

## TO HOPE'S END, TO HEART'S BREAKING

An ill wind blew from the north, across the plains of Rohan. Upon its cold wings, it carried the scent of snow from the Misty Mountains. Small, wooden houses clung to the lone hill of Edoras, seemingly hunkering beneath the force of the wind. Yet both the town as well as the great hall built upon the hill's summit had withstood worse and the Rohirrim did not worry much about the weather. Sturdy roofs kept their horses safely stabled; and the townsfolk themselves gathered around warm fires, their work for the day done.

Thus, only the stars saw the shadow that crept over stairs and along walls. Covered in a long, black cloak, which the wind flapped about thin legs, a small man made his way from the great hall of Meduseld to the city gate near the foot of the hill. The wind tore at his hood, ripping it from his head. For a moment, a glimpse of a pallid face could be caught, had anyone braced the storm and been watching.

He reached the gate and exchanged a few whispered words with the guard.

"'Tis a bad night to be out, master *éwita*. Will you be gone long?"

"Nay. Wait for me." He had set the watches well, making sure that only those sympathetic to his cause worked the gates after nightfall. Not a word of his little sojourn would ever reach the king's ear. Although it would not matter if it did: the king's ear belonged to him.

The guard opened the gate a crack, enough for his pale visitor to slip out.

Here, in the fields where nothing hindered the wind but clumps of grass, the gale blew even stronger. The cloaked man tottered down the path unevenly, carefully trying not to lose his balance when the storm shoved him.

Suddenly a tall, broad shape rose from the deep shadows, and the man gasped in surprise. A guttural chuckle came from the creature. "Did not see me, did you?"

The man grumbled something unintelligible in reply. He was chagrined with himself, for the Uruk was right: he had not noticed the messenger until the demon stood up. If not for the storm, his nose would have alerted him to the Uruk's presence much sooner since the creature stunk worse than a dung heap on a hot day.

"What news bring you?" he asked, keeping his voice as low as was possible and still be heard over the wind.

"A letter from our master," the Uruk replied. He held out a dirty paw, clutching an envelope that shimmered palely beneath the moonlight.

The man snatched the letter and turned it over. The seal, a splayed hand pressed in ruby wax, was unbroken. He tore it open.

The letter contained three words; and neither salutation nor signature.

"It is time." He read the words aloud and commented, "At last. Soon I shall have my just reward."

He looked up at the Uruk. "Tell Saruman it will be done tonight. Tomorrow, Rohan will ally itself with Isengard."

oOo

Far beneath Meduseld, in dark dungeons where water dripped from the walls, Éomer sat listing the names of the men in his *éored* in his mind. He had never known such utter blackness as reigned in this cell and the mental exercise helped him keep his imagination under firm control. He feared that otherwise the walls would close in or the ceiling would crush him. He ached for the wide vistas of the meadows of Rohan, for the wind in his hair as he rode Firefoot at full speed.

It was cold so deep below the earth and he shivered under the thin blanket his captors had provided him. His stomach gnawed with hunger; a few crusts of moldy bread did not satisfy the appetite of a man in his prime. Yet these discomforts were not what kept the marshal of the Mark awake.

No, despair prevented him from sleep. He worried about his king, fretted about the fate of his sister and feared for his country. Evil times had come over Rohan, even more so since he carried his cousin, the king's son Théodred, to Meduseld with a wound that had proven fatal. Their love for each other, and their loyalty toward their liege had kept the cousins steadfast in resisting the machinations of Gríma Wormtongue, the sneaky advisor who had gained the King's failing ear. Since Théodred's death, Éomer stood alone between Gríma and Rohan's final downfall.

He should have kept his temper in check, he told himself for a thousandth time. Allowing Wormtongue to provoke him was a mistake. He had known such even as it happened. But the triumphant smirk on Gríma's face as Éowyn informed the king of

Théodred's passing, and the lustful look the *wyrm* had cast at his sister, made him throw caution in the wind and draw his sword.

He had been fully intent to spear the slippery worm upon his blade. But Gríma's minions, hunkering among the shadows in the Golden Hall as they usually did these days, prevented him. Éowyn cried a warning, yet it came too late. Something hard and unyielding caught him on the temple and he knew naught until he woke here in this cold cell, where dirty water oozed down and a smirking Gríma watched as the guard locked the door.

Éomer heaved a deep sigh, and hunched a little further inside the blanket. How much damage would Wormtongue do to Rohan, while he sat powerless in its cells?

oOo

Gríma rapped a token knock on the door to Théoden's bedchamber and opened it without waiting for a reply.

