been or shall ever be."

"Save Elrond," murmured Minastir. "Yet who is free who loves? One loved the elf-folk; the other, a mortal. For myself, was I given the choice anew, I too would choose for love. The love of the world, rich and varied, with its treasures of wisdom and arts waiting to be found. I feel its bond upon me, though I know it is the love of Illuvatar that calls us mortals beyond the world. Thus our fates are wrought." Minastir let go of a chair-back he was gripping. "Your history has been most illuminating, Master Pengolod. I thank you for your tale, and its insights into Elvish politics. Now I shall go, and think once more on certain matters of Gil-Galad and Imladris." He turned and departed, all dignity.

A moment later, he returned, padding over to his abandoned footgear. "My shoes. I always forget them," he admitted, and smiled briefly. He slipped his feet into them and went off again with a gracious gesture of goodnight.

Pengolod drooped over the books before him, too drained to be angry that he was being treated as the arbiter of all Elvish customs and fate. Besides, he was disarmed by Minastir's final smile; he had been the image of Elros, for an instant. When Minastir is not working at living perfectly, he does so, Pengolod considered. The answer for the philosophers was, as he had thought before, at the Meneltarma. Yet it was too simple an answer, not good enough for cunning minds, such as

mortals had in these days of their power. Perhaps it might have been enough, if the answer did not also guarantee an end to the debate. Here in Númenor, Pengolod felt it himself as well. Time had him in its net, and the cords cut tight.

Reshelving the books, Pengolod thought of his own interrupted journey. Tar-Minastir's longing made the things that he deferred sweeter. When Pengolod arrived in Eressëa, he might experience its beauty, speak with many of the Maiar, perhaps even, some day, see his lost kin re-housed in elvish bodies again. Had Númenor held but Armenelos, he would have journeyed on well before. Rómenna, though, swirled Pengolod's lost past and its own vivacious present in a potent mix. He was not done yet with Rómenna, nor, he hoped, Rómenna with him. The last ship, he decided: the last ship of the year's sailing, he would take.

He would work no more that night, he decided, and returned to his suite. When he opened the door, the serving-page uncurled from a chair and blinked the sleep out of his eyes. Pengolod, who had expected solitude, started. "Do you want anything, my lord? A change of your robe? Are your shoulders stiff?"

Pengolod said, sharply, "No; please do not trouble yourself. I would be obliged if you would go. Get the sleep you need, and leave me to my work."

The page's face fell, and he darted a nervous glance around. "All right, my lord. I will, I will see you in the morning." With that, he left, slipping out without turning around.

Pengolod heard the door click shut, and listened, satisfied, as the lad went softly away. Then, before he turned to his own thoughts once more, he heard a shuffle and a low cough, and the sound of a second set of padding footsteps. Pengolod inhaled and forced himself to not turn around. For the sound had come from the wall behind him.

When Pengolod could hear nothing but his own beating heart, he turned. Immediately behind him was a large tapestry of Unien in her glory, attended by swans and dolphins. Pengolod lifted the tapestry and scrutinized the wall. There was an unmortared slot between two smooth blocks of stone, at eye level for an Elf, or a tall Númenorean. He tapped the wall, slid a long slip of paper through the slit; the wall was thin, and very likely concealed a space behind it. Pengolod stood before the slot and let the tapestry fall in front of his face. The weave had been thinned to a screen through which someone keen-eyed could watch.

Angry, Pengolod paced the suite. There seemed to be no more spy-holes, and all the walls save the one with the tapestry were solid. Nonetheless, every moment he had spent in Armenelos was tainted, from the young servants' fawning to his encounter with Tar-Minastir. Had that been chance, or no? As if his intuition tapped him on the shoulder, he thought of Minastir's strong son, Ciryatan.

Pengolod collected himself. If he was being spied upon, the spy must have been bored and tired himself, which was his due for watching blameless activities. Whoever had sought to catch him out in he knew not what would have gained naught. He knew what he wanted to do next, and was all the more firm that soon, his sojourn would end. That would give him an uncontested reason for his second departure from Armenelos.

The Traveller's Wind

Pengolod's experiences in Armenelos were welcome news when he returned to Rómenna. The indulgences and sights he had weighed with guilt were pure entertainment to most of his hearers. To Aelfwine alone did he tell most of his tale, confessing his midnight walk up the Meneltarma and his suspicion that, after Tar-Minastir's company, he had been spied upon.

"Having spies watching you – it's like a play set in the time of Tar-Anarion," had been Aelfwine's first remark. "I agree with you that any spies were likely set by Ciryatan. The Venturers' scribes say that Ciryatan has near usurped the power the Lord of Venturers once held, through sending him to Lindon for long."

"So you have been going to the Venturers' library," said Pengolod. "What else do the scribes say?"

"They were in a lather the last time I was there. The work Ciryatan gives them is not to their taste, and they want their old master back. I – ahem – suggested that I was available for some of these tasks. They pay well for their dignity." Elf and mortal both laughed. Aelfwine said, "They were too good to do tavern broadsheets like these," and took one out.

Pengolod read from it. "Join the King's Sailors – Land and Fortunes – Men for Umbar," he murmured. "Why Umbar, of all places in Middle-Earth? Númenoreans there are far too far south to be of any aid to Gil-Galad."

"They have poor trading at the haven of Vinyalondë, say the Venturers, and soldiers and sailors alike curse the winters of Eriador."

"They weren't that bad," said Pengolod, thinking of the winters in Gondolin. "But there are already men dwelling in Umbar, the northern point of the land of Harad. Once, a trade boat hailing from Harad sailed to Lindon, seeking the famous steel of the North. Neither elf-smiths nor the Dwarves of the Blue Mountains fancied their wares. The Haradrim got less than they sought, and did not come again."

"What did they bring?" asked Aelfwine.

"Spices, silk, alloyed silver, some dull gems," said Pengolod, casually.

Aelfwine looked at his broadsheet with new respect. "Spices? Silk? Silver? All that and a deep mooring...if the harbour is free, Umbar sounds very fine."

Just then, though it was afternoon, Rothinzil came in, tripping lightly with her empty basket balanced jauntily on one hip. She shifted the basket in front of her when she saw Pengolod, saying, "Oh, hello. You're back?"

"The last part of my stay," Pengolod answered, not asking why Rothinzil was coming around when her work was done.

"The traveller's wind will be taking you from us, then," she said. No explanation was needed. Pengolod had learned that the summer doldrums were broken by a fair breeze, the signal that summer's blending into fall would soon begin. "It's a cool summer, to bring the breeze so early this year!" She and Aelfwine agreed that the hot period had been short, a mere month, making Pengolod glad he had chosen this year to tarry. He felt half-melted just contemplating a normal

Rómennan summer.

Addressing her, Aelfwine said, "You're here just in time. You know all the news going. Have you anything about the folk of Umbar, or the Southrons?" It turned out that Rothinzil did not, but being considered such an authority by Aelfwine, then offered a tumbler of water-cordial, set her smiling and turning her hips beneath her skirt. She was kind to Pengolod, in the same way that she was kind to Soup when he came in, sandals flapping after an errand. It was a slightly anxious kindness, the unfocused pleasantness turned upon a lover's friends, lest they take a dislike.

After she left, Pengolod and Aelfwine talked late into the night of Pengolod's work in the King's archives, and Pengolod spoke of the question that troubled him, that of the imperfection and mystery of mortals. Aelfwine said, gravely, "That is an answer I sore wish to have, as you bethought. Oft have I wondered if one of my forebearers was cursed by the Sea, that my foot aches in the damp airs. Or, worse, if there had been some inferior blood in my Middle-Earth kin."

"Inferior? What do you mean?" asked Pengolod. "Mortals in the lands I left were struck by plagues, and the weather there has less of the Valar's favour, so they hunger more. Their arts are simpler. But they are brave folk and cunning – even when they are not the Elves' allies."

Aelfwine opened his mouth, but paused without speaking. Finally, he murmured, "I don't even know what I mean. If folk move to Númenor, they grow well and fair, even if their grandsires were stunted and gnarled. Yet we speak of it all the time."

"Mayhap it is the sense that Arda is marred, taking shape in your dark thoughts," said Pengolod. "I know that mortals are more keen to Morgoth's marring than Elves are. Perceiving it has troubled your kind since you first came to be."

Aelfwine brushed it off. "Do not write too much credit on my slate. I'm more concerned with the shape of my clubbed foot."

"Not all marring shows to the eye. Nor does it vex mortals alone," said Pengolod.

Aelfwine said, kindly, "You're a good friend. You needn't start on yourself just to ease me."

Pengolod started, then laughed. "There you go, plucking my thoughts from the air before I can speak them myself."

"Must beat you to it sometime," grinned Aelfwine, pleased to have been right.

"Would that you could have met my master Rúmil! Or some other friends of mine. You would have gotten along so well, you would not have had to speak at all; your thoughts alone would have flown." Pengolod grew sombre, recalling his brief consonance with Tar-Minastir. They had had one hour when the King's mind was open and at ease, but the warding of his pride had closed it up again.

Meanwhile, before him, Aelfwine was smiling, his fancy caught by Pengolod's idea, welcoming and wondering as he had been in the hour of their first meeting. Now it was Pengolod himself who withdrew somewhat, to hide the stab

he felt, remembering that their fellowship would end in some weeks.

In the days that followed, Pengolod found that keeping his turned-about hours worked well with his friend's afternoon courting. He settled again into the Kingstown neighbourhood, and some of those who had been used to him came by to greet him. Though ever ready to feel wary, he felt no eyes upon his back. Testing this four days after his return, he even set himself up to lure watchers. After the sun set, he opened the shop shutters and lit several candles, seating himself in the pools of light to write as a panorama for the curious. With this, he scattered leaves crisp and dry from summer's heat before the front and back windows, to betray any mortal's tread. Despite this, Pengolod heard no lingerers.

The morning after this experiment, Aelfwine had unusual customers. He and Pengolod had just washed their hands after breakfast when the group walked into the shop. Pengolod had expected to see Drúedain in Rómenna as much as they had expected to see an Elf. The short, swarthy people lifted their eyebrows in silent surprise as they filed in, until ten of them stood before the counter, women and men, and two children. All save the children carried large packs on their backs. Thinking back on his discussion with Aelfwine, Pengolod thought that they were the best-favoured Drúedain he had ever seen, straight in their modest height, elegant in their darker skins and thoughtfully simple garb.

One of the men addressed Aelfwine. "You read and write?"

"Yes, Master."

He reached under his wrap and took out an ordinary-looking letter. "How much to read this out?"

Aelfwine named a modest sum. The man gave him the letter.

Aelfwine began to read aloud, slowly and clearly. "I, Captain Lorongil of the ship Curuncir, state honourably that my ship will give safe passage to Master Ton-nuri-Ton and his nine associated kinsfolk to the port of Lindon in Middle-Earth. The terms of the passage are as stated by the King's Rule, namely being..." He read out the rest of the page.

Ton nodded. "Good. We will not forget." He turned to his kin and said something in a fluid, rumbling language. Flashes of it were familiar to Pengolod from Middle-Earth, but his accent was thick around the words. They all nodded, picking up the bags they had rested on the floor, and the smallest child. Ton put the small coin for this moment's service on the counter, exactly when Aelfwine put the letter down again. Aelfwine knit his brows and added conscientiously, "I hear Lorongil is known for a good captain. But if he sails now, either he's turning back immediately when he arrives, or he'll be wintering in Middle-Earth. You may have to stay a long time."

Ton laughed richly. "Good. We are glad to do it. We will go South and find our old kin."

Pengolod said, alarmed, "Master, have a care. The South-roads are hard, and may yet be beset by war and evil."

Ton said firmly, "The Prince is good for ships, the sailors say. Good for ships in this land means bad for forests. We are forest-people. This island is unsteady beneath our feet. It is time for us to go." Ton was their negotiator, yet perhaps not

their leader. The others were leaving the shop. A woman caught Ton's eye and tilted her head. Ton looked at Pengolod with more to say held in his deep eyes. But he said no more, and went, closing the transaction with a nod of thanks.

Aelfwine watched them go. "Mighty talkative, for a Drúedan. I suppose our customs here in Númenor have rubbed off on them."

"We said in Beleriand that they were as secret as Dwarves. But it is an Elvish thing of them to do, to choose a life of peril to live in the wide woods."

Aelfwine replied, "Goes back to what Rothinzil said, about the traveller's wind. This month and the next, if someone has a place to go, they'll go to it while the wind and weather hold fair."

They were both silent, considering this. The wind blew some of the dry leaves into the shop. Aelfwine inhaled to call for Soup, but Pengolod said, "Let me, it is little," and swept them away.

Aelfwine grumbled, "Where is that boy? I send him off to the laundry and he goes to and from it by way of the docks." When Soup eventually came in carrying a deep basket, Aelfwine dove into it right away, retrieving his best blue and yellow clothes. "That's for the wedding tomorrow, is it?" said Pengolod.

Soup, still panting from his errand, said, "I don't understand why you wouldn't marry the bookbinder's daughter, but he invited you to her wedding."

Aelfwine answered, "He means to show off what I'm missing by turning her down."

"Are you sorry?" asked Pengolod.