"My Lord Wormtongue!" Gálan, the king's manservant barred his way. "Please, the king is too wearied tonight to receive visitors."

Gríma suppressed an annoyed reply and schooled his voice into its customary silky smoothness. "You are a good man, Gálan. Unfortunately some affairs of the state cannot wait till the morrow."

"But--" Gálan began.

"Do you wish to explain to the king that these matters were not dealt with because a *servant* believed them unimportant?" Gríma asked. "Be gone, Gálan. I will see to it that Théoden King does not exhaust himself needlessly."

Gálan left, casting a last doubtful glance over his shoulder before he shut the door behind him.

Théoden slumped beneath the blankets, a few pillows straining to keep him upright. Gríma studied him for a moment and experienced a rare twinge of pity, which he quickly suppressed. Once a noble man of proud bearing, a few years of Gríma's careful attention had reduced Théoden to a mere husk, a feeble mind living in a failing body. Gríma shuddered. He commended himself on the choice made several years ago, when he resolved to side with the powerful master of Orthanc. The great warrior Théoden was

reduced to this, while he, Gríma son of Gálmód ruled an entire land in everything but name.

"Lord?" he called softly.

Théoden's watery eyes fluttered open and slowly settled upon his visitor. "Gríma."

"My lord." Gríma unrolled two scrolls he held clutched beneath his arm. "I have orders that need to be signed, sir. They cannot wait until morning."

He spread the parchment out before Théoden on the coverlet, and went to the small writing desk, where he dipped a quill into the bottle of ink. "Right here, lord." He pointed.

"What are they?" Théoden asked in a rare moment of clarity.

"One is an order to ascertain the future of Rohan. The other is to command the death of the traitor in your prison."

"Traitor?" The king's wizened brow crinkled and he appeared confused.

"Aye, lord. Surely you recall. The marshal who raised his weapon in your hall, against your orders."

"Ah, yes. The marshal." He scribbled something on each sheet of parchment, dripping ink onto the bedcovers but Gríma did not care. It was almost done. One last task awaited him, and he would rule Rohan in name also. See if she still dared deny him then, against her uncle's consent.

He reached for the decanter of wine that stood on the bedside table. "Let me prepare you some wine," he offered. "'Twill help you sleep."

"Yes. Sleep." Théoden's eyes shuttered again.

Gríma pulled a small vial from his tunic. It was filled with a clear liquid. He pulled the stopper and added the content to the wine. Swirling the wine around in its cup, he returned to the bed. "Here, lord. Drink this. Soon you will have no more worries to concern you with."

Like an obedient child, Théoden parted his lips, and Gríma emptied the cup. "Sleep well, my lord."

Leather boots upon a roughhewn stone floor woke Éomer from a restless slumber. Exhaustion had finally caught up with him in the wee hours of the morning. At least, he thought so; he did not have any true knowledge of time passing. Day and night were equally dark in his cell. He marked the passing of days by the meals they gave him, and could only hope those were regular occurrences.

He did not think it was time yet for his slice of bread and mug of water. He feared the approaching footsteps would mean another period of harassment from the guard, Graham, who seemed to find it an endless source of amusement to have such a mighty lord in his keep.

The door opened, and Éomer blinked against the sudden light. He squeezed his eyes to slits. It was indeed Graham who stood in the door opening, a spluttering torch in his left hand.

"Get yerself cleaned up," the warden barked. He put down a bucket filled with water. Some of it sloshed over the sides and onto Éomer's boots. "The Lord of the Mark demands yer presence. Can't have you befoul his great hall with yer filth."

The king wanted to see him? Hope lit up in Éomer's heart. Perhaps Éowyn had managed to get through to their uncle at last. Maybe she explained to him the folly of hearkening to Wormtongue's counsel over that of his own kin.

He dunked his head into the bucket, and splashed water across his face and over his hands in an attempt to make himself presentable. Once he was done, Graham shackled his wrists behind his back with rusty cuffs before leading him out of the cell. He took Éomer up the stairs and through the hallway to the great chamber of Meduseld. A strange noise drifted from the hall, a sound, which after a moment's thought Éomer identified as the low murmur of many voices speaking in whispers. His brow furrowed. It had been many years since Meduseld had witnessed such a gathering. He feared it was not a good sign.