"Not when I heard who she's marrying instead." Soup looked puzzled as his elders smirked; dissecting the scandal had occupied them for an evening. "No wonder her father wants to take satisfaction where he can get it. I'll have the last laugh, though."

"Because you're bringing Rothinzil?" Soup said.

"Don't be saying such things," said Aelfwine, sharply. "One doesn't take a woman to another's wedding lightly. I see my last laugh being some years from now, when I still prosper."

"Well said," Pengolod murmured. However, when Soup inevitably went to put the rest of the laundry in its place, Pengolod gave Aelfwine a look.

Aelfwine looked over-warm. "You've had twenty lifetimes; there's no fooling you. It's more mixed than I let on to the lad. But I stand by what I said as the heart of it."

The next day, Aelfwine went to meet Rothinzil at her lodging, taking a wedding-gift of crystal and a feast-gift of wine. He left behind one of his pair of crutches, and his apprentice, the former to leave an arm free to squire Rothinzil, the latter to aid Pengolod. Pengolod was to mind Aelfwine's business until he returned.

The sole business that fell to Pengolod in Aelfwine's stead was naming an awed stevedore's baby. As the afternoon drew on, Soup seemed to fall back into his restless, anxious ways. He set himself to drawing a map, next writing out something he would not show Pengolod. Then, he offered to help in one breath, and, when demurred, asked leave to sit in the courtyard, which he did for fifteen

minutes before returning to try and apply himself to his beginners' work once more. When Pengolod, sorry for the scraps he was set to work with, gave him a clean sheet of paper, the lad visibly turned into doleful nerves, nearly spilling his ink-pot over the paper.

Pengolod smiled. "I would vow I looked the same, the first time my master gave me a sheet of the best vellum. The only way to manage it is as if it was common scrap for an exercise." Having said this, he sat back and let himself appear absorbed in his own writing. Soup, thinking that he was ignored, did passably well with his map. Pengolod waited until Soup's pen was nowhere near the paper before he said, "That looks well done. This is about when Aelfwine would let you free for a time, is it not?"

Soup twisted the quill he held. He stammered, "Yes, sir, but if you're not busy – but you look busy – I'd truly like to hear one of your tales about Middle-Earth."

Being presented with such admiration was like drinking strong wine; it intoxicated despite the best intentions, and whether the wine was good or raw. Pengolod asked, "About what?"

Soup gaped for a second at his own success, then said, "I don't know. Not one of the ones that everybody knows all in rhyme, one of the ones that happened to you. Palaces and treasures and dragons and fighting."

Pengolod recalled Ciryatan's request at the King's table and smiled. "Princely tastes, indeed. I am in no mood for dragons, but I will accommodate the rest."

"Can we go outside and sit under the yard-tree? It's, uh, more, uh, Elvish."

"Cooler, as well," Pengolod agreed. The westering sun heated up the shop as the hour grew later.

"I'll, uh, go get it ready!" Soup ran out back as gracelessly as if he had an extra leg. Pengolod closed up the dead-quiet shop, wondering how you prepared a tree. He learned how in the courtyard. Soup had not only dragged a wide bench into the tree's shade, but swamped it in a large canvas tarpaulin, "on account of the bird-lime on the bench."

"Very considerate of you. You have learned well from Aelfwine." Pengolod took the seat, and Soup sat on the ground before him, looking about at the trees and ground in his eternal distraction before putting on an earnest face. The courtyard still held several distractions, some goodwives gossiping by the well, some gulls quarrelling over crusts. Pengolod blocked it all out and began to recount. But his tale-telling proceeded in unexpected ways, with this audience.



"If you would hear of treasures, then I will speak to you of more recent days, days within this Second Age of the World. After the great War of Wrath, I joined the followers of Gil-Galad, and had a position in his court. Within a hundred years of our dwelling there, Lindon was become the jewel of Middle-Earth, and many of the elves of old dwelled there. I had a position in our High King's court. So too did another loremaster, a fellow named Erestor. He was dismayed, for I gained a higher placement in the court than he did, despite his being elder in years and wedded."

"Why you and not him? Sir?" asked Soup.

"A good question; he was as skilled as I in many of the points relating to the position in question. At a time before Lindon was established, the Elves were divided into factions. The factions had mended, but I had been on Gil-Galad's side throughout, whereas Erester, at one point, had not. This was less well thought of. Erester's dissatisfaction grew when he had a daughter, a girl wondrous fair. He was very unhappy on her account, because – "

Soup interrupted, excited. "You fell in love with her and your love was forbidden because you were rivals with her dad and you tried to run away together?"

Pengolod restrained a sigh. "Nothing of the kind. No, Erester was grieved because, the moment she came of age, she took ship and went to Tol Eressëa, as any Elf might. Next his wife bore a son, and the same fate came to pass. Unhappy about this, they wearied of dwelling by the Sea, and were among the elf-folk who went to start a new realm, Eregion. Many of those who went had been in that same faction in the past. Others were simply wanting a change, and there were those who wanted jewels and gold, the heart of their craft."

Again, Soup interjected, "Why did they have to go there to get the jewels? I thought all the Elves had lots of jewels."

"I was getting to that. They went to Eregion because –" Pengolod stopped and stiffened. Some instinct told him to listen. Harkening to the sounds around he had blocked out, there were three mingled noises, a moan of caution, the rustle of leaves, and the snap of breaking wood. He glanced above just in time to see a swaying branch fall away and deposit another hobbledehoy on the flagstones.

"Ow! Ow!" The newly-delivered youth scrambled up and said, directly to Soup, "Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!"

"What were you doing up there, boy? Out with it, now!" said Pengolod, harshly for him. Was this what it was come to, that a lad had been hired to spy on him?

Dismayed, the newcomer blurted, "I just wanted to hear the story!"

Soup cursed under his breath and stood up. "The rest of you might as well come down."

"The rest?" Pengolod asked, to be answered by four more youngsters, from ten to fifteen years, descending from the thick leaves of the tree. Pengolod felt something bump against his leg; two smaller children were emerging from beneath the canvas-draped bench. To Soup, he said, "Did you set them here to listen?"

Soup, red as a plate of beets, nodded. He drew himself up, nobly ready to be chastised, only to have his face fall. For Pengolod bent double laughing in relief at the motley children and youths, until they were all laughing save Soup.

"You all might as well stay," he said. "But I warn you, I'm not going to change the story I was about to tell."

Nobody left, so he began. "As I was saying before we made each others' acquaintance, I stayed in Lindon after the great war of the Valar, otherwise I would have no tale to tell you."

One of the youths raised his hand and asked, "Why did you stay and not go to Tol Eressëa?"

"It's just one set of esses, Eressëa. Why?" Pengolod paused. "At first I stayed because I was weary – we had all survived the great War of Wrath, and I had lost everything I knew, save some good folk. Then the King Gil-Galad would have me as the head of his loremasters. This gave me scope to do much that I wished, and I renewed the old fellowship of the Lambengolmor, the elvish masters of many tongues." The youths snickered. Crisply, Pengolod clarified, "Which means diverse languages. Our elvish tou – languages shifted with time, and had many dialects. When our records of these were complete, we turned to the languages of mortal Men, first the Westron of Eriador, then those of more obscure folk. We documented the ways of speaking of the ice-men of Lossoth and the horse-lords of the East, and the few Haradrim of the South and wanderers of Dunland. The Ents, the tree-people, shared as much of their language as we wished to know, and helped us learn more of the tongues of birds and beasts."

Pengolod paused. His young audience was unmoved.

He hastened to his point. "After a thousand years, there was only one language we Elves knew naught about; that of the fierce, treasure-hunting, smith-master Dwarves. This was what took me to the Dwarves' greatest realm, Khazad-Dûm, and its hoards and secrets."

This won them back, and Pengolod went on. "Near Lindon, in the Blue Mountains, there were Dwarves. But they were too used to us elf-folk. They ate our bread, drank our wine, and traded us our metals, but it had become their custom to be close and secret. We had no joy there, and several other loremasters decided their language was ever to be unknown.

Erestor, whom I had once known, had as I told earlier, gone to dwell in Eregion, a land of plains and hills, hard by the gates of Khazad-Dûm. We got on better apart than we had in the same scriptorium, and letters we exchanged on business turned into friendship. He told me of their dealings with the Dwarves of Khazad-Dûm, and said that I might have better luck at their fabled mithril door. Thus I arranged for a year's sabbatical from my role in the King's court. The year before, I did what any elf of Lindon did who would make their fortune: I dove for pearls in the bay of Lindon. When I had enough pearls to fill both my cupped hands, I was, I thought, fit to parley with the Dwarves far from the sea."

Pengolod's listeners interjected yet again, with exclamations about how much the pearls would have been worth, and distractingly, tidbits about the pearl-divers in Númenor. Pengolod protested, "Enough, enough! Back to Middle-Earth and the road to Khazad-Dûm. In the spring, I went to Eregion with a great party of traders. By chance someone I had known long ago was become one of the Gwath-i-Mírdain, the Jewel-Smiths of Eregion. Thanks to him, I was soon talking to a Dwarf of that realm.

The Dwarf, a man of rank among their people, was named Narvi. I will tell you how he looked, that you will know how Dwarves appear. They are more than half the height of a tall Elf. Narvi's face was ruddy from his wanderings beneath the Sun in Eregion. He was so richly dressed that I took him at first for a lord of his kind. What treasures did he carry? He wore nigh every type of jewel you could

name, his hood was heavy brocade, and his beard of brown and red spread out over a mail-coat knit tightly as fishes' mail. Any one of the splendid weapons he carried, worked and gilt, would have been fit for a king. Such is the wealth of Khazad-Dûm, I learned, that this was only the garb of a goodly burgher.

I made my offer right away: pearls in exchange for the chance to learn somewhat of their secret language. Narvi laughed, and drew me off to converse with me alone. When we were by ourselves, this is what he said to me. "You tempt me sorely, Elf. Pearls are fair treasure. Yet not for pearls alone do we Khazad change the custom of ten thousand years. Our secret speech, the speech Aüle gave to us, is more precious than your jewels. What riches of knowledge will you give in turn? What language will you teach to us that we know not?"

I was amazed and humbled – and my hunger to learn this precious tongue scorched me like a bonfire. I spoke of the tongues of Elves, the tapestry of dialects, the diverse runes, and hinted that they might find this useful for trade.

Narvi said, "You offer what we know already. What else?"

I spoke of the tongues of diverse Men, yet every folk I named, either the Dwarves had the language, or merited it little. Scholarship had its limits to them, with their own language as their peerless treasure. Knowing that Narvi wanted a speech his folk could use, the offer to teach the rhythmic Ent-language died on my lips.

Thinking of the Ents reminded me of the last set of languages I knew. I hesitated, but I recalled a valiant old teacher of mine, who held that such speech had once saved his life – and underground, at that. Thus I offered up the ways to speak with birds and beasts.

Narvi raised an eyebrow. He pursed his mouth, silent for a moment. Finally, he said, "What kinds of birds?"

Twenty minutes after that, our bargain was struck. Dwarves esteemed few creatures. It was my stroke of luck that these included the birds that are easiest to speak with, ravens, lesser eagles, and thrushes. For the art of speaking with these, and a goodly amount of my pearls, I would dwell with Narvi in his deep hall, eat at his table, and learn the hidden language of the Khazad. The next day, I arose at dawn and departed with Narvi. I only saw the sun two hours before we came to the gates of mithril amidst the stone. "Go on, you open them," said Narvi, jovially. I read the inscription above and smiled. All I needed to do was speak one common word, "friend." I said the word, and the gates opened of their own accord. I complimented Narvi upon his enchanted workmanship, which he had signed. We went within. The gates sealed so tightly that not a line of light showed through. My sojourn amidst the deeps had begun.

As we traced our way through paths, stairs, and mine-work, all brilliantly lit with tin lanterns, Narvi spoke to me of the fortune that had led him to befriend the Elves. The Elves of Eregion, mad for craftsmanship and rich in gems, had traded more than usual with the Khazad on their arrival. The Dwarves of Khazad-Dûm, I gathered, are the most confident and prosperous of their folk. The traffic that they first saw as generosity soon turned into good fellowship.

Narvi was a jewel-smith and trader, and his forefathers had done the same

for time immemorial. Amongst his people, he was considered the equivalent of a dashing, adventurous captain. The elf-lord Celebrimbor had stayed in his hall, and as seems strange to tell, he and Narvi had become fast friends. "Once upon a time, he seemed wondrous old to me, did Celebrimbor. I am married now, with children; I have chosen where my bones will lie; and it seems my friend has become younger, still living lightly as he does. His solidity is all in his stone-work. Come! We are at my door. Enter my hall, and let guest-friendship prevail."

This is how the Dwarves live. Narvi's hall, carved out of the living rock, was as long as a racing-boat, and its roof could have taken a good mast and sail beneath it. A tall seat of stone was on each side of its mighty hearth, and in one seat, another Dwarf was sitting. Even from where I stood, this personage glittered with gold, wearing a robe of brocade and necklace upon necklace below a beard. I assumed this was Narvi's father, still young in dwarf-years.

The noble stood and greeted Narvi with a few sentences of the dwarf-language, eloquent with moving hands. Narvi knelt to do honour, then gestured me forwards and seemed to speak of me. He showed the pearls. Then, the pair leaned in and pressed their noses together before a kiss.

I was wrong. This was Narvi's wife!

Several smaller dwarves hopped out of an alcove and lined up soberly. Narvi went down the line and gave each a greeting and a kiss, and one of the pearls. They grew gleeful, my first sign that they, with their own little beards, were dwarf-children, the eldest of them the age of the youngest amongst you."

The idea of bearded women and children caused a sensation. In a moment, all the youths had agreed that this was the most unfair thing they had ever known of in all Arda, and that they wished they, too, had been born with their beards, instead of having to wait for them. The tallest youngster told them all to be quiet and commanded Pengolod to continue.

"Narvi introduced them all to me. His wife, with considerable ceremony, gave me a piece of bread and a drinking-horn full of ale. I was now their guest.

The language of the Dwarves that I learned at Narvi's hearth was slow, ponderous, and deep. They claimed it had not changed since the first Dwarves spoke. This went so far that, instead of making new words to mean new things, they strung together existing ones. Its repeating syllables echoed the repetitive nature of the Dwarves' lives in the heart of their great mountain. Though I am beginning to feel time's weight, being over two thousand years of age, I felt young there, for the Dwarves had been living their lives in exactly the same way for five times that.

Many of the Dwarves he knew had never seen the light of the Sun, and were well content. We saw some of it during my first two months there; it was during this time that I taught Narvi and some others bird-speech. This involved finding and teaching the birds, as well, so there were some rambles on the high mountain-sides. Being Dwarves, as soon as they could talk to the ravens, they were asking if the ravens would take messages to other dwarf settlements, regarding trade.

With this done, and Narvi assured that our bargain was a good one, he brought me deep. We went about the forges and mines, and through the great halls

of Khazad-Dûm, The stone arched so superbly high, it was a sky in itself, with its lanterns like a multitude of stars."

"What about the treasure?" asked Soup, and the others echoed, "Yes, treasure."

"They have treasure like you have fish here in Rómenna. It came from where they lived and was everywhere. I saw the scorching crucibles they used to melt the ore of mithril, and the hoards where they piled it waiting to be worked, and the slim fair things they made of it. There was one cave that was a hoard of steel, and another, its equal, held a hoard of gold. This was the property of their King; at that time, his name was Durin. The Dwarves hold that their first leader takes flesh again and again, and when this is deemed to have come about, the ruler takes up the name Durin. Durin wore a magnificent mail-coat of mithril to his knees, and a golden helm; there was strange wisdom in his eyes, so that I fancied their belief might be true. Durin's son, half-grown by his side, also had a mithril coat. Around his granite throne were the six sages of the realm, each a mighty smith or wright, with a hoary white beard.

But even they held to the custom of old, to speak Elvish to the elves, even down to the name for their people, Naugrim, which means, unpleasantly, "stunted." I could walk through the greatest hall and hear Dwarvish in the distance, while near me, silence fell or a less secret language was spoken. So in the end, it indeed at Narvi's table that I learned the most of the Dwarves' language, from Narvi's children. They had not settled into the pattern of their stony elders. Showing me words, and making me say them until I spoke with the proper harshness, fitted well with their sombre idea of play. Narvi's wife supervised this, and oft a child would go over to her first, before vouchsafing some knowledge to me. They it was who taught me the iglishmek, the dwarves' gesture-language.

I noted that Narvi's wife never left their hall, even when her husband departed for some time. When I had enough of their tongue to ask why she did not go forth herself, she replied that it was not their way for women to leave their hearth after bearing children. It was not my place to criticize, so I said naught. With time, I understood better; she came to seem more a queen content in her demesne than a prisoner. All the male dwarves who visited her honoured her as a paragon of womanhood. She received unmarried dwarf-women as her guests, exchanged message-slates often with other women reigning in their own halls, made offerings to Aüle for the household, and laid powerful charms – this last only in the absence of men folk of any kind. Once, while I was there, she departed to a woman's concourse, taking her daughters. Narvi, his son, and I all had to stay put for three days while the women roamed, for mysteries that were never explained to me. Her life as a dwarf-Lady was one of privilege and spiritual weight, but I understood why some dwarf-women remained unwed to escape it.

The Dwarves had come to not mind me, but by the end of my time, I felt I had overstayed. It grew wearisome, to eat the same dry bread and have the same simple conversation with new-met Dwarves ever and again, and I longed for the sun and the free airs. Learning the language and dwelling so strangely was the greatest challenge I ever faced as a lore-master, and I am glad to have had it, even though the Dwarves swore me to secrecy about much that I learned. I had enough

knowledge free that I was the joy of the Lambengolmor when I returned.

I wrote a short book about my sojourn and my new knowledge. I owed fair copies of this to several folk in Eregion, as well as to Narvi himself. I returned to Eregion too late for this. Narvi's bones had gone to their long home in the roots of the great mountain. His heirs remembered me, and I gave the book I had meant for Narvi to his son. The dwarf-man had married young, and thus never taken the time to befriend the Elves as deeply as Narvi had. He dwelt in his father's hall, another dwarf-woman was honoured by the hearth, and all, he assured me proudly, was as it had been. The feel that it truly was so gave me something of a chill. I did not linger, but returned to Eregion."

The spell of Khazad-Dûm was broken when Soup asked, "What happened then?"

"I visited with my friends who lived there. But I could not stay as long as I wished. For Eregion, while I was there, went to the brink of war."

At the word "war", the smallest child, young enough to cling to a sibling minding him, began to cry. The youths grumbled in impatience, and the child's sister cuffed him and said, "Be quiet! I want to hear about it! He just doesn't like hearing about the War since our father went for a soldier."

Pengolod leaned to face the boy and said, "Shhhh, lad. I won't speak of fighting. Would you like to hear something amusing?"

The boy gulped and nodded. "All right. Here is how it happened." Pengolod exerted all the tale-teller's charm he had, and drew them in so that he could recount with few interruptions.

"This happened in the first part of the war that your fathers from Númenor helped us with. We Elves of Lindon tried first. We went South to try and defend our people in Eregion, before the Evil One and his orcs came. We marched fast and fierce, at first going openly down the Great South Road, then diverting ourselves to go with greater stealth. Many streams and two rivers combine to become the Gwathlo River there, the waters twining and dallying, making the land about green and lush with life.

We slipped through marshes and along streams, carving their way through sandy banks and willow-glades. It was the fairest part of our journey south. The marshes knew naught of war. White swans coasted the meres and raised their cygnets, and flags and reeds blossomed for the spring. Being an interpreter and a scout, I rode at the front, but we walked beside our horses over the damp ground.

Along one stretch of sandy banks, we paused. "Do these look like orc-holes, d'you think?" one of our soldiers asked. There were some tunnels bored into the sand, too great to belong to otters or badgers. We decided that the area was too sunny and cleanly to draw orcs, but there was no scat or tracks from wild creatures. Our captain, to confirm this, leaned to peer inside one tunnel, poking his spear inside. His backside must have made an irresistible target. For someone out of sight threw a walnut in its husk at him, and hit true. He turned and straightened, well wroth, and several more nuts struck his armour, making musical noises. Our captain for a reason, he allowed himself to stay a target for a moment, then gave a signal. Several elf-warriors, creeping in stealth to the source of this

barrage, pounced and routed the nut-wielding foes. From where we stood, it sounded like a fair fight.

Two minutes later, four elf-men slid down the bank, all as vexed as the captain and half-blinded, wiping away mud splattered around their eyes. "Some wretched mortal children, of all things!" one complained. "No, they were Dwarves. They still hate Elves in their hearts, I told you," another said. "We only caught one, but you'll see." The captain, hearing these conflicting reports, called me. As the interpreter, I was to identify the captive, say what he was, and tell if he was good or evil.

Two tall elf-warriors, nigh seven spans like your King, drew their captive over. I had never seen anything like him. He was just over half our warriors' height, shorter than a Dwarf, but as beardless as I am. Yet he was no child, but a young man of his kind, with dark curls hanging down his neck and over his brow, and eyes full of wit and fire, fear and courage. Under the dirt from his recent scuffle with our warriors, he was fair and cleanly, simply dressed in homespun. The most curious thing about him was his feet. His unshod, bare feet were large as his stature was small, feet larger than my own, and thatched with thick curls. Yes, curls on his feet.

If you are all done laughing, shall I continue?

There we were, I, the curious fellow, and our captain and soldiers. I went down on one knee before our unwilling guest, so that I was closer to his height, and we attempted to talk. I heard traces of other mortal languages in his speech, but not enough for real comprehension, and he understood nothing in any language I tried. Attempting the basics, I held my hand up to my chest and named myself. Quick-minded, he took my meaning and did the same. I understood how the first Elves, the Elves beneath the stars, had reached out to those of other kind, urging speech, and smiled. His responding gladness shrivelled as our captain stepped forwards out of the watchers and demanded, "Well? What is he?"

This curtness vexed me sorely. I knew what this fellow was not – no creature of evil – but not what he was. I longed to have the chance to learn a new language from the start, and a new people through it, but this was war. There was no time. Thus I chose an answer that would save the stranger's life. I said, taking tremendous liberties, "By his curious dialect I believe him to be of a kindred of the Dwarves, perhaps the famed Noegyth Nibin, the Petty-Dwarves."

The captain exclaimed, "But he's got no beard!"

"His feet are bearded," I said.

Fortunately, our captive, despairing, had adopted a grim look that gave him a Dwarvish mien. The captain looked at his scowl and said, "All right, all right! The last thing we want is to anger King Durin by spearing one of his folk. Give him some gold and let him go."

After all that, the fellow almost doomed himself by giving the gold a dubious look, as no Dwarf would ever do. He ran his fingers over the image pressed on one of the pieces, and its craft won him over. Then, he pointed to my worked brass signal-horn at my belt. "He wants the horn? Give him that too," said our captain.

I took horn and baldric from my belt and passed them to his small hand. He

lifted it to his lips and shocked us all with a compelling horn-call. Then he smiled, bowed neatly, and was gone - wonderful quick, and silent as one of us. We remarked on this no more as we went; we had tarried and had to catch up, and it went down in our troop's report that we had paid a toll to the Noegyth Nibin.

I never saw the curious small marsh-man again, nor any of his kind. When the war was over, and we were heading home, our company stopped in a hamlet of mortal Men near Imladris. A nomad pausing with them told me I had seen one of the holbytla, the hole-dwellers of legend."

Pengolod's young listeners erupted at this. Each of them had heard about the holbytla, from grand-dad or great-aunt, shepherdess or gnarled old sailor. They vied to tell Pengolod what they knew. Their story-fragments were confused with lore of Dwarves and Elves, all rolled together into one fey, elusive race, so that Pengolod was hard put to stay grave as he listened to their inventive or half-remembered misconceptions.

The chaos of recounting, and the sun's setting, put an end to the session. Some of the young people thanked Pengolod, and some did not, but most gave Soup a coin, or half of one, as they went. "Pay you Starday when we meet at the docks, I'm good for it then," said one, heading off.

When the last youth had gone, Pengolod stood up. "You - charged a fee - for this?"

Soup's ears had turned red again, but he was stubborn. "It was a lot of fuss to set it up. The bench, and getting a good time, and all."

Pengolod snapped, "What do you think your master would say?"

"I should give you half?" said Soup.

Before Pengolod could recover from Soup's Rómennan logic, the boy went on. "I wanted to write up stories like pamphlets and sell them, but I'd have had to ask Master Aelfwine for the paper and he'd have wanted to see the exercises I wrote on them, and I can't speak them like you do. I wanted some money my own so's I could surprise the master with a wedding present when he gets married."

His anger toppled by surprise, Pengolod asked, "Has he asked her?"

"Not yet. But he will," said Soup, with unusual certainty. "They've been courting like two dolphins since you went to Armenelos. The day before you came back, he took the gold coin you gave him to hold your lodging to the jeweller who does rings. Please don't tell him I told you!"

"I should have seen it on my own. Though it is soon..." Pengolod muttered. He saw Soup's shame and fear. "The old tales and histories belong to everyone. You can write them as you will. Were any of those lads eager to hear about me?" he asked, thinking yet again of spies.

"Everyone wants to know about you!" said Soup, as if Pengolod was the last to know.

"Everyone? Surely there must be some in particular."

Soup examined his sandals. "A couple people are always asking, 'specially when you aren't here."

Pengolod could not keep the urgency out of his voice. "Does Aelfwine tell them what I do?"

“Oh, no. He told me not to either.” Soup explained, “If they don’t know, then they come around again a few days later and it’s good for business.” When Pengolod, still weighing this, did not reply, Soup said, “You’re going to tell Master Aelfwine what I did?”

“The story’s too good not to,” Pengolod admitted, exerting himself to not smile. “Not in a way that will get you scolded, if that is what you mean. But mind that you keep on as you have, and keep my business private.”

“Yes, sir, of course, sir!” Soup opened his hand, offering his humble takings. “Do you want half?”

It would have taught Soup a lesson to take it. Pengolod decided, “No. Use it for your paper, lad, or Aelfwine’s gift. And in the future, when you arrange an entertainment, the artist’s part is three-quarters of the takings, not half.” Debating the fairness of this kept them occupied until Aelfwine’s late return.