His heart sank even further when he noticed it was Raedyn, one of Gríma's men, who waited to take custody of him from Graham. Raedyn pushed the door open and shoved Éomer inside. All faces turned toward him, and many he recognized. Gárulf of the Wold was there, and Grimbold of Westfold. He saw the trusted lieutenant Gamling, and Durwyn of the Eastemnet, and many more of Rohan's lords. In fact, the full Council was present. Some faces were merely curious, others sympathetic. A few were hostile. He

caught Háma's eye, and the doorwarden quickly looked away. The crowd parted before Éomer and his guard, until finally he could look upon the dais where the throne was raised.

It stood empty; Théoden King was nowhere in sight. At the throne's right arm stood Gríma, his face a mask of false grief. What in Eorl's name was going on?

"Lords of Rohan!" Gríma called. Instantly, the murmured whispers began to die down and everyone turned to face the king's counselor. He waited until he had their undivided attention.

"I am regretfully informing you," Gríma added an insincere note of sympathy, "that our beloved king, Théoden son of Thengel, has passed in the night."

The gathered nobles gasped. It took Éomer a moment to digest the words. "No!" he moaned. "Murderer!"

"Keep still! Or I will have you gagged." Gríma's eyes flashed and their dark anger contrasted starkly with his pale skin. "We have no need of your insults. The king was old, and his health was failing. I asked that the Council convene to hear the king's last decision and verdict. Since it concerns you closely, Éomer, I had you brought from your prison. If you are not interested to hear the king's final words, I can have you returned before we proceed."

"Prison?" someone muttered in a low voice.

Éomer bit his lip to keep the angry retort from escaping. It would avail him nothing. Grudgingly, he nodded his consent.

"Good."

Gríma gestured at Háma before putting his hands behind his back. The warden gave Éomer an apologetic shrug before he unfolded a parchment scroll. It grew quiet in the Golden Hall. So quiet, in fact, that it would have been possible to hear an arrow-feather fall. Háma cleared his throat and began to read in a trembling voice.

"Hereby, I, Théoden son of Thengel, Seventeenth King of the Riddermark, declare that upon the event of my death the governance of the Kingdom shall fall to Gríma son of Gálmód, until such time as a suitable heir of Eorl is found."

"What?" someone in the crowd cried. "That is plain nonsense. The heir to Rohan stands right here before us! Éomer son of Éomund is the rightful successor of Théoden King."

Éomer recognized Gamling's voice and was grateful for the lieutenant's support.

"Gamling is right! This cannot be the king's decision. Did I leave the Fords' defenses to listen to such lies and deceit?" Grimbold turned to meet Éomer's eyes. "Lord Éomer. You have but say the word. You have my unfaltering allegiance."

Exclamations of agreement rose in the hall, and Éomer half expected someone to run Gríma through with a sword. Not a fiber in his body was unconvinced that Théoden's death was Gríma's doing. Somehow, the false-hearted advisor had murdered his uncle. And now he was trying to wrest the kingdom away from Eorl's just heirs!

Éomer would not stand for it. Neither would the Lords of Rohan, judging by the clamor of many voices pronouncing their support. It was high time he put an end to this farce. Éomer opened his mouth to lay claim to his kingship, when his eye caught movement in the shadows. Gríma's men gathered around the fringes of the crowd, and surrounded their leader. Their hands were on the hilts of their swords, their faces full of anticipation. Some even had arrows knocked.

Éomer snapped his mouth shut again. If he spoke at this time, it would lead to a bloodbath. The hall was filled to capacity; any arrow loosed would find a mark, no matter if it were properly aimed or not. And Gríma's men were treacherous and mean, but they did know how to wield a blade. No, if he spoke now, the blood of Rohan's nobles would be on his hands.

Gríma walked to the edge of the dais, barely visible through the wall of sturdy followers. "Have ye so little faith in thy late king?" he cried, raising his voice to be heard over the din. "Do ye not believe Théoden knew the rules of succession? Yes, Éomer son of Éomund, sister-son to the king, would be the legitimate successor, after the sad departing on the king's own son, Théodred. Except for one thing."

Here he paused for full effect. Though several voices still murmured, and Grimbold cast urgent looks in Éomer's direction, everyone's attention slowly focused upon Gríma once again.

"Háma." Gríma waved at the captain of the household, who unrolled yet another piece of parchment.

"I, Théoden son of Thengel, King of the Mark, sentence Éomer son of Éomund to death by hanging for reason of treachery and conspiracy against the Kingdom."

Jaws dropped. Silence fell over the hall, the nobles too shocked to react. Éomer could hear his own heartbeat in his ears. He knew Gríma would like nothing better than to get

the young marshal out of his path, yet never had he expected the serpent would succeed in convincing Théoden he was a traitor.