The Sea-Bells

I'm going to do it," Aelfwine said. "This afternoon, on the way back from visiting my parents' boat, I'll ask her. I've got the spot picked out; that point on the way back from the traders' docks, where the path angles up and you see all the bay below."

Pengolod made an approving noise, hiding his worries. When he had arranged his days to open some of Aelfwine's time for courting Rothinzil, he had not thought that a betrothal would happen so very soon. To an elf, the two months Aelfwine and the young widow had known each other was brief. But Aelfwine went on. "I'll have the ring on me and offer it to her." Aelfwine took it out. It was a silver band, graved with a twining pattern and set with a dot of amethyst. Númenor's cliffs and mountains held base metals, but no jewels, so any jewellery that had a gemstone instead of a pearl was of worth and note. "The stone matches her eyes."

"You really are in love," Pengolod said, smiling.

Aelfwine tucked the ring into its little bag and pocketed it. "I had better be. If I don't ask her now, I mayn't get a chance. You heard Rothinzil going on about the procession of the Prince when the last ship's worth of soldiers arrived yesterday. The city's now full of unwedded men with an eye for any woman who's not taken – and some who are. At least this brought my parents and their trade-boat here, seeking soldiers who'll pay well for a fast boat-passage to Andunie. I am not certain when they will return for another meeting. It is a good chance."

"You don't think someone else will win and wed her in a whirlwind, surely," said Pengolod.

Jaw squared, Aelfwine replied, "I think just that. I can just picture some trooper friend of her dead husband, who remembers the pretty wife now a widow, smarming all over her, saying he was asked to look after her."

Pengolod nodded, patient for this jealous imagining. "Perhaps. She is well-favoured, calm, a good bread-maker –"

Aelfwine eagerly added, "She's minded her own business well, works hard, has no debts: some of the women waiting here rack them up. She holds it a fault against her that she has no child, and has little Númenorean blood. But I haven't the most, either, so it's likely that our spans will be close." Aelfwine took the ring-bag out again and said, with a self-aware grin, "Anyhow, if she can't tell something's up, between being asked to the wedding and this afternoon, she's not Rothinzil." Changing the subject, he said, "You'll be well here? Soup will look to you before he goes."

"Goes where? No, now I recall, you gave him the evening's leave to go night-fishing." The lad would be with two other prentices given some holiday for good service. In Aelfwine's boat, they would eat what they caught and camp the night at Tol Uinen, and think themselves fine young men for the expedition. "Perhaps you won't come back either, if your own night-fishing is good?"

Aelfwine huffed, then laughed. "The jeweller said he charmed the stone for love, though I'm fair sure he says that for any purchase worth more than the plain

bands. But if you're weary and I'm late, don't wait up...Soup!" he shouted. The lad scrambled in and took Aelfwine's orders without blinking, despite the contradiction in him looking after Pengolod while going off and having a good time, both of which he was bade to do.

This done, Aelfwine left, starting off nimble with one crutch.

Soup leaned out the door to look after him. "I don't know as I should go tonight. He'll want to soak his foot after all the roaming around he does when he's courting."

"I can help him with it, if – when he returns," said Pengolod. Seeing Soup's doleful expression, he asked quietly, "Do you like Rothinzil?"

Soup scratched his head and said, "Aelfwine courting is good as a holiday, but it won't last. The other prentices say that when your master or mistress marries, you get worked harder. I won't mind working for her too."

Pengolod could not resist saying, "Maybe she'll have young lady-friends coming around?"

Soup, openly flustered, coughed, "Might as well be going myself. We thought we'd dive for pearls too, see if we can get any." He, too, left, swaying happily under a great basket that held a night's supplies, rods, and nets.

So Pengolod was alone in Aelfwine's shop, for the second time in a week, and the third time overall.

He looked it all over, fixing it into his memory; its benches and chairs, the wooden work-tables, cubbies near, shelves yonder, the completed broadsheets ready for the Venturers with a sheet of clean canvas folded around them. The sunlight in the courtyard behind was mingled with the greenness of leaves. The piping song of the *kirinki* was interspersed with the cart-rattles and pedlar-calls from the streets. Pengolod wondered if Tol Eressëa would provide any business for free scribes in Aelfwine's manner; or, even, as much of a sense of refuge as this little workshop had come to hold.

There was no knowing, so Pengolod set himself to some more writing. His fair copy of the First Age history for Aelfwine would be done that night, he estimated. He wrote, and thought, and remembered, until the brilliance of the setting sun slid through the shop's front windows. By now, Aelfwine and Rothinzil were probably at the turning of the path, he thought. In his mind, he asked Nessa, the Valar's dancer of love, to bring his friend fortune, and Yavanna to bring them fruitfulness. His head was bowed when he heard a passer-by rattling at the shop's door.

Looking up, Pengolod saw someone whose face, with the light behind him, was obscured. However, he was noble-tall and wearing the red hood of the Venturers. For a customer with work under way, Aelfwine opened the door at any time. Pengolod did the same, starting out saying, "Master Aelfwine is not here right now; may I..."

This Venturer strode right past him into the midst of the shop, which seemed to shrink, diminished before his strong splendour. "You certainly will help me, Master Pengolod; you and no other."

Pengolod went rigid from shock to hear the deep, confident voice of

Númenor's only Prince. Ensconced, Ciryatan flicked back his hood and looked around, smiling with one side of his mouth. "I could say I've come to check on my job. Your landlord's task-pay comes from the Venturers' coffers. But I knew you'd be here and alone, and I wished to speak to you. I'm here to offer you what you want."

Ciryatan must have had a spy to know what he did, someone placed on the very street itself. Defensively, Pengolod went to the workman's side of the counter. "How can this be, sir? I do not want anything."

Ciryatan snorted. "Then why are you here? An official of standing in Gil-Galad's court decides, for no apparent reason, he is going to defer the journey to Aman to summer in scenic, salubrious Rómenna, looking in on all the places of wise men as it suits his fancy. His conduct is almost too exemplary, especially when, of his own accord, he visits the King. There, he reinforces the idea that mortals can never aspire to Elvish superiority. Presumably, you wish to lessen your people's being beholden to mine, for our saving you in The War?"

"It would be ill if that was the reason – I say again that I owe your folk my life. Why should I not tarry? Your realm is fairer than you know, even your working folk's quarter of Kingston," Pengolod said, naming it deliberately.

Ciryatan said, "Yes, the very part of all Númenor where I build my ships is where you find your nest! I listen to all my folk, here. You were a wonder on your first day, but now you are a goad. A reminder of all they are not and cannot have, desires unfulfilled. If you have no great reason to linger here, then you are meddling and prying, frittering away your ages of wisdom in word-games and slumming. So to turn mischief to good, I offer you what you want, even if you know it not: a place as my father's counsellor."

Pengolod began to protest, then stopped. In one instant, he pictured a thousand things he might accomplish through this. He was tempted. Ciryatan's slight smile brought him back to the moment, and he said, "You are little fond of me, Ciryatan. Why, then, offer me such a plum?"

"Elves are well enough in passing, but you are out of place here. I believe in mortal lives for mortal men. However. My father vaunts your kind. I am no elf, nor Adanedhel, such as would delight him. If I can't please him myself, I will send him someone who will." Ciryatan stared stubbornly at Pengolod, daring him to retort this wish.

Pengolod replied, "While I was welcome in the King's house, I...felt some of the troubles you perceive. Due to the same reason that you say I cause problems here, being an Elf out of place." He drew a crisp breath. "Forgive me, but I must ask; is this about the fair maid Laurinquë? I hear you favour her. I have no designs on her, I assure you. There is no need to cage and chaperone me."

Ciryatan said, with a bitter laugh, "No designs! I would have liked you better if you had – if you showed a few stains and yearnings to match those of mortals – but no mortal is good enough for you, it seems. I like those I favour to have what they want." Pengolod gasped, unheard as Ciryatan went on, trying to smooth the moment unctuously. "Since you are not interested in such diversions, you evidently do not miss your folk. I am sure you understand what you might gain

here. Weeks and months in our great libraries, the chance to meddle to your heart's content, no doubt pleasing Gil-Galad, though you are not his informant – you say. I've no interest in alienating my main ally. Not when I have plans for both my realm and Middle-Earth's shores." Ciryatan took in all Aelfwine's shop with one glance and added, "I think you would find your landlord appreciative of such a contact in Armenelos."

Pengolod hardly heard the last words, still reeling at the implications of Ciryatan saying, of both his lady and his father, *I like those I favour to have what they want...*

He said, "I must refuse."

Ciryatan frowned. "Then I can tolerate your disturbances here no more. You will take yourself to Armenelos, or leave on the next elf-ship."

"But that's here at the next full moon, within a week!" cried Pengolod. "I was planning to depart come the autumn – if I leave on the ship after this, surely –"

"More time!" Ciryatan snapped. "Would I could hold the sound of it in a shell, an Elf asking a mortal for more time! You've wrought enough restlessness in two months already. No. If you will not serve my father, you will be gone. Defy me only if you would find out how Númenor's laws hound fugitives - and those who shelter them."

They glared at each other like two wildcats. In that long, silent moment, a bell began to toll.

"Well?" prodded Ciryatan.

Another bell, and another, joined the carillon, out of hour and out of time. Pengolod had not heard such a racket of bells and calls, down at the harbour, since the boat-races.

Ciryatan turned involuntarily at the sound. "Unien's teats, not now - your answer, Elf!"

The westering light struck Pengolod's face fully. Looking at that light, rather than at Ciryatan, Pengolod said, "I will go, Prince Ciryatan, so that you know my friend Aelfwine is good and lawful. You have my vow. I will take the next ship."

Ciryatan smiled at last. "I like lawful subjects. Your friend will keep the Venturers' favour, I am certain." He strode to the door. "My father comes to town soon. I will be sure to tell him that you asked me to give him a fond and honourable farewell on your behalf."

By now the bells were frenzied. People were running out of the nearby houses, even women and children.

Pengolod had to ask, "Why do the bells call?"

Ciryatan turned in the doorway. "The harbour – a wonder and a danger. Which I must attend. Journey swiftly, Master Elf." Then he was gone. Pengolod glimpsed him beginning a most unprincely dash for the harbour.

"What in Arda?" Pengolod murmured, wondering. He did his best to follow. The streets were on the brink of being crowded, full of folk running or loping down to the water. The people stood aside for Ciryatan, and took their place again when he was past, so that Pengolod soon fell behind him in the growing throng. One of Aelfwine's acquaintances from the neighbourhood fell in with him, and said that

the sea-bells meant some huge sea creature was past Tol Uinen, into the main harbour. Pengolod thanked him and continued to follow. At first, he was eager to see the whale, or whales, as might be, but when he realized why such a sighting might cause alarm, he went even faster. A frightened whale in the harbour might damage the piers or boats. And both Aelfwine and Soup were on the water just then.

Pengolod slid through the crowd like an arrow, and followed others brave or foolhardy enough to go out onto one of the piers. There, he stopped in wonder. If he had not known what to expect, he would have vowed that a new island had surfaced in the harbour, a smooth dome, almost flat enough to walk upon. Comparing it to the few boats fleeing the open water, it was more than thirty ells long. If this was its broad head, how could so vast a whale even swim in the harbour? This was answered when it lifted further from the water, to show it was no whale at all. It was a vast sea-turtle, one of the Fastitocalons.

The huge disk of a creature stretched its neck and turned in the water. One flippered foreleg unfurled twenty ells long before it dove. In a moment, it had surfaced belly-up, even more like an island, then turning about with a vast splash in the centre of the harbour. Peering around more with its vast, sly-eyed turtle's head, it seemed to be listening to all the bells and the people shouting in a massive din, both for the thrill of the sight and the sign of Unien's favour, and to shy the sea-beast away from the harbour's pilings and moored boats.

Most of the boats in the harbour were making for a mooring as fast as they could, but one racer's dhow sailed out towards it. Amongst its daring crew was someone wearing the red hood of the Venturers. Pengolod's keen eyes recognized the glint on the silver-bound shell he lifted, the horn blown at the ship-race to honour Uinen. The horn-call could not be heard above the din, but it seemed that the Fastitocalon attended. It looked sidewise at the approaching dhow with its great dark eye, opening its beak to breathe deep (somehow, it almost seemed to be smiling). Then it dove once more, to be a shadow in the water for several heartbeats. When it surfaced, it was speeding around the other side of Tol Uinen from where it had come, spinning out into the greater Firth again.

One by one, the bells stopped.

The white-sailed dhow turned back to its mooring. Everyone around Pengolod began to talk at once, about where they had been when the sea-bells rang, how unusual it was, and how many men or boats the Fastitocalon might have eaten. Pengolod left the pier to find that the crowd was staying, not dispersing. There were many hawkers and buskers in the great square by the waterfront, to cater to the returned soldiers. With refreshments and entertainment to hand on the afternoon of rest, and the fear and marvel past, nobody was in a hurry to leave.

His heart pounding, Pengolod leaned against a shadowed wall and let it all slide by. Someone tapped him helpfully and said, "Boat in four to seven days, sir, at the moon's full."

Pengolod turned to see an ordinary harbour-steward. "The boat?"

"Yes, sir. I guess you've been waiting here to find out?" At this, Pengolod realized he had taken his pause at the pavilion where the elf-boats moored.

Recovering, he said, "Thank you," The harbour-steward bowed and touched his forehead, as if to a noble.