Again, it was Gamling who first regained his voice. "I do not believe such are the king's orders," he said firmly. His fingers curled around the hilt of his sword, his knuckles white with tension.

"Háma," Gríma spoke. "Do you confirm that it is indeed the king's signature on those orders?"

Háma's mouth worked. He murmured something in a low voice.

"Speak up, man! These people wish to hear you."

"Yes," Háma said, a little louder. "'Tis indeed Théoden King's mark."

With Háma confirming the authenticity of the orders, the matter was sealed. Nobody doubted the doorwarden's word; he had ever been faithful to the king and he was a man of honorable repute. It was a smart move on Wormtongue's part, Éomer reluctantly admitted to himself. Anyone to stand up to the orders now, once their legality was confirmed, would be considered a traitor himself.

"So be it, then," Gríma said, the corners of his mouth twitching as if he suppressed a smile. "Hang him."

Hands grabbed Éomer and began to drag him away. He was too stunned to put up much of a resistance; his mind reeled with the implications while he desperately sought for a solution -- finding none. His blood ran cold in his limbs. Had his king truly believed he would conspire against Rohan? Was Wormtongue's poison so strong? Or had his uncle's mind been so clouded in his last days that he did not recognize his nephew's love?

"No!" a voice cried, breaking the dazed silence in the hall. "No! Lord, please, I beg of you."

He recognized Éowyn's voice and some of the stupor lifted. As a streak of flowing gown and golden hair, Éowyn came running into the hall and flung herself at Gríma's feet. "Please. Rescind that order. Éomer is all the family I have left."

Éomer wanted to cry out; he wanted to tell his sister not to degrade herself so before the usurper but tears made the words stick in his throat. Gríma looked down at the kneeling woman, his face an odd mixture of lust, tenderness, surprise and satisfaction.

"And what, my lady," he asked, "would I receive in return for such unwarranted kindness on my part?"

Éowyn cast a look over her shoulder at Éomer, and his heart broke when he saw the despair in her blue eyes. Then she turned back to Gríma.

"I would give you my promise of betrothal," she whispered. "I would accept your proposal and become your wife."

oOo

"Please, Éowyn. Come with me."

Éomer's words sighed in her hair as she pressed her cheek against his chest, leaving tearstains on his leather tunic.

"Nobody would think any less of you, if you decided to renege on your promise to that *náedre*."

She pulled back and wiped the moisture from her eyes with the sleeve of her dress.

"Mayhap not," she said softly. "But what would become of our people if I abandon them now, in their hour of greatest need? If I put my own welfare over theirs? Nay, Éomer, 'tis better I stay and do what I can for Rohan. And so must you, in departing."

She tried to muster a smile, knowing her tears made leaving even harder for her brother. Yet there was no choice. Gríma's first act as regent was to amend the verdict into one of banishment upon the penalty of death. Éomer was to leave Edoras and Rohan right away, carrying nothing but the clothes upon his back and the boots on his feet. In general, such a verdict would mean merely a slower death, no less certain than the hangman's noose. But she had faith in her brother. If anyone could survive the wilds, it was he. And he would return, with help. Her sacrifice gave Rohan hope, small though it was. It was the one thing she had to hold on to not to lose her sanity.

"I will be fine," she assured him. She leaned closer and slipped a small knife from her sleeve into his hand. "Take this. 'Tis not much but it is sharp. It will suffice until such time you can be better armed."

She leaned up and pressed her cheek against his. "Mark your passage," she instructed, her voice but a soft whisper in his ear. "I will send Gamling after you, with a horse and provisions as soon as I have the chance."

"I shall head for Gondor," Éomer said. "They are bound in oath to give aid to Rohan."

For a long moment they stood together, brother and sister, lending strength to one another before their parting. Overhead, banners flapped in the wind. Alongside the proud horse of Rohan on its green background, the White Hand of Saruman flew over Meduseld. Neither sibling was willing to look at the banners.

At last, Éowyn pulled away, giving her brother a gentle nudge. "'Tis time."

She followed him with her eyes as he marched down the rut path, away from the gate. She kept watching until at last he disappeared behind the crest of a hill. And even then she stayed to gaze out across the plains. Her dress fluttered around her legs, and her hair streamed behind her. But her eyes were dry. After all, she was the Lady of Rohan, and she would do her duty, whether it offered renown or no.

-> *éwita* = counselor

-> *wyrm* = worm

-> *nádre* = serpent

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