After his confrontation with Ciryatan, the fellow might as well have hit Pengolod in the stomach. Pengolod would have pulled him upright, if he could. It was honour for no reason save his being an Elf, and looking upon this, he knew that Ciryatan had been right, again.

At least he went away, leaving Pengolod to his misery. The sorrow of leaving Middle-Earth, that he had thought grown vague and numb, was torn open by the sight of the Fastitocalon. Rómenna had seemed a refuge without the vast wildness that Middle-Earth could hold. Seeing the Fastitocalon brought home that this was a blessed place, but still part of the greater world. He was not resting in-between; he was delaying, here; as Ciryatan had noted, to little good.

Pengolod considered his evasions and persuasions at the Court. From that, he realized with a shudder that he had borne a tactful yet superior air around Aelfwine about a thousand little things, to say nothing of his corrections to Soup and Rothinzil's overheard fears. There were also Minastir's longings that undermined him, like his namesake tower built too high. Just then, he felt that all these showed ills he had strengthened even as he tried to change them. His heart twisted like a hooked fish as he recalled his proudest, most superior moment of all, his confrontation of Nûph. Thankfully, the fellow had laughed it off.

And at that memory, Pengolod understood.

Only his grief and shock had allowed him to feel the answer to Nûph's question in his trail of thoughts. But it had the rightness, the clarity that he felt when a new language was unlocked to him. The knowledge grieved and excited him at the same time. His urge to write it down made him remember that he had left Aelfwine's shop unattended and unlocked. Fast as he had run down, he dashed back up again, castigating himself anew.

When he arrived, the street was quiet, and the shop's door was ajar. Pengolod sprang inside and checked. Nothing had been taken, as it might have been. For all Ciryatan's force and bluster, this was still Númenor. Yet he could not quite believe it. The small building did not feel half as secure as it had before. After checking again, he swept aside the history he had been working on and, fast and concentrated, wrote out half a page. Then he read it, thought it over, paced, and read it again.

By the time Aelfwine burst in, Pengolod was calm. Aelfwine grinned ear to ear, reeling in as if more unsteady from wine than from his twisted foot. "She said yes, Pengolod, she said yes!" Coming over to the counter, he smacked it with both hands, then yelled wordlessly for joy. Following this with a great shout of laughter, he said, "Can you countenance it, she was longing for me to ask? She said no lover could be better, and her married before, so she knows what she's saying! She said she'd spit in the eye of anyone who spoke ill of her for marrying a club-footed man, then break her basket over their head. Valar, she's gorgeous when she's fired up. What a woman!"

Pengolod smiled, unaware the expression did not reach his eyes. "When will you marry?"

"In two months, at apple-time. We...you don't approve?"

"No, it's wonderful. But I doubt I will be at your wedding. Alas! I will have taken ship by this week's end, at Ciryatan's command," Pengolod confessed.

"What?" Aelfwine roared. "What is his quarrel with you?"

Pengolod explained. At the end, he said, "So it matters not what my conduct has been. Whatever ill Ciryatan chooses to make of it may be your ruin. I must do Ciryatan's bidding, whether I stay or go."

"Unbelievable, that he came here to say this himself," Aelfwine said. "I can't believe the Prince came to my shop, but for such a reason!" He leaned against the counter, turning pale.

With his woe and his resolve bolstered, Pengolod said, "I have put you in an ill place just by being here, I fear. Ciryatan is jealous of his father's esteem of the Elves, and would force me to his father's side to win his father's praise. But we Elves do not deserve such esteem, Aelfwine, not as it is given, not that adulation, that imitation, that yearning. We yearn for your fate in turn."

"You want to die as we do. I have heard you hinting such," murmured Aelfwine.

Calmly, Pengolod said, "To live as you do, and then die, and leave the World, and be free." He went closer, his grey eyes intense. Only the counter was between them. "After Ciryatan had words with me, I grasped at last how Illúvatar bettered your people; the answer to that question."

At Aelfwine's urging, he spoke on. "You mortals differ from us elves in many ways, and the two greatest are linked; your remaking your fates, and your laughter. With those two things, mortals make a place for what is marred. We Elves never do that. We seek what we find fair, we cast the marred out. The Curse of Mandos showed that our fate is our chain, and we cannot escape it, twist it as we might. We do not change, beyond fading – indeed, perhaps we never truly heal. But mortals, turning your orders upside-down, you allow everything, and create the world anew."

"You're saying that it's our zanies, like the Little Court, that will undo Arda's Marring?" said Aelfwine, incredulous.

Pengolod opened his hands. "Not them, but what inspires them. What would your Little King do, and all his court's Queens, without their mad role? With it, they are the ultimate in the freedom we Elves envy, free even to rebel against the high fate of your Kings."

"So we shouldn't be trying to be like Elves at all...and all the court..." Aelfwine laughed in his bewilderment.

"Rather, we Elves should try to be more like you, and open our hearts to all of Arda."

"I think you're wrong in part," said Aelfwine, his brows lowered in grim memory. "Jests can be cruel."

Pengolod agreed. "All the more so, because they sharpen the way the world is. But that can be turned about, using it to diminish strength and evil, can it not?"

Aelfwine considered this. "Is there no way you can stay? Can't you bring this as a message to the King?"

"Should I? Should it be an Elf, I mean." He shook his head, and the reason behind his reluctance came swift to his tongue. "I fear it would be the wrong that Ciryatan claims I do, instilling sly counsels, saying we Elves know best and are superior. Likely he would think that I was taking his offer to counsel Minastir. We Elves have our own learning to do from this idea. If I do my best to speak this to the Elves, can you tell your people?"

Aelfwine held out his hand, with more mortal grace than he would ever know he possessed. "You act like you're asking something difficult. Of course I will. Those who will listen to me, me being who I am. On one condition."

"Name it," said Pengolod, eagerly.

"That we drink well this night, now that we are both celebrating and mourning. For I'll be grieved to see you go, I own it."

As at their first meeting, Pengolod folded his own hand around Aelfwine's, pressing their ink-stains together. "I, too, my friend. I..." Pengolod blinked, then drew his left hand across his eyes. "You're right about getting drunk. When do we start?"

It was when they had made that start that Aelfwine asked for a tale, as they had had on many nights. He asked a specific question. Pengolod finished his cup, and answered.



It is very kind of you to ask me about what drove me from Middle-Earth, in the end. The War, as you speak of it here, was what wore me down. When Sauron attacked Eregion, we of Lindon sped thence to defend. Though we were in time to try and help, we were vastly outnumbered. Thus it was that I got to see yet another elf-realm where I had had some fellowship and happiness gutted and burned. I must say that Sauron had not been able to muster all the evils of old. There were no dragons, no war-engines, no uncanny beasts; just orcs and mortals allied to his cause. But they were countless and canny, fresh and hungry for war. And then, if that wasn't enough, I lived through the Siege of Imladris.

What I remember best of the siege is the day we ate my horse.

Yes, we were that desperate, by the end. I will tell you how it was, so that you know how great a gift Minastir gave when he sent your soldiers to deliver us.

As Eregion crumbled, we of Lindon did what we could. We extracted less than half the population of Eregion's main city and fled northward in a body. Sauron's forces were behind us. We thought we could outrun them, until we scouts learned that a force of Orcs was coming down from cruel Mount Gundaband. Girdled by evil behind us and evil before, we went to ground, taking refuge in a valley.

The valley we found would allow us to rest with our many wounded, and possibly supply us for a few months, while we waited for the rest of Gil-Galad's forces. It was a fair place, with oak and chestnut in its deep-cloven vales and fragrant firs and pines on its cliffs. A fast-rushing river ran at its base, and there were even a few meads where our horses could graze. Our four leaders, Elrond, Celebrían, Galadriel, and Celeborn, estimated that it could supply us for a few months. Being wise, they were correct.

A pity, then, that we were there for more than two years.

We know now that this was because the orcs of the Misty Mountains blocked Thranduil's aid from the West, while Sauron's main force turned to battle at the edges of Lindon. They left just enough of our foemen guarding our valley to lock us in. When we learned how dire our plight was, we worked out a way to ration what little we had, eking out acorns, river-fish, and horsemeat. Which brings us to my horse. She was spared long, not because of my middling rank, but because she was a mare. Having her to care for helped my grief. I did not ride her often, but doing so was my one pleasure in the siege. Alas, she did not go with foal after two winters, and she was...shall we say, requisitioned.

That night, though you could count the bones in my hand for my leanness, I did not go to the meal where my good steed was served. Someone sought me out. When I saw her coming, I stood up, both to honour a lady and to be ready for duty. "My lady Celebrían, how may I aid you?" I asked, looking up at her.

Celebrían was the daughter of two tall nobles, and had their height. Though her face would be young to your eyes, she had long, waved hair of silver, as sometimes comes to pass among the Elves, and silver-grey eyes. Celebrían's mother had been a warrior-maid in her youth, and the daughter took after this side of her, being keen, daring, and wild about riding. It was with a fellow warrior's sympathy that she said to me, "I asked the quartermasters; they said today's horse was yours. I wished you to know that I was sorry to hear it. She was a good horse."

Trying to distance myself from this grief upon griefs put me in a strange humour. I said, "Ah, you had some of the backstrap, then? They say that's the best part."

Celebrían said, "I cannot bring myself to eat horse-meat, so if she was toothsome, I do not know." I looked twice at her. She, too, was overly lean from the siege. Then she eased my poor jest by touching my shoulder and saying, "I see you are having none either. I know I felt it keen when my dear mount was put to that use. But we all know our need is that hard." She did not need to tell me what I knew, that her own stallion had been butchered first.

There was more sympathy in her kindly eyes and touch than I can put into words. It was at that moment that Elrond came by. I was not vexed; his arrival saved me from weeping before her. He said, "My lady, Master Pengolod, greetings. I may speak before our good counsellor, Celebrían?" She nodded once, so he said, "There is a problem. The soldiers of the Khazad amongst us want another horse released for rations."

She sighed and leaned close to him to murmur, "Sometimes I understand my father deeply. Do you know what I mean?" At Elrond's sympathetic nod, she said, "Do they mean they want it now, or midway through the week, instead of once a week?"

Elrond stayed where he was, but two handspans from her, as he confided, "They haven't thought it through so much. They are too busy being angry about it."

"And stubborn?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"And stubborn," Elrond agreed.

They said together, "They didn't leave the anvils at home!" and laughed, bending even closer, like two tall trees nodding in the same wind. I did not understand why they found it funny, but I could read what lay behind this shared jest.

Celebrian spared me another sympathetic glance, seeing that I looked pained. It was no longer grief for my horse that gave me a pang, but recognizing, doubtless before either of them did, that Celebrian and Elrond were falling in love. I speak little about my private affairs; I will say that the war of Eregion had put to death one I would far rather see living. What I saw before me gave that grief a twist.

"Please do excuse me, Pengolod. I know this necessity is not a matter for jesting. Come, Lord Elrond. I will wield the authority that you so kindly reinforced for me." She gave me an old-fashioned curtesy and went off, followed by Elrond. I found out soon that the Dwarves gave way before her womanly authority.

The next week that passed, I was unhappy yet, though my companions tried to lighten my humour. At our first meeting, Aelfwine, you recognized that I wore the cloak of the Lambengolmor. Alas! The War was harsh upon us Masters of Tongues. I was the only one of our guild of thirty who had survived. But I had one friend there who I had not expected; Erester. Enduring the siege together, and our respective griefs, had undone most of our old rivalry. (I must avow that enough remained that we word-gamed and argued with equal fervor.) I had just said to him that I could face horsemeat again, now that my mare was just a memory and a piebald hide, when we were all shocked by an eagle sweeping overhead, calling clearly. It was the first messenger-bird to make it past the orcs' arrows in months, and it brought tidings.

My poor piebald, it turned out, was the last horse likely to die for rations. All around the valley, battle was begun to break our siege. A triple force, the might of Númenor aided by scouts from Mirkwood and warriors of Lindon, was striving to free us. We prepared for either our last stand, or the end of the siege.

Two days later, the siege was through.

Those who had come to free us poured down into the valley, expecting us to rejoice, which we did, once we had been fed. There were many reunions, and as much grief as there was joy at the news we exchanged with each other. Many of our people had been slain in Lindon; fewer had escaped from Eregion than had been expected. Despite this, it was at this time that I had a meeting that would have kept me in Middle-Earth, if anything could have.

Amidst the crush of reunions, Erester came to me. "Pengolod, there's one from Mirkwood here who says he's your nephew."

Disbelieving, I said, "Nephew? My nephews are dead, long ages past. Who can he possibly be?"

Erester took this in stride. "I don't know, but the fellow looks as much like you as the son you never had. You'd better come see." He took me through the new crowds and said, "That fellow, there." I caught my breath. He did indeed resemble my younger kinsmen, lost in the fall of Gondolin. Unsettled, I said to Erester, "His hair is lighter than mine, and his eyes are darker. Also, he is less tall."

"The resemblance is striking, though. Are you certain you have no kin

living?" Erester asked.

Before I could answer, the debated elf espied Erester. He sprang over to us, all freshness and young energy. "Is this him? Are you Pengolod? Uncle! This is splendid to meet you!"

I raised a hand. "Hold up, lad, before you style me so. Who are you, and what is your claim to kinship with me?"

"My name is Melpomaen, sir. It's a tale of my family that one of our ancestors married a Noldor maiden. And they had a son who became a knight of the Noldor court." The only things right about this story, when told in more detail, were my father's name and mine. Somehow my service to Rúmil had been dimly remembered by some distant kin. I corrected this misapprehension, and we untangled the roots of our connection. At last, I said, "So, you are the son of a woman who was the daughter of my father's brother, who went to Doriath when my father went to Nevrastr. That makes you my cousin twice removed."

"You aren't my uncle?" said this Melpomaen, crestfallen.

Feeling some sympathy, I said, "We can say it is so, yes."

Revivified, he said again, "Uncle! It's grand to meet you after all the tales my family has told. Did you use your rune-wielding sorcery to survive the battle?"

To my left, Erester was trying not to laugh, and failing, as I protested, "No! I'm a loremaster, not a sorcerer. At least, I am not a sorcerer like the loremasters of eld."

"Is there a difference? What do you do?" the young fellow asked, his sable brows knotted in confusion.

"These past few years, I've been fighting. But at the court of Gil-Galad, my arts are the making and keeping of books, and the science behind how we speak. I read and write many languages, and do the work of a scribe and translator."

Melpomaen said, "Oh, any trader in Mirkwood has many tongues to speak, with the varied Men about. But writing, that is a sorcerer's art! Only the chant-wardens in Thranduil's court know how to cut the runes." Erester and I exchanged a look. By his word "cut," evidently the straight-lined runes of Daeron were the only ones this youth knew about.

"Do you mean to say that you, my kinsman, cannot read and write?" I asked.

Melpomaen was taken aback. "The King says that only sorcerers use the great books, and that any bard worth their harp in his hall must remember the long tales and songs in their head."

Beside me, Erester coughed. "That's Oropher's voice for you. Long has he held the Tengwar for long works as a Noldor extravagance. If your King still holds his grudge against our people, why are you here?"

"King Oropher said to withhold aid from you would be to slay you, and he would never do that," said Melpomaen, proudly. "He hates evil far more than he hates the Noldor."

"Very glad to hear it," Erester grumbled, muttering to me, "You should teach him both Daeron's runes and Tengwar and send him back lettered, as a thank-you to Oropher for this ungrudging aid."

Melpomaen missed Erester's sarcasm. Earnestly, he said, "Then I could be a warden, too, and decode missives, and be allowed to see the great books. You could really teach me? Does it take a long time?"

"It depends if you've a talent for it," I said.

Melpomaen said quickly, "I know a hundred and twenty songs by heart, and three languages. The captains say they'll be posting some folk here to keep this as a way-station. I could stay and learn."

"I – let me think," I blustered.

Erester shifted, and his face tightened like the muscles of a racehorse eager at the start. "Tell us what you already know, first. You didn't learn a hundred songs at your mother's knee, did you? What brings you with the troops, anyway?" he asked Melpomaen. My new nephew told his own story to Erester, pouring it into the elder loremaster's ears, drawn on by Erester's occasional word of encouragement. Something had clicked between them, the line of affinity that must flow between any teacher and any student.

I should have been jealous. But I was not. The scene before me seemed to be unfolding remotely, as in a tale. I could not look at Melpomaen's fresh youth without beholding those I loved who had died, and something flinched inside me every time. He was a renewal, a bridge and a hope; but not for me. My heart was too full of grief and weariness to give Melpomaen his due.

Erester broke into my thoughts, saying, "That all sounds fair and promising. What d'you say, Pengolod? Will you take him on?"

They both looked at me.

I shook my head. "I will be returning to Lindon, for a time, where I have many duties. Besides, nothing personal, nephew, but teaching was never my greatest gift. Erester exceeds me in that. He knew just what to ask you, this moment past."

Melpomaen turned to Erester, nervous and hopeful. "Perhaps...could I ask..."

Erester did his best to look stern. "It wouldn't be just runes and new languages. There will be a lot of work. You might think your soldiering light duty when we were done. My apprentice would have to learn book-making from the inside-out, for I will be staying here to aid Lord Elrond."

Melpomaen's eyes shone. He began to assure Erester that he was up for every duress in the adventure for new knowledge. I stepped back, sad and satisfied. I saw how it would be, as if it was written. Melpomaen would soak up the new tales and knowledge. Erester's grief and sworn service to Elrond would be assuaged by the heir to his lore that he had always desired. I would not change what I had planned to do, once we knew we were delivered. My own grief, for my colleagues and my intimates, was heavy yet. I would return to Lindon, close my books, and do what I had so long deferred: depart Middle-Earth at last.

Thus, after two years to hand over Lindon's scriptorium to other keepers, I departed.

And arrived here.

Here I found, for a time, echoes of the memories I loved, of the folk and

world that had been; reminders close enough to evoke, but, unlike Melpomaen's face, not sharp enough to wound me anew. But the past is no more, Aelfwine. I must stop deceiving myself. Neither you nor I should dwell there. We are both going on, I to take the chances that fate brings me, you to enjoy what you have won in fate's despite.

Another drink is just what I need, my friend. And several others after that. It is your turn to be the tale-teller; all the details of you and Rothinzil.



They drank well that night. Aelfwine spilled all the details of his courtship with Rothinzil, more intimate ones with each cup they drank. Pengolod, in turn, told Aelfwine much lore of the Elves, and how certain other tales, besides that of Túrin, had been bowdlerized. Halfway down the second bottle, they became philosophical, and agreed that some of this wisdom needed to be preserved for posterity.

The next morning, they compared headaches as they began to clear away the results of this ill-advised scribing. Pengolod picked up a sheet and tilted it. "I don't know what's worse, that I actually wrote this down, or that I wrote it on such a vile angle."

He flinched and spun about at an assertive rap on the shop's front door. But it was no guard come to check on him, for a clear woman's voice was carolling, "Oooo-hooo! Is Master Aelfwine about? It is Rothinzil!"

Pengolod looked at the sheets of writing in his hand and folded them in on themselves. "Can she read Elvish?" he hissed.

Aelfwine whispered, "Adûnaic, yes, but not Elvish. And half these Elvish words are new to me anyway." This did not stop him from scrambling to retrieve the last papers before he called, "Come in, my dear!"

Rothinzil tripped in, starry-eyed. With the confidence of a well-loved woman, she purred, "Good morning, Master Elf! Has Aelfwine told you our splendid news?"

"Loud and long," Pengolod said, stuffing their wine-written pages onto one of the shelves. "Congratulations on your betrothal. Aelfwine is a lucky fellow."

"I too am lucky. Look at my lovely ring!" For the second time, Pengolod admired the amethyst ring. Rothinzil said to Aelfwine, "Did you ask him, dearest?"

"Um, I wanted you to be here," Aelfwine said, sounding married already. "We wondered yesterday, if at our wedding, you would lead us in the vow."

"Well, I - when did you plan to wed?" Pengolod asked, embarrassed at having forgotten.

Rothinzil answered. "We thought very soon - in two months, around harvest-time."

Pengolod shook his head, unhappily. "Lady, I must be gone by then. I leave within a week. I am sorry for it, now that I know I will miss your wedding."

Rothinzil's eyes went wide, her face falling in disappointment. Aelfwine, between friend and fiancée, was visibly torn. He looked at Pengolod and said, "Can I tell her of yesterday?" He said it in Adûnaic, so that Rothinzil could

understand.

Recalling Rothinzil's solid sense, and thinking that there might yet be repercussions from Ciryatan, Pengolod nodded. The explanation was made in full.

Rothinzil's expression mingled relief and regret. Pengolod had expected the former – who wanted a lodger in the house where they honeymooned? – but was surprised and gratified at the latter. "If the Prince makes trouble, we'll think of something to do. Surely he'll forget once the Elf-lord is gone. As for us, we could...get married sooner?" she ventured.

Aelfwine said, "Before his ship leaves, you mean? But, beloved – your reputation!" Pengolod was mystified by this.

Rothinzil tossed her head. "I'll lose a little and you'll gain a lot, trust me; I know how folk speak! I can't think of any other way to get one of the Fair Folk, and your friend besides, to say the vows. I've not heard of anyone since Tar-Aldarion who had such a blessing." There was pride in her as she spoke. She was Númenorean, and be it good or ill, right or wrong, the Elves were still esteemed.

Everyone was quiet for a moment as the idea sank in. Finally, Rothinzil said, more tentatively, "If it's all right with Aelfwine – "

She had spoken just as Pengolod started to say, "If it is what you wish, of course I am at your service – "

At the same time, Aelfwine began, "If I deliver this job to the Venturers now and we meet in the afternoon – "

When they all stopped talking at once, it was agreed; somehow, the wedding would take place within the week.

The Charivari

The week before the wedding passed swiftly. There had been a huge amount of gossip. Unexpectedly, it had mostly been about Ciryatan.

The day after Ciryatan had confronted Pengolod, Soup had bustled up from the harbour with more news about Ciryatan. "The Prince just swept up to the Venturers' house after the great turtle went away, and he burst out onto the balcony where Lady Lauri was watching it all with the Lord Venturer, and he declared that Venturers were the King's right hand and he was going to finish making the Venturers and the Royal House one if –" Soup paused for breath. "If Laurinquë would have him! Then he gave her a ring off his own finger, made of gold, with a stone of adamant! Worth a whole ship!"

Pengolod lifted a brow. "Interesting timing."

"It makes Prince Ciryatan the centre of attention, certainly," said Aelfwine.

"Without too much politics, and in a way nigh guaranteed to win his parents' favour," Pengolod mused. "Can you imagine what their children will be like?"

This was all above Soup's head. The youth stopped looking perplexed when Aelfwine asked. "Did you hear when they're going to be wedded?"

"Don't know. The woman who told me just went on about dresses after that." Soup looked at the basket Rothinzil had left behind in the shop earlier that day. "Did you, um, did you and Mistress Rothinzil have a nice visit, master?" They all stopped talking about Ciryatan's engagement, and Aelfwine spoke of his own to Rothinzil.

Most of the Rómennans were as pleased about Ciryatan's dramatic trothplighting as if they themselves had been Laurinquë's kin. The only ones openly displeased were the single men, who grouched that any woman expecting a betrothal would now demand a gold-and-adamant ring, herself. When Aelfwine went to the wine-shop up the street to order for his small wedding, the wine-keeper said, "Lucky you got in before all this with a silver ring, Aelfwine. That's the way the Elves do it, isn't it, Master?" This last was directed to Pengolod.

"Yes; a silver ring for the elf-man and the elf-woman, when they get betrothed. They wait until they are married to exchange rings of gold," he answered.

"Something for the fellow as well, I like that. Pity we won't be doing it like the Elves anymore. Ciryatan sets the fashion, he does," said the wine-keeper.

His wife bustled out and seemed to dissolve into sentiment at Aelfwine's news. "You're getting married! So soon? I do suppose it's the right thing to do, isn't it?" she said, giving Aelfwine the briefest, newly assessing look. "She'll be a good wife, and I'm sure she'll appreciate you being so honourable. We all wish Ciryatan was getting married tomorrow, just imagine, a royal wedding for a lass of Rómenna. We haven't had a royal wedding as long as anyone living can remember! Tar-Telperien, Eru bless, never married, and Tar-Minastir wedded young and quiet before the sceptre went to him. What have you ordered?" Her spouse tilted the slate. "Give them ten percent off – no, fifteen. And you tell everybody you got your wedding wine from us, won't you? There'll be a lot of

weddings soon, between Ciryatan and the troops coming home!" She beamed at them, elbowed her husband, and went into the back again.

"That was very good of her," said Pengolod, when they had left.

Aelfwine pulled at his moustache. "Not her! Kept me from trying to bargain for twenty-five percent, is all."

They also went to the bailiff to schedule the use of a fair garden open to the common people, and went to some trouble to find a roaster available for hire on the day. Both the prim bailiff and the rubicund roaster, like the wine-keeper's wife, assumed this hasty wedding was due to need and honour. Pengolod was chaffing Aelfwine about the names for his future children, expected in six months' time, as they walked back.

The chief problem with the swift-planned wedding, Pengolod decided on its morn, was that he had not been alone with Aelfwine in days. Aelfwine's mother and Rothinzil had hardly left. Pengolod knew that this was due to him. Four days before the wedding, as Rothinzil fussed over what Aelfwine might wear, he had offered up the finery Gil-Galad had given him. Rothinzil had been so enchanted by the rich fabrics that Pengolod gave the pair of them the robes outright. She and Aelfwine's mother had grown friends as they remade the silver-blue under-robe and pantaloons into a gown for Rothinzil, and altered the azure silk over-robe and its sash to fit Aelfwine.

Aelfwine had been busy coping with congratulations, and several friends of his had returned together from The War in Middle-Earth. Pengolod sat to one side when they came by in the evenings, bringing wine and food, flirting with Rothinzil's friends and even Aelfwine's mother. He was touched by jealousy, but his gratitude to them was greater. In their company, he saw where Aelfwine had learned the art of friendship. Soup, run off his feet with a thousand errands and shy around the returned warriors, took refuge in Pengolod's quiet.

The night before the nuptials, Pengolod was able to relax. The elf-boat had not come to port that day, though the moon rode full in the sky. It took little coaxing for Pengolod to recruit Soup to slip about Rómenna that midnight. Together, they found and took the best flowers and greens for the wedding garlands, cautious amongst the moonlit shadows. "Much too late to ask permission, isn't it?" whispered Soup, as Pengolod boosted him over a garden wall.

"I'm sure that Yavanna approves of flowers for a wedding. So remember, if anyone catches us, we're doing this for a woman," Pengolod hissed, leaping silently after. "No, none of that one –none from the *laurinquë* trees. You get the jasmine and I'll climb up yonder and get some *nessamelda*." He stifled his curses when it turned out that the richly fragrant flowers of the *nessamelda* were guarded by inch-long thorns.

On the wedding morn, Aelfwine admired the garlands they had woven, looking on as the roaster set up in the courtyard. Then he paced about in his finery, all nerves, as his party gathered. The wedding was to be at midday. The wait would have been dull if a messenger had not come by halfway through the morning. "The elf-ship is come to port, my lord. Ciryatan said you wished to be

informed, as you are sailing on it today?" the messenger said dubiously, looking at the folk dressed for festival.

Pengolod sighed. "Is it just arrived?" To his relief, the messenger nodded. "They linger until the tide changes. I have until the night. I will see your wedding out as my last deed here, Aelfwine. Don't go yet, fellow – I have luggage for the boat." In a great rush, sweating in his green robes, Pengolod saw his luggage down to the ship. He returned to Aelfwine's with enough time to comb out his hair, don his chaplet of leaves, and join Aelfwine's procession.

The Meneltarma was the hallow of Númenor, and the only one, but Elves and mortals shared the urge to have a place of ceremony near their dwellings. In lost Gondolin, this had been a sacred grove, set within the city's walls. Rómenna's accommodation for lesser ceremonies was similar. Use had become custom, and a lovely grove had become something of an orchard-garden, planted to have blooms throughout the seasons. Late-summer flowers arched beneath the *yavannamirë* trees, their branches bowed beneath their rich scarlet fruits. It had other touches befitting this use, several benches and a handsome sundial. As Aelfwine's small group entered, a larger wedding party was on their way out.

They had some time to wait in the midst of the garden, where the grass was tamped down. Rothinzil, being the bride, took far longer to get there, as she was obliged to kiss whoever wished it along the way. At last her larger party, loud and merry, arrived. When they did, Eadwine, the groom's father, took Aelfwine's crutch, then draped a long garland of *oiolaire* and fragrant *nessamelda* about his son's neck. Aelfwine's calm, long-faced mother quietly handed her son the garland he would give his bride. When they stepped aside, the silence that Númenoreans linked to sacredness had taken both parties. Rothinzil, being a widow once already, walked across the grassy space alone to Aelfwine. He draped a long garland of *nessamelda* and late roses over her shoulders, as she lifted her hair to let it fall around her neck. Then, they both looked at Pengolod.

Elvish vows, speaking of marriage for the life of the World, embodied or not, would have been an insult to widowed Rothinzil. Hoping that the new words would suit, Pengolod spoke. First in Sindarin, then in Adûnaic, he said these words:

"Like all in this isle, you stand beloved of the Valar and of Illúvatar, Eru, the one who created that the world would be heard to sing. The chorus of this song, that which links all, is affinity and love. This song it is that has brought you here to be wedded to one another. While you both walk in Arda, love each other truly and deeply, that you do not rue love left unsaid, or loving deeds left undone. Be a mirror for each other's fairness, as you each deserve; and be the tending hands that give each other daily care, to keep your hearts in tune. Such devotion pleases Eru well, for through it your love becomes a song itself, enduring through high notes and low."

When he had said this fully, he asked them, "Can you live thusly with each other, and love well together?"

Knotting their fingers together, the pair said, "Yes."

"Then be you both, Rothinzil and Aelfwine, Aelfwine and Rothinzil, together

espoused. Embrace now, and be wedded with a kiss."

Kiss they did, as a wind took the grove, setting the branches of *yavannamirë* swaying, and sending up all the bees and butterflies that had drowsed among the blooms. When they separated, Soup brought Aelfwine a fine, small wooden box, holding two bands of gold. Aelfwine showed Rothinzil the elvish engraving inside them before sliding hers onto a finger. She did the same for him, eyes shining with delight and surprise. Pengolod smiled, deeply pleased. Aelfwine had said that no gift was needed between such friends as they. Nonetheless, he had urged Aelfwine to allow him to turn some of his remaining Elvish gold into these rings, with the excuse that, as he had been asked to speak the vows as an Elf, he would not consider it done right if they did not have gold rings to exchange.

With this done, Aelfwine's mother took something else out of her basket, a document and a pen and ink. On the broad stone of a sundial, before all the wedding-watchers, the new couple signed off on a written vow to share their modest goods. Aelfwine had some savings, and it turned out that Rothinzil had been thrifty with her widow's portion. The watchers from both parties were visibly eased when this practicality was dispensed, assured that their dear one would be treated fairly. Pengolod thought that the two lovers redeemed this when Aelfwine folded the sheet, kissed it, and offered it to Rothinzil. She kissed it where he had pressed his lips and tucked the sheet into her bosom.

The newlyweds (Aelfwine with his crutch restored to him) led them as they all went together to Aelfwine's shop, which was now become home for Rothinzil as well. A professional associate of Aelfwine's said to Pengolod, "Very nice. Very well-spoken. I like an old-fashioned wedding. Do you charge a lot for this?"

"I will wed no more Númenoreans, I fear. I leave for Tol Eressëa tonight." Quick as a thought could flicker, he added, "I don't know what Aelfwine charges, though; you could ask."

Wedding-feasts in Númenor were held where the newlyweds dwelt. The only rule over who might come was that whoever walked under the feast's garlanded archway was obliged to bring both a house-gift and a feast-gift. The latter was an immediate contribution to the day's merriment. Aelfwine was surprised at how many of his neighbours walked beneath the garland, bearing wares from their shops to give and food for the feast. Rothinzil's saucy women friends mingled eagerly with the returned soldiers Aelfwine knew.

The mirth went on until the last of sunset had faded. Gradually, folk left. Soup helped bring the leftover food and drink into the shop. There was so much that the broken meats and half-finished dishes covered the shop's double counter. Pengolod assumed that they would go down to the shop's cool cellar, once farewells were said. The first of such was his goodbye to Soup. To give the newlyweds some privacy, Soup would be spending at least one night on Eadwine's boat.

At last, it was only Pengolod, Aelfwine, and Rothinzil. Standing before them, Pengolod opened his hands. "It is time for me to depart, as well. I am sorrowful, but I am glad to leave you thusly, wedded and happy. Whatever Time does, know this; that the memory of how you are today will live in me, for the life of the World."

Aelfwine said, quietly, "I will miss you here and now."

"Will it always be that mortals cannot go to the Elves' shores?" Rothinzil asked.

Pengolod replied, "If the world changes, perhaps, you might come to Avallonnë, or the son and daughter you will have. Name them with your names, that I may know them, should they come."

Rothinzil gasped, "A son and a daughter? How can you know?"

Pengolod never had a chance to answer. At that instant, outside the shop, there was a familiar din; the distinctly out-of-tune horns and yodels of the Little Court, with cowbells added to rack up the dissonance. He was outraged to see their painted faces pressed grotesque and laughing against the windows' glass. The core of the racket was the repeated cry, "Taxes for the Little King! Taxes for the Little King!"

Rothinzil murmured something salty and said, "Those stinking mummers! They come around mocking whenever a widow or widower remarries. I'd thought having an Elf around would stop them entirely. My ill luck!"

"At least they ran shy of the wedding itself," said Aelfwine, patting her consolingly. "We've got enough wine left that they'll be pleased and go soon." To Pengolod, he added, "This is the one time we can get a word edgewise in to them. You'll see."

The noise increased. Rothinzil rearranged her garland and said, haughtily, "Better open the door. They just get louder until you do."

Pengolod did so, and it was filled entirely with the tall, broad figure of the Little King. "I heard our good Prince was engaged, but wedded so soon? Ciryatan, you must have twisted your foot running to put the garland on your bride." Behind him, the other mummers yelled out, correcting him, so that he feigned surprise. "What? Aelfwine the bookmaker? You don't say. Here's a drone who's been busy while the other bees went a-stinging! If a man like that, covered in ink and with one foot lasting lame, can get wedded, the rest of you clowns can as well."

Pengolod recoiled at the words, for something like had been whispered underhand several times that week. Aelfwine retorted, "I'll write that in my inks and hold you to it, you lime-smeared gulls and the garbage scow you follow! Lame I may be, but if I don't dance at your weddings, you'll never hear the last of it."

With his face rippled around a huge grin, the Little King said, "And how about the little woman, hey? I heard she took a look in at half Kingstown before she took her pick, and that all and sundry had a taste of her muffins. Good muffins, they say. Excellent muffins. Really the best muffins!" He made broad groping gestures, miming around imagined "muffins," while he went on to add, "Now our baker has turned hostler, it seems. They say no-one manages stallions like a widow! She must know that a lame horse can still be a fine stud – and he won't go a-roaming to find other mares."

Rothinzil stamped one foot so hard that her garland fell off one shoulder. "Don't sass me, you jealous old horrors! Some call you've got to come around insulting poor widows when they become new wives. Where'd your other Queens

before this one go? You must've eaten them to get so fat!"

Pengolod chimed in, "Bees, muffins, horses, what a mess of insults! Sweep it all back to the inn-stables where it belongs. Good King, to give us such nonsense, you've fuddled your wits with your own feasting on plump-breasted hens, or maybe green almond sweetmeats. Tell us all, which was it?"

The Little King pretended to stagger. "Verily, ouch. I am not armed, I say, I am not armed against such an assault. Be married and be happy, someone has to, after all. Now that you have my blessing, good people, will you pay your taxes to the Little Court or no?"

Rothinzil pointed to the food. "There it is, you hog, for you and all your swinelets!"

Happily, the mummers streamed in, crowding the shop, and attacked the remaining food and drink. Pengolod met the Little King's eyes as he rolled through the door. "Is this truly necessary?"

Nûph roared with laughter. "Not for my belly! 'Tis the custom. The wine looks good, though." He picked up a pitcher and drank from it directly.

Quietly, Pengolod said, "O King: I found the answer to your question."

Above the mouth of the jug, Nûph's brows flew up. "You did?" When Pengolod only nodded, Nûph added shrewdly, "Ah. You found it. But you say not if you will tell me."

"I have told Aelfwine. It is best that you hear it from him," said Pengolod.

Nûph was quiet himself before he grinned. "That's twice as vexing as your feeble insults, elf-man. Between this rabble and the wedding-night, you'll make me wait a day for it."

"You and Aelfwine may have more than that to talk about," said Pengolod.

Nûph waved this off. "If you're trying to get me to keep an eye on your mate, I'll do it. Should Ciryatan take a dislike to him, that'll make looking out for your friend all the more amusing, fear not. So enough of your politicking! No sense of humor, you Elves, that's the problem. I hear you're off. Drink with us one last time!"

Pengolod intended to stay only a moment for that. Then, he fell into a final word with Rothinzil; then, a next-to-final word with Aelfwine, over a second cup of mead. Somehow, he was helping the Little Queen fix her wig's braids more accurately when guards banged on the door. "Hey there! It's nearly midnight. There's working folk dwelling here and they want to sleep. Get out and go home, you clowns!"

Amidst the moans and groans, Pengolod hissed, "I must fly! What if they're Ciryatan's men – and they see me here?" He dragged at the elbow of the tallest zany. "You, change cloaks with me, quick. They won't know me, that way."

"You gotta be drunk. Mine's just sailcloth," he protested, holding out his arm so that the canvas, the red and yellow of some racing boat, hung down.

Pengolod could only plead, "I have to get out of here so that they don't know it's me – if they think I've overstayed - don't ask. I beg you!" He undid his fine sage-green cloak, of silk and wool, as he spoke.

"Well, all right. Your loss," the mummer drawled. When the cloaks were exchanged, he gave Pengolod a wink and put on a loose-limbed stagger, swirling towards the front. "Hey, look at me, everybody! I'm an elvish loremaster!" The Little King roared, as did everyone else, so that the guards hammered again.

"All right, oh, all right!" Nûph groaned. "But I'm bringing my new counsellor with me." The tall fellow and Nûph went out first, and immediately began to banter with them.

At the back, with Rothinzil by his side, Aelfwine held the other door open. Pengolod slipped over. They stood there and stared at each other for a moment. "I have known the last moment would come for all these days, and it surprises me yet," said Pengolod.

Aelfwine reached to take his arm, or perhaps Pengolod went to pat his shoulder, and they embraced. Aelfwine said, "I'll write to you soon. I'll give the letters to the elf-boats."

Pengolod replied, "Some elf-boats go the other way; I will answer. Fare well, my friend."

"How can I not, with what I have gained this summer?" Aelfwine said this with a glance for Rothinzil, who had taken his arm. He folded his silk-clad arm around her, tenderly.

Shy at the last, Rothinzil said, "I hope you find - well - whatever it is that would please you."

Pengolod understood. "Perhaps. I will hope for it. But I must fly to find it. May the stars shine on you ever!"

Pengolod drew up the hood of the mummer's cloak. Then, he turned and legged it across the courtyard, and ran down the streets to the harbour. He knew the way well enough to dash without glancing through the moonlit night, even when he passed by a pair of guards. When he hit the harbour's great square, he paused beneath the shadow of Unien's statue and gasped in relief. The white mast of the elf-boat was still at its quay. He was ready for one last sprint when someone said, "Hey, Longshanks! You, in the motley!"

Pengolod spun about to see a cluster of revellers from a more exalted event. They must have just left one of the great houses on the better side of the square. Some were more in their cups than others. The more sober ones were amused to see their red-faced friend, his rich hat askew, yelling, "You're one of those mummers, the Little Court. Give us a jest then; go on!"

Without thinking, Pengolod said, "Good sir, I've no time. I must run before the elf-boat leaves for Avallonë, if I'm to sail."

His listener bellowed with surprised, appreciative laughter. "Oh ho, that's a new one," he chortled.

"It's true! I must!" Pengolod declared.

At this, they all fell about, one or two of them even clapping. The main fellow grinned and said, "You clowns just get better all the time! Here, you've earned it!" After a clumsy grab in his purse, he threw a handful of coins at Pengolod.

Quick as thought, Pengolod caught them all neatly, then twitched back his hood. "Most obliged, sir," he said. With an artistic bow and flourish, he fled,

leaving them gasping.

He sped across the square, through the elegant quay, up the plank, and onto the deck of the elf-boat, to reel there breathless. "Made it!" he gasped.

Cool in their surprise, the elf-crew looked at him. The captain cleared his throat. Eyeing the sailcloth cloak, then deciding to ignore it, he said, "Pengolod of Lindon, now that you are here, we sail. Your luggage is battened by your berth. You may go below, if you wish it."

Pengolod murmured, "Once we sail..."

He drifted to the railing when the boat's moorings were loosed. His heart slowed to its normal pace as he felt the familiar, Elvish company and Elvish language, settle around him. As the journey began, he pocketed the coins, then stood where he could see the city and its lights, until Rómenna was receding, lost to the night, behind the warding island of Tol Uinen. The light of the tower there, the Calmindon, was the last sign of Rómenna to be seen.

When its light had gone, the elf-captain came to Pengolod. With the faintest hint of offended dignity, he noted, "There was no need to run. We were waiting for you."

Pengolod could not have said, himself, why this made him laugh, instead of weep.

Epilogue

On Tol Eressëa, in his study, Pengolod let the coins slide from his fingers, letting them jingle down into their bowl. He tapped his fingers on the burlwood of his work-table. He had ceased to long for Middle-Earth the moment he stepped on the quay of Tol Eressëa. Something about the place immediately resonated through his being, like a fair note of music, or the paths of childhood and their remembered beauty, renewed without diminishment or regret. There had been pleasures both gentle and vivid to follow, and reunions unimagined. But hearing of a mortal come to the shores of Elvenhome after so long stirred up his profound curiosity once more. Where were they, with that mortal? By now Pengolod was aching to have his story, to find out how Middle-Earth had changed since the last Elf had come to the isle.

Restless in his impatience, he opened a low drawer and flicked through some papers, without reading them. He remembered their contents well enough. There were letters from Aelfwine, describing the births and advancements of his son, Eadwine, and daughter Vingilot; a few missives from Aerlinion, when he had been in Rómenna between sailor's ventures; then letters from Aerlinion and Vingilot together, chronicling their own fortunes and how Eadwine's fair face had won him a wondrous marriage. Their own son (named Aelfwine again) had let the correspondence lapse. Pengolod had been only a name to him, and times had changed in Númenor. It was out of fashion, at the end of Ciryatan's reign, for a mortal to be an Elf-Friend.

Pengolod had not taken it ill. Indeed, he had wondered, upon hearing in Númenor's darker years that Rómenna was become the haven of those faithful to Illuvatar and the Elves. Perhaps this was the echo of his long-past friendship, there,

or maybe it meant that it was the Elf-Friends now who, unwelcome at the court and exiled from their lands in Andúnië, took refuge in the neighbourhood of Kingstown, amongst the wanderers and the poor-favoured and the earthy tricksters. Pengolod had hoped against hope that his friend's distant scions had not been corrupted by Númenor's later evils, but been amongst the Faithful who escaped the island's terrible end. He himself had written of it, and tried to evoke the richness of what had been lost to evil: *and Númenor went down into the sea, with all its children and its wives and its maidens and its ladies proud; and all its gardens and its halls and its towers, its tombs and its riches, and its jewels and its webs and its things painted and carven, and its lore; they vanished for ever.*

Pengolod opened a window and called. A bright-eyed magpie fluttered down. Pointing an ink-stained finger at the bird, he said, "Go home, and say this: Pengolod will be late returning; strange matters are afoot." The bird hopped and repeated this, with a mocking lilt, then tilted its head expectantly. "You'll get something for it when you get there," Pengolod replied. The bird clicked its beak and was off, just as Pengolod heard a tread draw near. It was a heavy tread, the kind he had heard but rarely in the Elvish city. He was ready when the door opened.

Or so he thought. The mortal who walked in was nothing like the friends he had been remembering. He was harder, warier, visibly worn by a hard journey, glancing about as if he expected the stones of Tavrobel to melt away like a dream. His grey eyes were set deep and glinting in his tanned sailor's face, and grey streaked his brown hair. Warily, he glanced back at the elf who had guided him, and came into the study only when gestures urged him. This stranger bowed to Pengolod, then looked around. His look lingered on one wall, where a tattered cloak in yellow and red sailcloth was hung like a banner. This mummer's cloak was all that remained of the fleets of Númenor.

"Greetings. What is your name?" Pengolod asked, clearly. The mortal stepped back, and looked at his guide for cues. Seeing that he really was without any elf-language, Pengolod started at the beginning. He placed his ink-marred hand on his own chest and named himself, then made an open gesture towards the mortal.

Still grave, the mortal set his sun-browed hand on his own chest and said his own name. Pengolod smiled. It had been long since a new language had come to his ears. When the mortal smiled in reply, then, at last, Pengolod felt something familiar about him. He gestured invitingly to the room's broad, cushioned window-seat. Gingerly, the mortal sat down.

Pengolod turned to the guide and nodded. "You can go. I think we will be some time." Even the basics between two intelligent folk took some work, at the beginning; the names of things, then grammar and actions. And, perhaps, Pengolod would learn if the mortal's name meant something he would recognize. He had a feeling that it might.


THE END

Story Notes

Elvish terms for "human" sourced from *The Silmarillion* - Atani, Second People; Engwar, Sickly; Aponanar, the After-Born; Firimar, the Mortals; "and they named them the Ursurpers, the Strangers, the Inscrutable, the Self-cursed, the Heavy-handed, the Night-fearers, the Children of the Sun." All pretty awful except for that last one! *The Silmarillion*, "Of Men."

Some archaic vocabulary: Swive = One of many colourful terms meaning "copulate." Syne = Since.

Some Elvish vocabulary: Naevar = "farewell" in Sindarin.

The debate of Andreth and Finrod = Available in all its heartbreaking excruciatingness in HoME: Morgoth's Ring.

Nûph = Adûnaic for "fool." Curiously, Tolkien's scraps of Adûnaic do not include a corresponding word for "sage."

Turuphanto = One of Aldarion's great boats, "the wooden whale."

vails = Archaic term for a gratuity or tip.

Dírhaval = See "Aelfwine and Dírhaval" in *HoME: The War of the Jewels* for the canon elements about Dírhaval.

Vidumavi = Yes, this name is borrowed from the ROTK Appendix, an incident where a Gondorian marries a lovely Northern woman named Vidumavi. I could not find any name for Elros' bride. If anyone has a reference, I'm eager to hear it.

Vinyalönde = A haven that the mariners of Númenor tried to establish at the mouth of the Gwathlo river in Middle-Earth during the reign of Tar-Aldarion, possibly stabilized in Tar-Minastir's time. Tale of Aldarion and Erendis, *Unfinished Tales*.

Drúedain/Drúedan = The presence of Drúedain in Numenor is sourced from Footnote 7 in "The Drúedain", *Unfinished Tales*. Drúedain is plural, Drúedan is singular.

The dwarvish details here refer to notes in "The Later Quenta Silmarillion" in HoME volume *The War of the Jewels*. At one point in Tolkien's writing these pieces of information were titled "The words of Pengolodh concerning the Naugrim." At various points it is noted that Pengolod's time amongst the Dwarves and Legolas' friendship with the dwarf Gimli were the two main Elvish sources of information about Dwarf mythology and lives.

The Noegyth Nibin, the Petty-Dwarves = "Of Hurin" in *The Silmarillion* and "Narn i Chin Hurin" in *Unfinished Tales* describe this lesser dwarvish race.

Holbytla = As close as this story is going to get to the word "hobbit" or "halfling." It seemed premature to include the Elvish term *Periannath* relating to this "first contact" between elf and hobbit.

Adanedhel = "Elf-mortal," a term originally used to apply to Túrin, meaning a mortal man who strongly resembles an Elf.

Pengolod's visitor in Tol Eressëa is the Aelfwine of HoME volumes *Lost Tales 1 and 2*.

and Númenor went down into the sea = Quote directly from *The Silmarillion*.

Author's Afterword: Discarded Plots and Eucatastrophes

Oh, I know, I know – this story is off the deep end of obscurity for Tolkien fanfiction. I'm one of the Soverigns of Dorkness for being this much of a Tolkien fan. And what proves it is how much fun I had writing this. I like the *Silmarillion*; I like the *History of Middle-Earth* volumes; and I thought Pengolodh was a fascinating character, when I found out about him from the *HoME* works. This is my love letter to Tolkien canon, as I will explain.

Yes, in most of *HoME* the character Pengolod's name is soekked "Pengolodh." Tolkien did acknowledge *Pengolod* as a potential spelling of the name, along with *Pengolo*. I used the spelling "Pengolod" to give my fictional take one step of separation from Tolkien canon. If you don't like it you can say, "Well, that's not really Pengolodh."

So, Pengolod/h is one of the points of inspiration for this story. Another is one of Tolkien's own letters, #257, where he describes the idea of his character Aelfwine, who makes it to Tol Eressëa, being descended from the Númenoreans, with the names Aelfwine and Eadwine repeating throughout their long history, in different linguistic forms. This brought together together Tolkien's desire for a rationalization as to why the linguistics of Middle-Earth were in modern bookstores today, his self-described "Atlantis-haunting," which he brought into fiction as the isle of Númenor, and possibly a wish for a character to have the pleasure of going among the Elves. Regarding his Atlantis plot and Aelfwine's role in it, he says:

"The thread was to be the occurrence time and again in human families (like Durin among the Dwarves) of a father and son called by names that could be interpreted as Bliss-friend and Elf-friend...It started with a father-son affinity between Edwin and Elwin of the present, and was supposed to bgo back into legendary time by way of an Eadwine and Aelfwine of circa A.D.918...In my tale we were to come at last to Amandil and Elendil, leaders of the loyal party in Numenor...Well, there you are. I hope it does not bore you."

Tolkien eventually discarded this plot – for a reason, I learned, trying to write a story that could include it. It was difficult! Nonetheless, this story presents a potential "first Aelfwine." Just as, in *Lord of the Rings*, the character called Samwise in the book was actually named *Banazîr* in Westron, the language of the time, and Samwise was an approximate translation, the Aelfwine here was probably named *Nimruzîr*. Pengolod, being a linguist, would immediately have recognized the meaning behind the name, "Elf-friend" in a form similar to the later Elvish *Elendil* and the eventual Olde English *Aelfwine*.

Rúmil of Tirion was an interesting character to develop, though I took great liberties in sending him to Middle-Earth. One of Tolkien's versions of Rúmil appears in *Lost Tales 1* as this mysterious crotchety character who's both a door-warden and a linguist – which are both, in some way, a gatekeeper. This cameo established some character elements I used: his ability to speak to animals, his captivity in Thangorodrim and his escape. Rúmil is crotchety, but so is Gandalf, and I hypothesize that Rúmil's role in Elvish society was that of Tolkien's precursor of the Istari, the Elvish loremasters and counsellors whom Tolkien named the *ingolmo*. He is a gate-keeper character for our protagonist; if not for his experiences

as Rúmil's apprentice, Pengolod in this tale would not have been open to the experiences that came to him in Tol Eressëa.

Another way this fanfiction draws on Tolkien is that it is meant to be a fairy-story. Instead of a mortal man or woman transported into Elfland and baffled and dazzled by the diverse denizens of Faerie, it is one of the Elves who sojourns among mortals. Amongst these strange folk, he finds much to be desired and longed for, and strict limitations placed by the laws of existence. He ends up experiencing both sorrow at unsurmountable divisions and *eucatastrophe*, Tolkien's term for a moment of realization, transformation, and transcendence.

So, for this story, I borrowed Tolkien's characters and philosophies, and tried to tie them together using a discarded Tolkien plot, all in a homage to an enjoyable fantasy world, and as an offering to other fans of Tolkien's complete universe. At the end, I can say nothing more appropriate than "Well, there you are. I hope it does not bore you."

April 22, 2005

Tyellas

Tyellas@hotmail.com

<http://www.ansereg.com>